decision by a judge or jury—metaphorical or literal—about the true nature of the facts of an occurrence; to enable an objective reconstruction of what history was like, irrespective of the witness), why is it that the witness's speech is so uniquely, literally irreplaceable? "If someone else could have written my stories, I would not have written them." What does it mean that the testimony cannot be simply reported, or narrated by another in its role as testimony? What does it mean that a story—or a history—cannot be told by someone else?

It is this question, I would suggest, that guides the groundbreaking work of Claude Lanzmann in his film Shoah (1985), and constitutes at once the profound subject and the shocking power of originality of the film.

A Vision of Reality

Shoah is a film made exclusively of testimonies: first-hand testimonies of participants in the historical experience of the Holocaust, interviewed and filmed by Lanzmann during the eleven years which preceded the production of the film (1974–1985). In effect, Shoah revives the Holocaust with such a power (a power that no previous film on the subject could attain) that it radically displaces and shakes up not only any common notion we might have entertained about it, but our very vision of reality as such, our very sense of what the world, culture, history and our life within it are all about.

But the film is not simply, nor is it primarily, a historical document on the Holocaust. That is why, in contrast to its cinematic predecessors on the subject, it refuses systematically to use any historical, archival footage. It conducts its interviews, and takes its pictures, in the present. Rather than a simple view about the past, the film offers a disorienting vision of the present, a compellingly profound and surprising insight into the complexity of the relation between history and witnessing.

It is a film about witnessing: about the witnessing of a catastrophe. What is testified to is limit-experiences whose overwhelming impact constantly puts to the test the limits of the witness and of witnessing, at the same time that it constantly unsettles and puts into question the very limits of reality.

Art as Witness

Second, Shoah is a film about the relation between art and witnessing, about film as a medium which expands the capacity for
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witnessing. To understand Shoah, we must explore the question: what are we as spectators made to witness? This expansion of what we in turn can witness is, however, due not simply to the reproduction of events, but to the power of the film as a work of art, to the subtlety of its philosophical and artistic structure and to the complexity of the creative process it engages. “The truth kills the possibility of fiction,” said Lanzmann in a journalistic interview. But the truth does not kill the possibility of art—on the contrary, it requires it for its transmission, for its realization in our consciousness as witnesses.

Finally, Shoah embodies the capacity of art not simply to witness, but to take the witness stand: the film takes responsibility for its times by enacting the significance of our era as an age of testimony, an age in which witnessing itself has undergone a major trauma. Shoah gives us to witness a historical crisis of witnessing, and shows us how, out of this crisis, witnessing becomes, in all the senses of the word, a critical activity.

On all these different levels, Claude Lanzmann persistently asks the same relentless question: what does it mean to be a witness? What does it mean to be a witness to the Holocaust? What does it mean to be a witness to the process of the film? What does testimony mean, if it is not simply (as we commonly perceive it) the observing, the recording, the remembering of an event, but an utterly unique and irreplaceable topographical position with respect to an occurrence? What does testimony mean, if it is the uniqueness of the performance of a story which is constituted by the fact that, like the oath, it cannot be carried out by anybody else?

The Western Law of Evidence

The uniqueness of the narrative performance of the testimony in effect proceeds from the witness’s irreplaceable performance of the act of seeing—from the uniqueness of the witness’s “seeing with his/ her own eyes.” “Mr. Vitold,” says the Jewish Bund leader to the Polish Courrier Jan Karski, reports it in his cinematic testimony thirty-five years later, in narrating how the Jewish leader urged him—and persuaded him—to become a crucial visual witness: “I know the Western world. You will be speaking to the English ... It will strengthen your report if you will be able to say: ‘I saw it myself’ “ (p. 171).⁵

In the legal, philosophical and epistemological tradition of the Western world, witnessing is based on, and is formally defined by, first-hand seeing. “Eyewitness testimony” is what constitutes the most decisive law of evidence in courtrooms. “Lawyers have innumerable rules involving hearsay, the character of the defendant or of the witness, opinions given by the witness, and the like, which are in one way or another meant to improve the fact-finding process. But more crucial than any one of these—and possibly more crucial than all put together—is the evidence of eyewitness testimony.”⁶

Film, on the other hand, is the art par excellence which, like the courtroom (although for different purposes), calls upon a witnessing by seeing. How does the film use its visual medium to reflect upon eyewitness testimony, both as the law of evidence of its own art and as the law of evidence of history?

Victims, Perpetrators, and Bystanders: About Seeing

Because the testimony is unique and irreplaceable, the film is an exploration of the differences between heterogeneous points of view, between testimonial stances which can neither be assimilated into, not subsumed by, one another. There is, first of all, the difference of perspective between three groups of witnesses, or three series of interviewees: the real characters of history who, in response to Lanzmann’s inquiry, play their own role as the singularly real actors of the movie, fall into three basic categories: those who witnessed the disaster as its victims (the surviving Jews); those who witnessed the disaster as its perpetrators (the ex-Nazis); those who witnessed the disaster as bystanders (the Poles). What is at stake in this division is not simply a diversity of points of view or of degrees of implication and emotional involvement, but the incommensurability of different topographical and cognitive positions, between which the discrep-

⁵Shoah, the complete text of the film by Claude Lanzmann, New York, Pantheon Books, 1985. Quotations from the text of the film will refer to this edition, and will be indicated henceforth only by page number (in the parenthesis following the citation).


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ancy cannot be breached. More concretely, what the categories in the film give to see is three different performances of the act of seeing.

In effect, the victims, the bystanders and the perpetrators are here differentiated not so much by what they actually see (what they all see, although discontinuous, does in fact follow a logic of corroboration), as by what and how they do not see, by what and how they fail to witness. The Jews see, but they do not understand the purpose and the duration of what they see: overwhelmed by loss and by deception, they are blind to the significance of what they witness. Richard Glazar strikingly narrates a moment of perception coupled with incomprehension, an exemplary moment in which the Jews fail to read, or to decipher, the visual signs and the visible significance they nonetheless see with their own eyes:

Then very slowly, the train turned off of the main track and rolled . . . through a wood. While he looked out—we'd been able to open a window—the old man in our compartment saw a boy . . . and he asked the boy in signs, “Where are we?” And the kid made a funny gesture. This: (draws a finger across his throat) . . .

And one of you questioned him?

Not in words, but in signs, we asked: “What’s going on here?” And he made that gesture. Like this. We didn’t really pay much attention to him. We couldn’t figure out what he meant. [34]

The Poles, unlike the Jews, do see but, as bystanders, they do not quite look, they avoid looking directly, and thus they overlook at once their responsibility and their complicity as witnesses:

You couldn’t look there. You couldn’t talk to a Jew. Even going by on the road, you couldn’t look there.

Did they look anyway?

Yes, vans came and the Jews were moved farther off. You could see them, but on the sly. In sidelong glances. [97–98]

The Nazis, on the other hand, see to it that both the Jews and the extermination will remain unseen, invisible: the death camps are surrounded, for that purpose, with a screen of trees. Franz Suchomel, an ex-guard of Treblinka, testifies:

Woven into the barbed wire were branches of pine trees . . . It was known as “camouflage” . . . So everything was screened. People couldn’t see anything to the left or right. Nothing. You couldn’t see through it. Impossible. [110]

It is not a coincidence that as this testimony is unfolding, it is hard for us as viewers of the film to see the witness, who is filmed secretly:

as is the case for most of the ex-Nazis, Franz Suchomel agreed to answer Lanzmann’s questions, but not to be filmed; he agreed, in other words, to give a testimony, but on the condition that, as witness, he should not be seen:

Mr. Suchomel, we’re not discussing you, only Treblinka. You are a very important eyewitness, and you can explain what Treblinka was.

But don’t use my name.

No, I promised . . . [54]

In the blurry images of faces taken by a secret camera that has to shoot through a variety of walls and screens, the film makes us see concretely, by the compromise it unavoidably inflicts upon our act of seeing (which, of necessity, becomes materially an act of seeing through), how the Holocaust was an historical assault on seeing and how, even today, the perpetrators are still by and large invisible: “Everything was screened. You couldn’t see anything to the left or right. You couldn’t see through it”.

Figuren

The essence of the Nazi scheme is to make itself—and to make the Jews—essentially invisible. To make the Jews invisible not merely by killing them, not merely by confining them to “camouflaged,” invisible
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dead bodies, but by reducing even the materiality of the dead bodies to smoke and ashes, and by reducing, furthermore, the radical opacity of the sight of the dead bodies, as well as the linguistic referentiality and literality of the word "corpse," to the transparency of a pure form and to the pure rhetorical metaphoricity of a mere *figure*: a disembodied verbal substitute which signifies abstractly the linguistic law of infinite exchangeability and substitutability. The dead bodies are thus verbally rendered invisible, and voided both of substance and specificity, by being treated, in the Nazi jargon, as *figure*: that which, all at once, *cannot be seen* and can be *seen through*.

The Germans even forbade us to use the words "corpse" or "victim." The dead were blocks of wood, shit. The Germans made us refer to the bodies as *figure*, that is, as puppets, as dolls, or as Schmatte, which means "rags."[13]

But it is not only the dead bodies of the Jews which the Nazis, paradoxically, do not "see." It is also, in some striking cases, the living Jews transported to their death that remain invisible to the chief architects of their final transportation. Walter Stier, head of Reich Railways Department 33 of the Nazi party, chief traffic planner of the death trains ("special trains," in Nazi euphemism), testifies:

*But you knew that the trains to Treblinka or Auschwitz were—*  
Of course we knew. I was in the last district. Without me the trains couldn't reach their destination . . .  
*Did you know that Treblinka meant extermination?*  
Of course not . . . How could we know? I never went to Treblinka.

[135]

*You never saw a train?*  
No, never . . . I never left my desk. We worked day and night. [132]

In the same way, Mrs. Michaelson, wife of a Nazi schoolteacher in Chelmno, answers Lammann's questions:

*Did you see the gas vans?*  
No . . . Yes, from the outside. They shuttled back and forth. I never looked inside; I didn't see Jews in them. I only saw things from outside. [82]

The Occurrence as Unwitnessed

Thus, the diversity of the testimonial stances of the victims, the bystanders and the perpetrators have in common, paradoxically, the incommensurability of their different and particular positions of not seeing, the radical divergence of their topographical, emotional and epistemological positions not simply as witnesses, but as witnesses who *do not witness*, who let the Holocaust occur as an event essentially unwitnessed. Through the testimonies of its visual witnesses the film makes us *see* concretely—makes us *witness*—how the Holocaust occurs as the unprecedented, inconceivable historical advent of an *event without a witness*, an event which historically consists in the scheme of the literal erasure of its witnesses but which, moreover, philosophically consists in an accidenting of perception, in a *splitting of eyewitnessing* as such; an event, thus, not empirically, but cognitively and perceptually without a witness both because it precludes seeing and because it precludes the possibility of a community of seeing; an event which radically annihilates the recourse (the appeal) to visual corroboration (to the commensurability between two different seeing) and thus dissolves the possibility of any community of witnessing.

_Shoah_ enables us to see—and gives us insight into—the occurrence of the Holocaust as an absolute historical event whose literally _overwhelming_ evidence makes it, paradoxically, into an utterly _proofless_ event: the age of testimony is the age of prooflessness, the age of an event whose magnitude of reference is at once below and beyond proof.

The Multiplicity of Languages

The incommensurability between different testimonial stances, and the heterogeneous multiplicity of specific cognitive positions of seeing and not seeing, is amplified and duplicated in the film by the multiplicity of languages in which the testimonies are delivered (French, German, Sicilian, English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish), a multiplicity which necessarily encompasses some foreign tongues and which necessitates the presence of a professional translator as an intermediary between the witnesses and Lanzmann as their interviewer. The technique of dubbing is not used, and the character of the translator is deliberately not edited out of the film—on the contrary, she is quite often present on the screen, at the side of Lanzmann, as another one of the real actors of the film, because the process of translation is itself an integral part of the process of the film, partaking both of

*See Chapter 3, II, "An Event Without a Witness."
its scenario and of its own performance of its cinematic testimony. Through the multiplicity of foreign tongues and the prolonged delay incurred by the translation, the splitting of eyewitnesses which the historical event seems to consist of, the incapacity of seeing to translate itself spontaneously and simultaneously into a meaning, is recapitulated on the level of the viewers of the film. The film places us in the position of the witness who sees and hears, but cannot understand the significance of what is going on until the later intervention, the delayed processing and rendering of the significance of the visual/acoustic information by the translator, who also in some ways distorts and screens it, because (as is attested by those viewers who are native-speakers of the foreign tongues which the translator is translating, and as the film itself points out by some of Lanzmann’s interventions and corrections), the translation is not always absolutely accurate.

The palpable foreignness of the film’s tongue is emblematic of the radical foreignness of the experience of the Holocaust, not merely to us, but even to its own participants. Asked whether he has invited the participants to see the film, Lanzmann answered in the negative: “In what language would the participants have seen the film?” The original was a French print: “They don’t speak French.” French, the native language of the filmmaker, the common denominator into which the testimonies (and the original subtitles) are translated and in which the film is thought out and given, in turn, its own testimony happens (not by chance, I would suggest) not to be the language of any of the witnesses. It is a metaphor of the film that its language is a language of translation, and, as such, is doubly foreign: that the occurrence, on the one hand, happens in a language foreign to the language of the film, but also, that the significance of the occurrence can only be articulated in a language foreign to the language(s) of the occurrence.

The title of the film is, however, not in French and embodies thus, once more, a linguistic strangeness, an estrangement, whose significance is enigmatic and whose meaning cannot be immediately accessible even to the native audience of the original French print: Shoah, the Hebrew word which, with the definite article (here missing), designates “The Holocaust” but which, without the article, etymologically and indefinitely means “catastrophe,” here names the very foreignness of languages, the very namelessness of a catastrophe which cannot be possessed by any native tongue and which, within the language of translation, can only be named as the untranslatable: that which language cannot witness; that which cannot be articulated in one language; that which language, in its turn, cannot witness without splitting.

**The Historian as a Witness**

The task of the deciphering of signs and of the processing of intelligibility—what might be called the task of the translator—is, however, carried out within the film not merely by the character of the professional interpreter, but also by two other real actors—the historian (Raul Hilberg) and the filmmaker (Claude Lanzmann)—who, like the witnesses, in turn play themselves and who, unlike the witnesses and like the translator, constitute second-degree witnesses (witnesses of witnesses, witnesses of the testimonies). Like the professional interpreter, although in very different ways, the filmmaker in the film and the historian on the screen are in turn catalysts—or agents—of the process of reception, agents whose reflective witnessing and whose testimonial stances aid our own reception and assist us both in the effort toward comprehension and in the unending struggle with the foreignness of signs, in processing not merely (as does the professional interpreter) the literal meaning of the testimonies, but also, (some perspectives on) their philosophical and historical significance.

The historian is, thus, in the film, neither the last word of knowledge nor the ultimate authority on history, but rather, one more topographical and cognitive position of yet another witness. The statement of the filmmaker—and the testimony of the film—are by no means subdued by the statements (or the testimony) of the historian. Though the filmmaker does embrace the historical insights of Hilberg, which he obviously holds in utter respect and from which he gets both inspiration and instruction, the film also places in perspective—and puts in context—the discipline of history as such, in stumbling on (and giving us to see) the very limits of historiography. “Shoah,” said Claude Lanzmann at Yale, “is certainly not a historical film . . . The purpose of Shoah is not to transmit knowledge, in spite of the fact that there is knowledge in the film . . . Hilberg’s book The Destruction of the European Jews was really my Bible for many years . . . But in spite of this, Shoah is not a historical film, it is something else . . . To condense

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4Interview given by Lanzmann on the occasion of his visit to Yale University, and filmed at the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale (interviewers: Dr. Dori Laub and Laurel Vlock) on May 3, 1986. Hereafter, citations from this videotape will be referred to by the abbreviation Interview.

in one word what the film is for me, I would say that the film is an incarnation, a resurrection, and that the whole process of the film is a philosophical one. Hilberg is the spokesman for a unique and impressive knowledge on the Holocaust. Knowledge is shown by the film to be absolutely necessary in the ongoing struggle to resist the blinding impact of the event, to counteract the splitting of eyewitnessing. But knowledge is not, in and of itself, a sufficiently active and sufficiently effective act of seeing. The newness of the film’s vision, on the other hand, consists precisely in the surprising insight it conveys into the radical ignorance in which we are unknowingly all plunged with respect to the actual historical occurrence. This ignorance is not simply dispelled by history—on the contrary, it encompasses history as such. The film shows how history is used for the purpose of a historical (ongoing) process of forgetting which, ironically enough, includes the gestures of historiography. Historiography is as much the product of the passion of forgetting as it is the product of the passion of remembering.

Walter Stier, former head of Reich railways and chief planner of the transports of the Jews to death camps, can thus testify:

What was Treblinka for you? ... A destination?
Yes, that’s all.
But not death.
No, no.
Extermination came to you as a big surprise?
Completely ...
You had no idea.
Not the slightest. Like that camp—what was its name? It was in the Oppeln district ... I’ve got it: Auschwitz.
Yes. Auschwitz was in the Oppeln district ... Auschwitz to Krakow is forty miles.
That’s not very far. And we knew nothing. Not a clue.
But you know that the Nazis—that Hitler didn’t like the Jews?
That we did. It was well known ... But as to their extermination, that was news to us. I mean, even today people deny it. They say there couldn’t have been so many Jews. Is it true? I don’t know. That’s what they say. [136–138]

To substantiate his own amnesia (of the name of Auschwitz) and his own claim of essentially not knowing, Stier implicitly refers here to the claim of knowledge—the historical authority—of “revisionist historiographies,” recent works published in a variety of countries by historians who prefer to argue that the number of the dead cannot be proven and that, since there is no scientific, scholarly hard evidence of the exact extent of the mass murder, the genocide is merely an invention, an exaggeration of the Jews and the Holocaust, in fact, never existed. But as to their extermination, that was news to us. I mean, even today, people deny it. They say there could not have been so many Jews. Is it true? I don’t know. That’s what they say. I am not the one who knows, but there are those who know who say that what I did not know did not exist. “Is it true? I don’t know.”

Dr. Franz Grassler, on the other hand (formerly Nazi commissioner of the Warsaw Ghetto), comes himself to mimick, in front of the camera, the very gesture of historiography as an alibi to his forgetting.

You don’t remember those days?
Not much ... It’s a fact: we tend to forget. Thank God, the bad times ...

I’ll help you to remember. In Warsaw you were Dr. Auerswald’s deputy.
Yes ...
Dr. Grassler, this is Czerniakow’s diary. You’re mentioned in it. It’s been printed. It exists?
He kept a diary that was recently published. He wrote on July 7, 1941 ...
July 7, 1941? That’s the first time I’ve relearned a date. May I take notes? After all, it interests me too. So in July I was already there! [175–176]

In line with the denial of responsibility and memory, the very gesture of historiography comes to embody nothing other than the blankness of the page on which the “notes” are taken.

The next section of the film focuses on the historian Hilberg, and discussing, Czerniakow’s diary. The cinematic editing that follows shifts back and forth, in a sort of shuttle movement, between the face of Grassler (which continues to articulate his own view of the ghetto) and the face of Hilberg (which continues to articulate the content of the page).
The Return of the Voice

The three roles of the filmmaker intermix and in effect exist only in their relation to each other. Since the narrator is, as such, strictly a witness, his story is restricted to the story of the interviewing: the narrative consists of what the interviewer hears. Lanzmann’s rigor as narrator is precisely to speak strictly as an interviewer (and as an inquirer), to abstain, that is, from narrating anything directly in his own voice, except for the beginning—the only moment which refers explicitly the film to the first person of the filmmaker as narrator.

The story begins in the present at Chelmno . . . Chelmno was the place in Poland where Jews were first exterminated by gas . . . Of the four hundred thousand men, women and children who went there, only two came out alive . . . Srebnik, survivor of the last period, was a boy of thirteen when he was sent to Chelmno . . . I found him in Israel and persuaded that one-time boy singer to return with me to Chelmno [3–4].

The opening, narrated in the filmmaker’s own voice, at once situates the story in the present and sums up a past which is presented not as the story but rather as a pre-history, or a pre-story; the story proper is contemporaneous with the film’s speech, which begins, in fact, subsequent to the narrator’s written preface, by the actual song of Srebnik re sung (reenacted) in the present. The narrator is the “I” who “found” Srebnik and “persuaded” him to “return with me to Chelmno.” The narrator, therefore, is the one who opens, or reopens, the story of the past in the present of the telling: But the “I” of the narrator, of the signatory of the film, has no voice; the opening is projected on the screen as the silent text of a mute script, as the narrative voice-over of a writing with no voice.

On the one hand, then, the narrator has no voice. On the other hand, the continuity of the narrative is insured by nothing other than by Lanzmann’s voice, which runs through the film and whose sound constitutes the continuous, connective thread between the different voices and the different testimonial episodes. But Lanzmann’s voice—the active voice in which we hear the filmmaker speak—is strictly, once again, the voice of the inquirer and of the interviewer, not of the narrator. As narrator, Lanzmann does not speak but rather, vocally recites the words of others, lends his voice (in two occasions) to read aloud two written documents whose authors cannot speak in their own voice: the letter of the Rabbi of Grabow, warning the Jews of Lodz of the extermination taking place at Chelmno, a letter whose signatory was himself consequently gassed at Chelmno with his whole community (“Do not think”—Lanzmann recites—that this is written by a madman. Alas, it is the horrible, tragic truth”, 83–84), and the Nazi

The Filmmaker as a Witness

At the side of the historian, Shoah finally includes among its list of characters (its list of witnesses) the very figure of the filmmaker in the process of the making—or of the creation—of the film. Traveling between the living and the dead and moving to and fro between the different places and the different voices in the film, the filmmaker is continuously—though discretely—present in the margin of the screen, perhaps as the most silently articulate and as the most articulated silent witness. The creator of the film speaks and testifies, however, in his own voice, in his triple role as the narrator of the film (and the signatory—the first person—of the script), as the interviewer of the witnesses (the solicitor and the receiver of the testimonies), and as the inquirer (the artist as the subject of a quest concerning what the testimonies testify to; the figure of the witness as a questioner, and of the asker not merely as the factual investigator but as the bearer of the film’s philosophical address and inquiry).

12Statement made in a private conversation in Paris, Jan. 18, 1987: “J’ai pris un historien pour qu’il incarne un mort, alors que j’avais un vivant qui était directeur du ghetto.”
document entitled “Secret Reich Business” and concerning technical improvements of the gas vans (“Changes to special vehicles . . . shown by use and experience to be necessary”, 103–105), an extraordinary document which might be said to formalize Nazism as such (the way in which the most perverse and most concrete extermination is abstracted into a pure question of technique and function). We witness Lanzmann’s voice modulating evenly—with no emotion and no comment—the perverse dictum of this document punctuated by the unintentional, coincidental irony embodied by the signatory’s name: “Signed: Just”.

Besides this recitation of the written documents, and besides his own mute reference to his own voice in the written cinematic preface of the silent opening, Lanzmann speaks as interviewer and as an inquirer, but as narrator, he keeps silent. The narrator lets the narrative be carried on by others—by the live voices of the various witnesses he interviews, whose stories must be able to speak for themselves, if they are to testify, that is, to perform their unique and irreplaceable first-hand witness. It is only in this way, by this abstinence of the narrator, that the film can in fact be a narrative of testimony: a narrative of that, precisely, which can neither be reported, nor narrated, by another. The narrative is thus essentially a narrative of silence, the story of the filmmaker’s listening: the narrator is the teller of the film only insular as he is the bearer of the film’s silence.

In his other roles, however, that of the interviewer and of the inquirer, the filmmaker, on the contrary, is by definition a transgressor, and a breaker, of the silence. Of his own transgression of the silence, the interviewer says to the interviewee whose voice cannot be given up and whose silence must be broken: “I know it’s very hard. I know and I apologize” (117).

As an interviewer, Lanzmann asks not for great explanations of the Holocaust, but for concrete descriptions of minute particular details and of apparently trivial specifics. “Was the weather very cold?” (11). “From the station to the unloading ramp in the camp is how many miles? . . . How long did the trip last?” (33). “Exactly where did the camp begin?” (34). “It was the silence that tipped them off? . . . Can he describe that silence?” (67). “What were the [gas] vans like? . . . What color?” (80). It is not the big generalizations but the concrete particulars which translate into a vision and thus help both to dispel the blinding impact of the event and to transgress the silence to which the splitting of eyewitnessing reduced the witness. It is only through the trivia, by small steps—and not by huge strides or big leaps—that the barrier of silence can be in effect displaced, and somewhat lifted. The pointed and specific questioning resists, above all, any possible canonization of the experience of the Holocaust. Insofar as the interviewer challenges at once the sacredness (the unspeakability) of death and the sacredness of the deadness (of the silence) of the witness, Lanzmann’s questions are essentially desacralizing.

How did it happen when the women came into the gas chamber? . . . What did you feel the first time you saw all these naked women? . . .

But I asked and you didn’t answer: What was your impression the first time you saw these naked women arriving with children? How did you feel?

I tell you something. To have a feeling about that . . . it was very hard to feel anything, because working there day and night between dead people, between bodies, your feeling disappeared. You were dead. You had no feeling at all. [114–116]

Shoah is the story of the liberation of the testimony through its desacralization; the story of the decanonization of the Holocaust for the sake of its previously impossible historicization. What the interviewer above all avoids is an alliance with the silence of the witness, the kind of emphatic and benevolent alliance through which interviewer and interviewee often implicitly concur, and work together, for the mutual comfort of an avoidance of the truth.

It is the silence of the witness’s death which Lanzmann must historically here challenge, in order to revive the Holocaust and to rewrite the event-without-a-witness into witnessing, and into history. It is the silence of the witness’s death, and of the witness’s deadness, which precisely must be broken, and transgressed.

We have to do it. You know it.
I won’t be able to do it.
You have to do it. I know it’s very hard. I know and I apologize.
Don’t make me go on please.
Please. We must go on. [117]

What does going on mean? The predicament of having to continue to bear witness at all costs parallels, for Abraham Bomba, the predic-
ment faced in the past of having to continue to live on, to survive in spite of the gas chambers, in the face of the surrounding death. But to have to go on now, to have to keep on bearing witness, is more than simply to be faced with the imperative to replicate the past and thus to replicate his own survival. Lanzmann paradoxically now urges Bomba to break out of the very deadness that enabled the survival. The narrator calls the witness to come back from the mere mode of surviving into that of living—and of living pain. If the interviewer’s role is thus to break the silence, the narrator’s role is to insure that the story (be it that of silence) will go on.

But it is the inquirer whose philosophical interrogation and interpellation constantly reopen what might otherwise be seen as the story’s closure.

Mrs. Pietyra, you live in Auschwitz?
Yes, I was born there . . .
Were there Jews in Auschwitz before the war?
They made up eighty percent of the population. They even had a synagogue here . . .
Was there a Jewish cemetery in Auschwitz?
It still exists. It’s closed now.
Closed? What does that mean?
They don’t bury there now. [17–18]

The inquirer thus inquires into the very meaning of closure and of narrative, political and philosophical enclosure. Of Dr. Grassler, the ex-assistant to the Nazi “commissar” of the Jewish ghetto, Lanzmann asks:

My question is philosophical. What does a ghetto mean, in your opinion? [182]

Differences

Grassler of course evades the question. “History is full of ghettos,” he replies, once more using erudition, “knowledge” and the very discipline of history to avoid the cutting edge of the interpellation: “Persecution of the Jews wasn’t a German invention, and didn’t start with World War II” (182). Everybody knows, in other words, what a ghetto is, and the meaning of the ghetto does not warrant a specifically philosophical attention: “history is full of ghettos.” Because “history” knows only too well what a ghetto is, this knowledge might as well be left to history, and does not need in turn to be probed by us. “History” is thus used both to deny the philosophical thrust of the question and to forget the specificity—the difference—of the Nazi past. Insofar as the reply denies precisely the inquirer’s refusal to take for granted the conception—let alone the preconception—of the ghetto, the stereotypical, preconceived answer in effect forgets the asking power of the question. Grassler essentially forgets the difference: forgets the meaning of the ghetto as the first step in the Nazi overall design precisely of the framing—and of the enclosure—of a difference, a difference that will consequently be assigned to the ultimate enclosure of the death camp and to the “final solution” of eradication. Grassler’s answer does not meet the question, and attempts, moreover, to reduce the question’s difference. But the question of the ghetto—that of the attempt at the containment (the reduction) of a difference—perseveres both in the speech and in the silence of the inquirer-narrator. The narrator is precisely there to insure that the question, in its turn, will go on (will continue in the viewer). The inquirer, in other words, is not merely the agency which asks the questions, but the force which takes apart all previous answers. Throughout the interviewing process the inquirer-narrator, at the side of Grassler as of others, is at once the witness of the question and the witness of the gap—or of the difference—between the question and the answer.

Often, the inquirer bears witness to the question (and the narrator silently bears witness to the story) by merely recapitulating word by word a fragment of the answer, by literally repeating—like an echo—the last sentence, the last words just uttered by the interlocutor. But the function of the echo—in the very resonance of its amplification—is itself inquisitive, and not simply repetitive. “The gas vans came in here,” Srebnik narrates: “there were two huge ovens, and afterwards the bodies were thrown into these ovens, and the flames reached to the sky” (6). “To the sky [zum Himmel],” mutters silently the interviewer, opening at once a philosophical abyss in the simple words of the narrative description of a black hole in the very blueness of the image of the sky. When later on, the Poles around the church narrate how they listened to the gassed Jews’ screams, Lanzmann’s repetitious echoes register the unintended irony of the narration:

They heard screams at night?
The Jews moaned ... They were hungry. They were shut in and starved.
What kinds of cries and moans were heard at night?
They called on Jesus and Mary and God, sometimes in German ...
The Jews called on Jesus, Mary and God! [97–98]

Lanzmann’s function as an echo is another means by which the voicelessness of the narrator and the voice of the inquirer produce a
question in the very answer, and enact a difference through the very verbal repetition. In the narrator as the bearer of the film’s silence, the question of the scream persists. And so does the difference of what the screams in fact call out to. Here as elsewhere in the film, the narrator is, as such, both the guardian of the question and the guardian of the difference.

The inquirer’s investigation is precisely into (both the philosophical and the concrete) particularity of difference. “What’s the difference between a special and a regular train?” the inquirer asks of the Nazi traffic planner Walter Stier (133). And to the Nazi teacher’s wife, who in a Freudian slip confuses Jews and Poles (both “the others” or “the foreigners” in relation to the Germans), Lanzmann addresses the following meticulous query:

Since World War I the castle had been in ruins . . . That’s where the Jews were taken. This ruined castle was used for housing and defouling the Poles, and so on.

The Jews!
Yes, the Jews.
Why do you call them Poles and not Jews?
Sometimes I get them mixed up.
There’s a difference between Poles and Jews?

Oh yes!
What difference?
The Poles weren’t exterminated, and the Jews were. That’s the difference. An external difference.
And the inner difference?
I can’t assess that. I don’t know enough about psychology and anthropology. The difference between the Poles and the Jews? Anyway, they couldn’t stand each other. [82–83]

As a philosophical inquiry into the ungraspability of difference and as a narrative of the specific differences between the various witnesses, Shoah implies a fragmentation of the testimonies—a fragmentation both of tongues and of perspectives—that cannot ultimately be surpassed. It is because the film goes from singular to singular, because there is no possible representation of one witness by another, that Lanzmann needs us to sit through ten hours of the film to begin to witness—to begin to have a concrete sense—both of our own ignorance and of the incommensurability of the occurrence. The occurrence is conveyed precisely by this fragmentation of the testimonies, which enacts the fragmentation of the witnessing. The film is a gathering of the fragments of the witnessing. But the collection of the fragments does not yield, even after ten hours of the movie, any possible totality or any possible totalization: the gathering of testimonial incommensurates does not amount either to a generalizable theoretical statement or to a narrative monologic sum. Asked what was his concept of the Holocaust, Lanzmann answered: “I had no concept; I had obsessions, which is different . . . The obsession of the cold . . . The obsession of the first time. The first shock. The first hour of the Jews in the camp, in Treblinka, the first minutes. I will always ask the question of the first time . . . The obsession of the last moments, the waiting, the fear. Shoah is a film full of fear, and of energy too. You cannot do such a film theoretically. Every theoretical attempt that I tried was a failure, but these failures were necessary . . . You build such a film in your head, in your heart, in your guts, everywhere”([Interview, pp. 22–23]). This “everywhere” which, paradoxically, cannot be totalized and which resists theory as such, this corporeal fragmentation and enumeration which describes the “building”—or the process of the generation—of the film while it resists any attempt at conceptualization, is itself an emblem of the specificity—of the uniqueness—of the mode of testimony of the film. The film testifies not merely by collecting and by gathering fragments of witnessing, but by actively exploding any possible enclosure—any conceptual frame—that might claim to contain the fragments and
to fit them into one coherent whole. Shoah bears witness to the fragmentation of the testimonies as the radical invalidation of all definitions, of all parameters of reference, of all known answers, in the very midst of its relentless affirmation—of its materially creative validation—of the absolute necessity of speaking. The film puts in motion its surprising testimony by performing the historical and contradictory double task of the breaking of the silence and of the simultaneous shattering of any given discourse, of the breaking—or the bursting open—of all frames.

II

The Impossibility of Testimony

Shoah is a film about testimony, then, in an infinitely more abysmal, paradoxical and problematic way than it first seems: the necessity of testimony it affirms in reality derives, paradoxically enough, from the impossibility of testimony that the film at the same time dramatizes. I would suggest that this impossibility of testimony by which the film is traversed, with which it struggles and against which it precisely builds itself is, in effect, the most profound and most crucial subject of the film. In its enactment of the Holocaust as the event-without-a-witness, as the traumatic impact of a historically ungraspable primal scene which erases both its witness and its witnessing, Shoah explores the very boundaries of testimony by exploring, at the same time, the historical impossibility of witnessing and the historical impossibility of escaping the predicament of being—and of having to become—a witness. At the edge of the universe of testimony which is the universe of our era, at the frontiers of the necessity of speech, Shoah is a film about silence: the paradoxical articulation of a loss of voice—and of a loss of mind. The film is the product of a relentless struggle for remembrance, but for the self-negating, contradictory, conflictual remembrance of—precisely—an amnesia. The testimony stumbles on, and at the same time tells about, the impossibility of telling.

No one can describe it. No one can recreate what happened here. Impossible? And no one can understand it. Even I, here, now . . . I can’t believe I’m here. No, I just can’t believe it. It was always this peaceful here. Always. When they burned two thousand people—Jews—every day, it was just as peaceful. No one shouted. Everyone went about his work. It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now. [6]

What cannot be grasped in the event-without-a-witness, and what the witness nonetheless must now (impossibly) bear witness to, is not merely the murder but, specifically, the autobiographical moment of the witness’s death, the historical occurrence of the dying of the subject of witnessing as such.

What died in him in Chelmno?
Everything died. But he’s only human, and he wants to live. So he must forget. He thanks God . . . that he can forget. And let’s not talk about that.
Does he think it’s good to talk about it?
For me it’s not good.
Then why is he talking about it?
Because you’re insisting on it. He was sent books on Eichmann’s trial. He was a witness, and he didn’t even read them. [7]

Podchlebnik, in whom “everything died” as a witness, retrospectively gives testimony in the Eichmann trial, but he still would rather keep the witness dead, keep the witness as a (dead) secret from his own eyes by not reading anything about his own role in the trial. The desire not to read, and not to talk, stems from the fear of hearing, or of witnessing, oneself. The will-to-silence is the will to bury the dead witness inside oneself.

But the film is “insisting,” here again, that the “Jewish cemetery” (to return to the dialogue with Mrs. Pietyra) cannot be once and for all “closed” (18), that the witness must himself precisely now reopen his own burial as witness, even if this burial is experienced by him, paradoxically enough, as the very condition of his survival.

The Matter of the Witness, or the Missing Body

What would it mean, however, for the witness to reopen his own grave—to testify precisely from inside the very cemetery which is not yet closed? And what would it mean, alternatively, to bear witness from inside the witness’s empty grave—empty both because the witness in effect did not die, but only died unto himself, and because the witness who did die was, consequent to his mass burial, dug up from his grave and burned to ashes—because the dead witness did not even leave behind a corpse or a dead body? One of the most striking and surprising aspects of Shoah as a film about genocide and war
The Return of the Voice

Testifying from Inside

Is it possible to literally speak from inside the Holocaust—to bear witness from inside the very burning of the witness? I would suggest that it is by raising, by experiencing and by articulating such a question that the film takes us on its oneiric and yet materially historic trip, and that it carries out its cinematic exploration—and its philosophical incorporation—of the radical impossibility of testimony. To put it differently, the very testimony of the film (insofar precisely as it is a groundbreaking testimony) actively confronts us with the question: in what ways, by what creative means (and at what price) would it become possible for us to witness the-event-without-a-witness? A question which translates into the following terms of the film: Is it possible to witness Shoah (the Holocaust and/or the film) from inside? Or are we necessarily outside (outside the blazes of the Holocaust, outside the burning of the witness, outside the fire that consumes the film) and witnessing it from outside? What would it mean to witness Shoah from inside?

It is the implication of this rigorous, tormented question that guide, I would suggest, the topographical investigation of the film and specifically, the inquiry addressed by Lanzmann to Jan Piwowski, the Polish pointsman who directed the death trains from the outside world into the concrete inside of the extermination camp:

"Exactly where did the camp begin?"
"... There was a fence that ran to those trees you see there ..."
"So I'm standing inside the camp perimeter, right?"
"That's right.
"Where I am now is fifty feet from the station, and I'm already outside the camp. This is the Polish part, and over there was death."
"Yes. On German orders, Polish railmen split up the trains. So the locomotive took twenty cars, and headed toward Chelm ... Unlike Treblinka, the station here is part of the camp. And at this point we are inside the camp."

I would suggest that this precision, this minute investigation and concretization of the film's cinematic space, derives not simply from a geographical or topographical attempt at definition, but from the quest of the whole film to get to witnessing precisely this inside of the

atrocities is the absence of dead bodies on the screen. But it is the missing corpses which Shoah remarkably gives us to witness, in its "travellings" throughout the graveyard with no bodies, and in its persistent exploration of the empty grave which is both haunted and yet uninhabited by the dead witness.

And it was the last grave?
Yes.
The Nazi plan was for them to open the graves, starting with the oldest?
Yes. The last graves were the newest, and we started with the oldest, those of the first ghetto ... The deeper you dig, the flatter the bodies were ... When you tried to grasp a body, it crumbled, it was impossible to pick up. We had to open the graves, but without tools ... Anyone who said "corpse" or "victim" was beaten. The Germans made us refer to the bodies as Figuren ... Were they told at the start how many Figuren there were in all the graves?
The head of the Vilna Gestapo told us: "There are ninety thousand people lying here, and absolutely no trace must be left of them" [12–13]

"No one was supposed to be left to bear witness," testifies in turn Richard Glazar (50). The Nazi plan is in effect to leave no trace not only of the crime itself of the historical mass murder, but of all those who materially witnessed that crime, to eliminate without trace any possible eyewitness. Indeed, even the corpses of the now dead witnesses or the Figuren are still material evidence by which the Nazis might, ironically, be figured out. The corpses still continue to materially witness their own murderers. The scheme of the erasure of the witnesses must therefore be completed by the literal erasure—by the very burning—of the bodies. The witness must, quite literally, burn out, and burn out of sight.

Suddenly, from the part of the camp called the death camp, flames shot up ... In a flash ... the whole camp seemed ablaze ... And suddenly one of us stood up ... and facing that curtain of fire, he began chanting a song I didn't know:
"... We have been thrust into the fire before we have never denied the Holy Law."
He sang in Yiddish, while behind him blazed the pyres on which they had begun then, in November 1942, to burn the bodies in Treblinka ... We knew that night that the dead would no longer be buried, they'd be burned. [14]
death camp. In contrast to the Nazi teacher’s wife, who insists on having seen the gas vans only from outside—

_Did you see the gas vans?_  
No...yes, from the outside...I never looked inside; I didn’t see Jews in them. I only saw things from outside. [82]—

the crucial task and the concrete endeavor that separates _Shoah_ from all its filmic predecessors is, precisely, the attempt to witness from inside.

What does it mean, however, once again, to witness from inside a death camp? And supposing such a witnessing could in itself be (or become, thanks to the film,) possible, what would the consequent necessity of _testifying out of that inside_ precisely mean? One after the other, Lanzmann explores the philosophical challenges and the concrete impossibilities/necessities that such a testimony from inside the death camp would entail:

1. It would mean _testifying from inside the death, the deadness and the very suicide of the witness_. There are two suicides in the film, of two (unrelated) Jewish leaders. Both suicides are elected as the desperate solutions to the impossibility of witnessing, whose double bind and dead end they materialize. To kill oneself is, in effect, at once to _kill the witness_ and to remain, by means of one’s own death, _outside the witnessing_. Both suicides are thus motivated by the _desire not to be inside_. _How then to bear witness from inside the desire not to be inside?_  

2. Testifying from inside a death camp would mean, at the same time, equally, the necessity of _testifying from inside the absolute constraint of a fatal secret_, a secret that is felt to be so binding, so compelling and so terrible that it often is kept secret even from oneself. _For many reasons, the transgression of such secrecy does not seem possible to those who feel both bound and bonded by it. “For we were ‘the bearers of the secret,’” says Philip Müller, an ex-Sonderkommando member: “we were reprieved dead men. We weren’t allowed to talk to anyone, or contact any prisoner, or even the SS. Only those in charge of the Aktion” (68). Victims as well as executioners come to believe in their elected fate to join a tongue-tied cult of muteness, to be the destined _bearers of the silence_. Because the secret is at once a bondage and a bond, the breach of silence sometimes is no longer at the disposal of a conscious choice, or of a simple (rational) decision of the will. So that concentration camps’ survivors will historically maintain the secret, and the silence, even years after the war._

Since the testimony, like the oath of silence, is in turn a speech act, but a speech act that, both in its utterance and in its stakes, is specifically the opposite act to the pledge of secrecy, how would it be possible to testify not just in spite of, but precisely from _inside the very binding of the secret?_  

3. In the sequence of concrete and philosophical impossibilities, bearing witness _from inside a death camp_ would equally entail the paradoxical necessity of _testifying from inside a radical deception_, a deception that is, moreover, doubled and enhanced by _self-deception_:  

_(Philip Müller)_

All eyes converged on the flat roof of the crematorium...Aumeyer addressed the crowd: “You’re here to work for our soldiers... Those who can work will be all right. It was clear that hope flared in those people... The executioners have gotten past the first obstacle... Then he questioned a woman: “What’s your trade?” “Nurse,” she replied. “Splendid! We need nurses in our hospitals... We need all of you. But first, undress. You must be disinfected. We want you healthy.” I could

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6One by Czerniakow, the Jewish leader of the Warsaw ghetto, who attempts at first to negotiate with the Germans, but commits suicide when he understands that his negotiations failed, the day after the first transport of the Jews of Warsaw to Treblinka takes place (188-190); the other is by Friedy Hirsch, one of the Jewish leaders of the Czech family camp and specifically the protector of the (hundred) children, who commits suicide when he is urged to participate in the camp’s armed resistance, a participation which necessitates his abandonment of the children to their likely death (157, 159-162).  

7The same is true of the self-blasting of the Warsaw ghetto, which might be seen as yet another suicide, and as yet another materialization of the desire not to be inside (not to be inside the ghetto).  

1Cf. Podhilembik’s way of refusing to read books about the Eichmann trial, thus keeping his own witness, his own testimony in the trial as a sort of secret from himself (7).
see the people were calmer, reassured by what they’ve heard, and they began to undress. [59]

(Franz Suchomel)
We kept on insisting: “You’re going to live!” We almost believed it ourselves. If you lie enough, you believe your own lies. [147]

How to attest to the way things were from within the very situation of delusion and illusion—from inside the utter blindness to what in reality things were? How to bear witness to historic truth from inside the radical deception (amplified by self-deception) by which one was separated from historic truth at the very moment one was most involved in it?

4. Finally, the necessity of testifying from inside (the topographical determination to bear witness from inside the death camp) amounts to the film’s most demanding, most uncompromising and most crucial question: How to testify from inside Otherness?

When the Jews talked to each other . . . the Ukrainians wanted things quiet, and they asked . . . yes, they asked them to shut up. So the Jews shut up and the guard moved off. Then the Jews started talking again, in their language . . . ra-ra-ra, and so on. [30]

Lanzmann, who is listening to the Polish peasant Czeslaw Borowi in the company of his interpreter, knows, as soon as his attentive ears pick up the “ra-ra-ra,” that the foreign language he is listening to is no longer simply Polish. He interrupts the Pole and, addressing him through the interpreter without waiting for her complete translation, asks:

What’s he mean, la-la-la? What’s he trying to imitate?

Their language—

answers the interpreter by way of explanation, or translation, not of Borowi’s sounds but of his intention. But this is one moment in which Lanzmann does not want translation. In response to the translator’s explanation, the inquirer insists:

No, ask him. Was the Jews’ noise something special?

They spoke Jew—

Borowi replies, misnaming Yiddish but finally returning to the scene of discourse, and gracefully offering a meaning to explain the strangeness of his previous sounds and to dispel their unintelligibility.

Does Mr. Borowi understand “Jew”?

No. [30–31]

To testify from inside Otherness is thus to be prepared, perhaps, to bear witness from within a “ra-ra-ra,” to be prepared to testify not merely in a foreign language but from inside the very

language of the Other: to speak from within the Other’s tongue insofar precisely as the tongue of the Other is by definition the very tongue we do not speak, the tongue that, by its very nature and position, one by definition does not understand. To testify from inside Otherness is thus to bear witness from inside the living pathos of a tongue which nonetheless is bound to be heard as mere noise.

Insiders and Outsiders

It is therefore in reality impossible to testify from inside otherness, or from inside the keeping of a secret, from inside amnesia or from inside deception and the delusion of coercive self-deception, in much the same way as it is impossible to testify, precisely, from inside death. It is impossible to testify from the inside because the inside has no voice, and this is what the film is attempting to convey and to communicate to us. From within, the inside is unintelligible, it is not present to itself. Philip Müller, who spent years working in the management of the dead bodies in the Auschwitz crematorium, testifies:

I couldn’t understand any of it. It was like a blow on the head, as if I’d been stunned. I didn’t even know where I was . . . I was in shock, as if I’d been hypnotized, ready to do whatever I was told. I was so mindless, so horrified . . . [59]

In its absence to itself, the inside is inconceivable even to the ones who are already in. “Still I couldn’t believe what had happened there on the other side of the gate, where the people went in,” says Bomba: “Everything disappeared, and everything got quiet” (47). As the locus of a silence and as the vanishing point of the voice, the inside is untransmittable. “It was pointless,” says Müller, “to tell the truth to anyone who crossed the threshold of the crematorium” (125). The film is about the relation between truth and threshold: about the impossibility of telling the truth, and about the consequent historical necessity of recovering the truth, precisely past a certain threshold. And it is this threshold that now needs to be historically and philosophically recrossed. Inside the crematorium, “on the other side of the gate” where “everything disappeared and everything got quiet,” there is loss: of voice, of life, of knowledge, of awareness, of truth, of the capacity to feel, of the capacity to speak. The truth of this loss constitutes precisely what it means to be inside the Holocaust. But
the loss also defines an impossibility of testifying from inside to the truth of that inside.

Who would be in a position, then, to tell? The truth of the inside is even less accessible to an outsider. If it is indeed impossible to bear witness to the Holocaust from inside, it is even more impossible to testify to it from the outside. From without, the inside is entirely ungraspable, even when it is not simply what escapes perception altogether and remains invisible as such (as for the Nazi teacher’s wife), nor even simply (as in Borowi’s case) what is witnessed as pure noise and perceived as mere acoustic interference. To Jan Karski, the most honest, generous and sympathetic outside witness, the wartime messenger who politically accepted, in his mission as an underground Polish courier, to see the Jewish ghetto with his own eyes so as to report on it to the Western allies, his own testimony makes no sense. The inside of the ghetto in effect remains to him as utterly impenetrable as a bad dream, and his bewidered, grieving memory retains the image of this wretched inside only as what makes of him, forever, an outsider.

It was a nightmare for me . . .

Did it look like a completely strange world? Another world, I mean?

It was not a world. There was not humanity . . . It wasn’t humanity. It was some . . . some hell . . . They are not human . . . We left the ghetto. Frankly, I couldn’t take it any more . . . I was sick. Even now I don’t want . . . I understand your role. I am here. I don’t go back in my memory. I couldn’t tell any more.

But I reported what I saw. It was not a world. It was not a part of humanity. I was not part of it. I did not belong there. I never saw such things, I never . . . nobody wrote about this kind of reality. I never saw any theater, I never saw any movie . . . this was not the world. I was told that these were human beings—they didn’t look like human beings.

[167, 173–174]

Since for the outsider, even in the very grief of his full empathy and sympathy, the truth of the inside remains the truth of an exclusion—"It was not a world, there was not humanity"—it is not really possible to tell the truth, to testify, from the outside. Neither is it possible, as we have seen, to testify from the inside. I would suggest that the impossible position and the testimonial effort of the film as a whole is to be, precisely, neither simply inside nor simply outside, but paradoxically, both inside and outside: to create a connection that did not exist during the war and does not exist today between the inside and the outside—to set them both in motion and in dialogue with one another.
having no bearing on the course of military or political events. Karski failed, in this way, to politically (effectively) transmit the inside of the Holocaust. But he did accomplish his own autobiographical, uncanny journey toward the Other, his own disorienting, radical displacement, by crossing first the boundary to the inside and by then recrossing it, in an attempt not merely to go back outside but to reach out to the Outside from within his very eerie visit to the inside.

How, indeed, can an outsider such as Karski, and, for that matter, how can anyone reach out, and open up, precisely to the frightening inside of Otherness?

I would suggest that Karski’s testimony might provide some answer to the philosophical insistence and to the enigmatic pressure of this question. The striking narrative of Karski’s trip into the ghetto is doubled, and to some extent is motivated, by the underlying latent narrative of the occurrence of a unique human encounter. The story of the ghetto unwittingly encompasses the story of the birth of a particular attachment, an attachment that will grow into a singular, compelling human bond, not between the Jews at large and the Pole who they hope will be their advocate, but between two individuals: Jan Karski and the Jewish leader of the Bund.

Between those two Jewish leaders—somehow this belongs to human relations—I took, so to say, to the Bund leader, probably because of his behavior—he looked like a Polish nobleman, a gentleman, with straight, beautiful gestures, dignified, I believe that he liked me also, personally. Now at a certain point, he said: “Mr. Vitold, I know the Western world . . . It will strengthen your report if you will be able to say “I saw it myself.” We can organize for you to visit the Jewish ghetto. Would you do it? If you do, I will go with you to the Jewish ghetto to Warsaw so I will be sure you will be as safe as possible. [171]

Ironically and paradoxically in a story of the encounter with an Other, Karski gets to like the Bund leader precisely because of his non-Jewish, Polish (aristocratic) air. He can love the Jewish because he recognizes in him something humanly familiar (“somehow this belongs to human relations”), because he sees in him, initially, not the Other but (safely) the Same. In the very movement of his sympathy, Karski can thus take the Jew, ironically, outside of Jewishness and bring him into his own world of the Polish nobleman, as an imaginary double, a companion or a brother.

But the Jewish leader offers, precisely out of this mutual responsiveness and in view of what he feels to be a historical necessity, to take in turn Karski out of his aristocratic Polish world and have him visit not only the foreignness of his own world, but, beyond the mere fact of the strangeness, precisely the alienation of the Jewish ghetto. In return, the Bund leader offers not only companionship, but a companionship intent on providing a protection, on precisely making the trip into the alien world safe. Thus it is that Karski unsuspiciously is led to his bewildering discovery of Otherness, as well as to his startling recognition that what he took to be familiar in the very figure that has focused his particular attachment is in fact quite staggeringly different and quite frighteningly strange.

So within the outside walls, practically there were some four units. The most important was the so-called central ghetto. They were separated by some areas inhabited by Aryans . . . There was a building. This building was constructed in such a way that the wall which separated the ghetto from the outside world was a part of the back of the building, so the front was facing the Aryan area. There was a tunnel. We went through this tunnel without any kind of difficulty. What struck me was that now he was a completely different man—the Bund leader, the Polish nobleman. I go with him. He is broken down, like a Jew from the ghetto, as if he had lived there all the time. Apparently, this was his nature. This was his world. So we walked the streets . . . We didn’t talk very much. He led me. [171–172; my emphasis]

Through the formation of a dialogue in walking, as well as through the sharing of a silence, the two companions in the eerie trip unsettle both for us and for themselves the boundaries between the inside and the outside. Karski’s testimony is the story of this unexpected intimate relationship with a double from outside the ghetto who (by merely crossing the ghetto’s wall) has turned out to be radically Other, an estranged Other who nonetheless continues to be cherished and, as such, continues both to mark a traumatizing lesson and to inform a discipleship of Otherness—a genuine discipleship of the inside.

It was not a world. There was not humanity. Streets full, full . . . Those horrible children . . . It wasn’t humanity. It was some . . . some hell . . . Now the Germans in uniform, they were walking . . . Silence! Everybody frozen until he passed . . . Germans . . . Contempt. This is apparent that they are subhuman. They are not human.

Now at a certain point some movement starts. Jews are running from the streets I was on. We jumped into a house. He just hits the door. “Open the door! Open the door!” They open the door. We move in . . . He says: “All right, all right, don’t be afraid, we are Jews.” He pushed me to the window, says, “Look at it. Look at it.” There were two boys, nice-looking boys, Hitler-jugend in uniform. They walked. Every step
they made, Jews disappearing, running away... At a certain point, a
boy goes into his pocket without even thinking. Shoots! Some broken
glass. The other boy congratulating him. They go back. So I was para-
alyzed. So then the Jewish woman—probably she recognized me, I don’t
know, that I am not a Jew—she embraced me. “Go, go, it doesn’t do
you any good, go, go.” So we left the house. Then we left the ghetto.
[172–173]

Under the protection—but also in the very skin—of his Jewish alter
ego (“we are Jews”), Karski, in observing and recording what it means
to be the Other, in effect experiences what it means to be inside the
Holocaust, as well as what it feels, specifically, to be an insider of the
ghetto. It is ironic that it is precisely Jewish empathy that has to send
him back outside, back to the relief of the outsider, so as to prevent
his torture and to spare him this particular insidiousness of its own
humiliation.

In going out, however, Karski has learned an unforgettable—though
unanticipated—lesson. He knows, henceforth, that it is not a simple
thing to move from one side to the other side of the wall of the ghetto.
He has learned that there is a radical, unbreachable and horrifying dif-
ference between the two sides of the wall. It is indeed this knowledge,
this sense that the outside and the inside are qualitatively so different
that they are not just incompatible but incomparable and utterly irre-
concilable, that he expresses in his dismally repeated (quasi-halluci-
nated) statement: “This was not a world. There was not humanity.”

So then the Jewish woman—probably she recognized me, I don’t
know, that I am not a Jew—she embraced me. “Go, go, it doesn’t do you
any good, go, go.” So we left the house. Then we left the ghetto. So then
he said: “You didn’t see everything; you didn’t see too much. Would you
like to go again? I will come with you. I want you to see everything. I will.”

Next day we went again. The same house, the same way. So then again
I was more conditioned, so I felt more things. [173; emphasis mine]

The real question raised by Karski’s testimony is the following: why
does Karski go a second time inside the ghetto? His cognitive report
as witness is more or less complete after the first time, and his second
visit to the inside is not really necessitated by his formal mission as
a diplomatic emissary. Moreover, Karski now knows that it is not
possible to simply wander to and fro, to simply move between the
inside and the outside of the ghetto, without paying a costly price. I
would argue that the most significant element of Karski’s testimony
is precisely this gratuitous return to the ghetto—this Orphic repetition

of his spectral visit. Karski is persuaded to accomplish this return from
inside the very intimacy of the singular friendship—of the singular
companionship of his estranging and compelling host. I would thus
suggest that this visit to the ghetto is nothing less, indeed, than the
retracing of a journey equal to an oath of love. In repeating his descent
to hell (“This was not a world... It was some... some hell”), Karski
makes a gift to his companion of his fear, of his attention, of his
memory, of his emphatic suffering, of his discipleship in trauma, and
of the oath of faithfulness precisely to his witness—of the pledged
promise of his future testimony.

So then we just walked the streets; we didn’t talk to anybody. We
walked probably one hour. Sometimes he would tell me: “Look at this
Jew”—a Jew standing, without moving. I said: “Is he dead?” He says: “No,
no, no, he is alive. Mr. Witold, remember—he’s dying, he’s dying. Look at
him. Tell them over there. You saw it. Don’t forget.” We walk again. It’s
macabre. Only from time to time he would whisper: “Remember this,
remember this... Very many cases. I would say: “What are they doing
here?” His answer: “They are dying, that’s all. They are dying.” We spent
more time, perhaps one hour. We left the ghetto. Frankly, I couldn’t take
it any more. “Get me out of it.” And then I never saw him again. I was sick.
Even now, I don’t want... I understand your role. I am here. I don’t go
back in my memory... Then we left. He embraced me then. “Good luck,
good luck.” I never saw him again. [174–175]

Like the testimony of the Holocaust survivors, Karski’s testimony
ends with the abruptness of an irrecoverable loss. “Still I couldn’t
believe,” Karski could have said with Bombs, “what had happened
there on the other side of the gate, where the people went in: every-
thing disappeared, and everything got quiet” (47). Like the fading of
the voice, the vanishing from sight—the sudden disappearance of the
Jewish Bund leader from Karski’s life—marks Karski’s own personal
participation in the Holocaust experience: “I never saw him again.”
This loss is built into the testimony, which is informed by its own
bereavement—informing, that is, not just from without, but from
within. I would suggest precisely that it is the power of Karski’s whole
testimony to bespeak throughout the whole description of the ghetto
the quintessence of its final sentence, to say the disenchantment and
the dispossession of the witnessing by this sudden interruption of the
cognitive report, by this disruption, this abduction, this expropriation
of the seeing for the very witness who accepted to go in so as to “see
with his own eyes.” “I never saw him again.”

This final loss is final sentence is, however, also, at the same
time, Karski’s indirect way of explaining why, historically, once his mission failed and caught within the paradoxes of his own ongoing history, in the end he had no choice but to leave the Jew behind.

We are humans. Do you understand it? Do you understand it? [169]

It was not a world. There was not humanity . . . It was not a world. It was not a part of humanity. I was not part of it. [172]

The prisoner of his own oath of speaking, Karski thus becomes, unlike the Jew but also, paradoxically, like him, as yet another bearer of the silence:

Now . . . Now I go back thirty-five years. No, I don’t go back . . . In thirty-five years after the war I do not go back. I have been a teacher for twenty-six years. I never mention the Jewish problem to my students. [167]

**Between the Inside and the Outside: Lanzmann’s trip**

I would now suggest that Lanzmann’s own trip is evocative of that of Karski: that Lanzmann, in his turn, takes us on a journey whose aim precisely is to cross the boundary, first from the outside world to the inside of the Holocaust, and then back from the inside of the Holocaust to the outside world.

On the one hand, it is the spectator of the film who, like Karski, is the visitor from the outside, and Lanzmann is in the position of the Jewish Bund leader, seemingly a “Polish [or French] nobleman,” a man of the world, but who knows the tunnel that connects the outside to the inside and who leads us through this tunnel in his film guiding us into a singular and unforgettable experience of a seeing, while at the same time whispering, precisely, in his echo-like, ghost-like asides: “Look at it, look at it” . . . (173).

“Look at this Jew”—a Jew standing, without moving. I said: “Is he dead?” He says: “No, no, no, he is alive. Mr. Vitold, remember—he’s dying, he’s dying. Look at him. Tell them over there. You saw it. Don’t forget” . . . “Remember this, remember this.” [174; emphasis mine]

On the other hand, Lanzmann at the same time is himself, like Karski, fundamentally a courier, and perhaps in turn, of necessity, also something like an underground courier: not only the bearer of the silence but, like Karski in his diplomatic mission, the very bearer of a message which he has to bring, precisely, from the very voicelessness and silence of the inside to the outside. While Karski failed, however, to communicate effectively the inside outcry of the ghetto to the outside world, Lanzmann hopes, by means of the resources of his art, to have an impact on the outside from the inside, literally moving the viewers and to actually reach the addressees: to make—historically and ethically—a difference. Will the artistic messenger succeed where the political messenger failed? In an interview in L’Express, Lanzmann defines the difficulty of the task:

My problem was to transmitt. To do that one cannot allow oneself to be overwhelmed by emotion. You must remain detached. This work has plunged me into an immense solitude . . . But it was essential not to be crushed. Or to crush others. I tried rather to reach people through their intelligence.

How to transmit at once the pathos and the disconnection, the abyssal lostness of the inside, without being either crushed by the abyss or overwhelmed by the pathos, without losing the outside? How to be, thus, at the same time inside and outside? And how to guide the audience into an inside which nonetheless can keep in touch with the outside? It is the complexity of this specific question that defines, I would suggest, Lanzmann’s paradoxical attempt to “reach people through their intelligence” precisely in a film that produces an effective and affective shock that resonates, as such, in the whole body of the viewer. If the film succeeds in reaching in the viewer the intelligence of the emotion, the very dumbness of the inside will have been transmitted, and the very shock of the event might generate its own process of historical intelligibility.

“To reach people through their intelligence” is thus to bring the darkness of the inside to the physical light of the outside, to literally narrate the Holocaust in light.²⁰

²⁰I would suggest here that the very notion of intelligence in relation to Shoah is both disoriented and disorienting, and is thus, like the film itself, not a concept (“I was asked what was my concept of the Holocaust: I had no concept,” said Lanzmann; “I had obsessions, which is different”), but something like a metaphor: a metaphor similar to that of light, not, however, in the sense of an enlightenment (which, ultimately, is not possible) but in the sense of a physical illumination. Physical illumination is indeed what the film is about, even though the very process of illumination involves obscurity. The film is itself obscure: it sheds light where we least expect it to, and its heart of darkness is revealed as utterly unknown and perhaps unknowable. The film’s role, however, is to physically shed light. It is in this way that the film speaks to the intelligence.

The Return of the Voice

The importance of the role of light in the whole film is itself obliquely, oddly, inadvertently illuminated in the very secrecy (the very incompatibility with light) of the astounding Nazi document discussing, in its purely bureaucratic manner, the technical improvements to be implemented in the lighting system of the gas vans, with the purpose of preventing, quite specifically and quite uncannily, the gas vans' "load" (the overload of the dead bodies) from precisely falling out into the light.

Geheime Reichssache (Secret Reich Business)

Berlin, June 5, 1942 . . .

The lighting [in the gas vans] must be better protected than now. The lamps must be enclosed in a steel grid to prevent their being damaged. Lights could be eliminated, since they are never used. However, it has been observed that when the doors are shut, the load always presses hard against them [against the doors] as soon as darkness sets in, which makes closing the doors difficult. Also, because of the alarming nature of darkness, screaming always occurs when the doors are closed.

It would therefore be useful to light the lamp before and during the first moments of the operation. [104]

Heart of Darkness

As soon as darkness sets in, the half-dead and half-living bodies in the gas vans rush to the doors—rush to the outside light—in a desperate attempt at once to 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. 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 intelligence provided by an outside light.

As illustrated by the Nazis' own perception of the "operation" of the gas vans, the Nazi project is essentially a project of containment: the gas van is designed primarily as a death container—as a moving grave and as the enforced confinement of a burial alive. In much the same way as the death camp, the gas chamber, and the walled confinement of the ghetto, the gas van concretizes, once again, the way in which the Other in the Nazi program is at once enclosed and literally (in all senses of the term) framed. The essence of the sought containment—both physical and metaphysical—is to transform the material frame, the rationale of the container, into a means for the literal obliteration of the Other and a medium for the rationalization of the murder. The ghetto is thus made into an antechamber to the gas chamber and the moving vans are themselves transformed from pragmatic vehicles of transportation into vehicles that go nowhere—vehicles, precisely, of asphyxiation.

As the film shows and as the Nazi document (Geheime Reichssache) itself unwittingly reveals, however, light—and the desire for illumination—is what prevents the closure of the doors and what disrupts, uncannily, the Nazi project of containment: "the load naturally rushes toward the light when darkness sets in, which makes closing the doors difficult." The Nazi project, on the other hand, is a project in which "lights could be eliminated, since they are never used." But the film brings the bodies back to light. In bringing the inside of the darkness (the interior of the gas van, of the mobile grave) to the light of the outside, the film, once again, expands and ultimately bursts the very limits of the grave—explodes the very contours of the frame and of the frame's inherent claim both to define life and to contain (to bury) death.

Since light—the effort toward intelligence and intelligibility—is what prevents the closure of the doors, the film—as a striving for light—struggles to prevent, in turn, its own closure, and bursts open even its own filmic frame. In a discussion of his film at Yale, Lanzmann was addressed by the following question from the floor.

Question: I would be interested to know if there is a relation between the figure of Simon Srebnik—the boy singer, who says at one point; "I thought: If I survive, I just want one thing: five loaves of bread . . . But I dreamed too that if I survive, I'll be the only one left in the world"—and the ending of the film. You end the film with the story of Sinha Rottem, one of the members of the failed Jewish uprising of the Warsaw ghetto, who in turn says, "I was alone throughout my tour of the ghetto. I didn't meet a living soul . . . I said to myself: I'm the last Jew. I'll wait for morning, and for the Germans." "I'm sure that was intentional—"the only Jew in the world left." I'm sure you framed that intentionally . . .

Claude Lanzmann: It is . . . it is the same end with a slight difference. But the last image of the film is a rolling train. You know, this was a real question, the question of the end. I did not have the moral right to give a happy ending to this story. When does the Holocaust really end?
Did it end the last day of the war? Did it end with the creation of the State of Israel? No. It still goes on. These events are of such magnitude, of such scope that they have never stopped developing their consequences... When I really had to conclude I decided that I did not have the right to do it... And I decided that the last image of the film would be a rolling train, an endlessly rolling... train.\textsuperscript{21}

Unlike Karski who, after his visit to the ghetto, gets back outside without disrupting the very boundaries that his own crossing has unsettled, without putting in question the dividing line that separates the inside and the outside, Lanzmann’s shuttle movement between the inside and the outside has a far more radical effect. Once he has gotten inside, Lanzmann cannot simply (to borrow Karski’s terms) “get out,”\textsuperscript{22} but has to break out and to break through from inside the darkness into the physical light of the outside. Unlike Karski, whose trip leaves the inside behind while unwittingly continuing to mourn its loss, Lanzmann’s voyage takes precisely the inside outside and, in so doing, breaks the frame which both encloses and closes the inside in keeping it radically separate from the outside.

\section*{IV}

\textit{Between the Inside and the Outside: Biographical Geography}

Like Karski, Lanzmann in his turn comes to the Holocaust, however, from the outside and starts his journey toward \textit{Shoah} as a mere outsider: an outsider in the sense that he is not, historically, a Holocaust survivor; in the sense that his relationship with the inside was not for him a given—geographical or biographical—but a taxing journey of discovery, a life process marked, in turn, by the struggle of a groping in the dark and punctuated by its own impossibilities. The film’s \textit{narration in light} is at the same time, enigmatically and referentially, a \textit{narration in life}: a narration which consists in the account—and in the performance—of a \textit{journey}, of a life-itinerary with respect to which the film is at once an interpreter and a material witness. As an outsider to the Holocaust Lanzmann will, indeed, like Karski, have to \textit{travel} toward the inside. He, too, will accomplish his own voyage toward the Other, an uncanny voyage made of actual trips and of a series of geographical and biographical displacements, of which the film—and the process of its making—are both a replica and the testimonial culmination.

Lanzmann starts his journey as a patriotic Frenchman, attuned to social and political French preoccupations and to contemporary philosophical concerns. “I was not brought up in Jewishness,” he pointed out in his 1986 interview at Yale. “My paternal grandfather, who became a French citizen in 1913, at the age of 39, was called up for the French army at the very outbreak of the [First World] war, and fought for four years at the front line with the soldiers who had graduated in the 1913 high school class. He was wounded three times and obtained the highest French military distinctions... After the War... [my family] thought it had given enough blood for France, cut most of its ties with the Jewish world, and plunged into the ambiguous adventure of assimilation. I say ‘ambiguous’ because assimilation, in many respects, can be considered as destruction” (Interview). Lanzmann, disconnected both from the cultural tradition and from the history of Jews, is educated in French culture and, as a student, specializes in German philosophy.

From this position of exteriority to Jewishness and to the inside of the Holocaust, Lanzmann, during World War II, fights the Nazis as a member of the French Underground and as a student Resistance leader. His father, one of the Resistance leaders in Auvergne, nonetheless teaches his children how, in their capacity as Jews or as potential victims, they should above all be the masters of the art of disappearance. “He would ring the bell of the main entrance of the house we lived in,” Lanzmann narrates, “in much the same way as the militia or the Gestapo would have done it. Jolted out of sleep, we had to break speed records—which he would time with a chronometer—to put on our clothes and take refuge in an underground hiding place which he had dug up in the middle of the garden. The house we lived in was the most silent in the world: the hinges of each door were oiled with compulsive regularity and accuracy. Thus our father taught us to escape perception and to remain invisible... I was not Jewish by tradition or by education, “but I think that the war as such has made me very much aware of what it is to be a Jew” (Interview). This glimpse of the inside is still essentially grasped only from outside: Jewishness is for the first time recognized as a potential threat, but the threat is not experienced as a real danger inside history, but rather, as the frightening inside of the father’s thinking and imagination. “My father was a very pessimistic man,” Lanzmann explains. “The worst was always sure for him. He had no doubts about it... In one way he was

\textsuperscript{21}Panel Discussion of Shoah, Yale University, May 5, 1986. Transcript, pp. 51–52.

\textsuperscript{22}“Get me out of here,” says Karski to the Jewish Bund leader when he “cannot take it any more” (174).
insane. But in another way he was ... absolutely right. The inside of the Otherness of Jewishness is thus unwittingly, obscurely grasped, in the midst of the patriotic freedom struggle of the Frenchman, as the (neither true nor false) enigmatic locus of a fear in the father's fantasy. Out there in history, however, the real danger crucially remains, for the adolescent Lanzmann (who is fifteen years old in November 1940), in the military risks taken by the French Resistance and in the political menace which the Nazis represent for France, for Europe and for the Western world.

After the war, Lanzmann is inspired by the philosophical work of his future friend and mentor Jean-Paul Sartre, who, in 1946, publishes his *Reflexions sur la question juive*. Lanzmann comments on the impact of this publication: "[The] book ... was absolutely crucial for me ... It was something, what the greatest French writer had written ... [on the question of anti-Semitism]. This permitted us to breathe. It was a kind of *reconnaissance*, of acknowledgment ... The picture of the anti-Semite that Sartre gave is still exemplary today". Via Sartre, the acknowledgment (*reconnaissance*) of the Jewish question can remain, however, an external—as opposed to an internal—recognition, the acknowledgment from the outside of the reality of anti-Semitism but, by the same token, only of the mythic fictionality of the Jew, of the *unreal* negativity of Judaism in the anti-Semitic's fiction.

Belatedly, Lanzmann recognizes, on another level, that Sartre's book itself encompasses a remarkable silence, that it omits mentioning the Holocaust in spite of its date of publication at a crucial turning point of history:

The book was published in 1946 ... And yet there is not a word in it about the Holocaust; because the Holocaust is an event that was no one at the time could grasp in its full scope. *[Interview]*

After the war, Lanzmann undertakes a series of successive travels, a series of negotiations of the inside and the outside, whose combination constitutes, I would suggest, the itinerary of an existential search whose destination, *a priori*, is unknown and that will eventually lead him to the inside of the film, and to the film as the locus of a true discovery of the inside.

Lanzmann's postwar search begins in Germany. "I went to Germany very early, in 1947. I spent one year in Tubingen ... I was studying philosophy, this was my field, and Germany was a country of philosophy in spite of the Nazis. There was Kant. There was Leibniz. There was ...


... Hegel ... The year after, I was appointed lecturer at Berlin University during the blockade of Berlin ... Berlin was destroyed completely. I wanted to see the Germans, in plain clothes" (*Interview*). "What do you think impelled you to go to Germany?" the interviewer asks. Lanzmann replies: "I can understand myself only in the process of creation, with a pen ... or with a camera. Even now it is unclear to me why I went to Germany ... At the time, and I was not alone—this was the case for many people, even in Europe—we didn't fully grasp the scope—and the immensity—of the catastrophe. We didn't ... Even the people who returned from concentration camps could not, or did not want to, talk at the time" (*Interview*).

The position of the European scholar—the pure lover of philosophy, or the lover of pure philosophy—which Lanzmann occupies during his stay in Germany, is unknowingly again, in the wake of Sartre, an oblivious theoretical position marked by an unrecognized omission, a modified position of exteriority to the insiders of the Holocaust and of pragmatic, practical outsidedness to the reality and the immediacy of Jewish European history. From this stay in Germany as a professional philosopher Lanzmann recalls, however, one incident that, from the midst of his cosmopolitan engagement, returned him unwittingly to "the Jewish question":

When I was a lecturer in Berlin I was giving a course ... about Sartre (*Being and Nothingness*) and about Stendhal (*The Red and the Black*) ... One day a group of German students came to me ... and ... asked me if I would hold with them a seminar on anti-Semitism. I said why not, yes ... We started to [conduct] this [seminar]. After three weeks, I was called by the French military commander in Berlin, General Ganvel ... [who] told me: "I forbid you to hold this seminar ... Berlin is a sensitive town, at the ... crossroad of five nationalities: the Americans, the British, the Russians, the French and the Germans ... This [seminar on anti-Semitism] is politics, and you are not supposed to engage in politics." *[Interview]*

In response to the German students' expressed wish to face history and to confront themselves, in an attempt to understand anti-Semitism as a driving force which guided Germany throughout the war—and its meaning for them now—Lanzmann sets out—under the aegis of philosophy—to ask a real question and to make a real impact, to meditatively engage with history so as to move it forward, toward a change, toward a lesson of the war, or at least toward the process of a dialogue and of a historicization of the trauma. But the Franco-German seminar on anti-Semitism is irrevocably prohibited by the
French military command, which forbids precisely Lanzmann to engage (to intervene) in historical, political processes. Later, Lanzmann will identify in this diplomatic prohibition the Allies’ share in the forgetting—and in the denial—of the war: the closing of the seminar is itself a symptom of the Western world’s inability to face the Holocaust, an allegory of the postwar historical repression of historical processes by the Allies. “I always have maintained, and I still do today,” says Lanzmann, “that if the Germans of today are unable to face their past, to integrate it into their history, if the de-Nazification [of Germany] was made so badly, it is not only the fault of the Germans: it is the fault of the Allied powers too” (Interview, p. 17).

At the time, however, Lanzmann is surprised by the political repercussions of his professional philosophical concerns: “We were real philosophy students. This is what counted for us most . . . We were discussing Plato and Descartes and Kant. We were working hard in the field. The political side was secondary in a way, even with what happened” (Interview, p. 17). Politics thus catches Lanzmann unaware. In the split Berlin, he unexpectedly discovers politics as something he unwillingly comes up against from within his very passionate engagement in philosophy. He discovers that, in some obscure way, politics—apparently an outside business—has to do with the inside. But he is still too much outside, still an outsider to his own discovery. From the Franco-German philosophical exteriority to the immediacy of Jewish history, “at the [adventurous] crossroads of five nationalities,” the unrecognized inside of the Jewish question ironically returns, still only theoretically, still only from outside (from France), but in the form of the absolute constraint of a practical reality and in the lived predicament of an unforgettable and irrevocable pragmatic prohibition. Even though he is outside France, France is unwittingly reminding Lanzmann that he is not outside the question, nor is the question—or the asking of philosophy—outside the impact, or the processes, of politics.

The next stage in Lanzmann’s existential voyage is East Germany. Out of a strong desire to work out an understanding of the Communist bloc, and to understand the Russians who have helped to bring about the victory over the Nazis, Lanzmann applies for a visa to East Berlin.24

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**The Return of the Voice**

He is denied the visa, but nonetheless accomplishes the trip without permission, underground, and publishes (in ten articles in Le Monde) the first French newspaper reportage on East Germany during the Cold War.

Lanzmann’s next trip is to Israel, where he goes with a similar goal in mind: to send a reportage on the problems of the Middle East to the same French newspaper, which has in fact solicited it. The successive biographical positions of the wartime French patriotic activist and of the European (cosmopolitan) philosopher, are thus replaced by the position of the international reporter, in this consistent movement toward the outside and toward the Other, a movement which repeatedly combines geographical displacements with the formulation of some philosophical and analytical reflections. These analytical reflections—these persistent philosophical and epistemological displacements—are both triggered and enabled, each time, by the recurrent movement of the physical transgression of a boundary.

In Israel, however, this crossing to the outside abruptly and unsettlingly reveals an inside: the inside of Jewishness which is, for the first time, recognized as a reality in its own right, and a reality which, furthermore, has resonance inside himself. The voyage outside toward the Other inadvertently comes up against the inside of the Other in himself.

I went to Israel for the first time in 1952 and it was a real shock for me to discover that there was a real Jewish world, to discover, let us say, the Jewish positivity . . . I had many debates with Israelis, because I saw it according to Sartre, [and thought] that the Jew was a pure creation of the anti-Semite . . . I discovered that this was not true. I felt immediately these Israelis as my brothers, [and thought] that I was born French by pure chance. [Interview]

they were fighting against the Germans” (Interview).

If one remembers, in addition to the significance of the Russians during the war, the fact that Lanzmann’s grandfather had originally come to Paris from White Russia, after having spent a period of his life, as a transition, in Berlin (Interview, p. 1), one realizes that Lanzmann’s itinerary—from Paris to Berlin to East Berlin (as an attempt to understand the Russians)—re enactment unwittingly the Grandfather’s itinerary in reverse. Of all the possible significations of the direction of his journey, Lanzmann is aware only of the fact that it is a trip toward anxiety, a retreating in reverse of the obscure itinerary of a flight. Both the later journey of the film Shoah and Lanzmann’s biographical itinerary embody, thus, a reaching out toward anxiety in a drive to search and to explore its source, its origin and its dynamic. “But if you ask me,” Lanzmann comments, “why I wanted to go to Germany, I have another answer too. I wanted to go east, because I am afraid of the east . . . When I drive my car, when I want to go outside of Paris . . . my first movement is to go west. I feel at ease when I go west, and . . . it scares me to travel to the East. And Germany for me was the East . . . The obsession of the East [is in the film] . . . When I was in Poland . . . in one way I like Poland and I like Russia too. But there is a movement Eastward which is frightening” (Interview).
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From Israel, the traveler also discovers that he can no longer simply write as a reporter, simply expedite to France a reportage. Unexpectedly, the inside is encountered as a resistance to—and an unsettlement of—theory. "I spent four months there," Lanzmann testifies, "but I was unable to write this report... I could not write about Israel as if I would have written about India or any other kind of country. I could not" (Interview). In other words, Lanzmann discovers that he can no longer simply write as an outsider, simply testify from the outside. But he does not yet entirely possess the meaning of the difficulty.

Why Israel

At first he thinks that it is simply the medium which is at fault, that journalism is not the appropriate realm for his philosophical attempt at understanding. He consequently sets out to write, instead of the reportage, a book. But the book, of which he writes about a hundred pages, will turn out to be equally impossible, lacking focus and simultaneously pursuing too many directions. The material of the difficulty would itself become, belatedly, both the substance and the subject of Lanzmann's first film. At the time of the endeavor of the book, however, Lanzmann finds himself blocked and entangled:

I could not go on because [the book] raised too many questions that I was not able to answer... It was an aborted book... It was only twenty years later that this unrealized reportage and this aborted book became the film Pourquoi Israel ("Why Israel"), which I created very fast, almost without preparation. I knew exactly what I wanted to say... The questions which are unresolved in the book are solved in the film, but not on the same level... I had to go up and there are questions that... become meaningless in the course of life... You give the answers, but on another level. [Interview]

Film would thus seem to be the very medium which accommodates the simultaneous multiplicity of levels and directions, a medium that can visually inscribe—and cinematically bear witness to—the very impossibility of writing. The film is not merely an overcoming of the actual impossibility, but specifically, a testimony to it. Very like the necessity of "going on" for the Holocaust survivors, the film also speaks about what is impossible and yet what must be done: "We have to do it. You know it."

This impossibility which Israel embodies for Lanzmann, first in the actual impossibility of writing and later in the very possibility of film as a testimony to—and an inscription to—that same impossibility, is, I would suggest, the impossibility, on the one hand, of saying the inside from the outside, and, on the other hand, the imperative necessity of speaking from inside to the outside; the contradictory and yet compellingly intransigent necessity of being outside and inside at the same time.

As in Karski's case, however, Lanzmann's journey into the inside and into the reality of Otherness is equally made possible by the creation of a "we" ("Don't be afraid, we are Jews"),25 by a loving dialogue engaged with an insider who is also, on another level, like himself in some way an outsider, a companion who thus mediates the difficult negotiation of the inside and the outside and facilitates the trip inside by transforming it, here as in Karski's case, into the very journey of an oath of love. "It's really complicated, Lanzmann says, "because I'm not sure I would have done this film had I not met in Jerusalem my [future] wife":

She was not my wife at the time, she was a strange woman and she was half German-Jewish, a writer. She introduced me to the world of the German Jews in Israel, and it was for me a revelation to see these people who had left Germany between 1933 and 1939 with libraries full of Schiller, Goethe, Kant, and the entire German culture. It was a connection with my first years in Germany and it was a real estrangement for me and I liked this very much. I did the film Pourquoi Israël because I was in love with her and because it was the only way for me to be able to go to Israel and see her. I dedicated the film to her. [Interview]

The uniqueness of his first film opens for Lanzmann the possibility of addressing the unconscious question of his search—and the unknown direction of his journey—in yet another film, when his Israeli friends—resonating to his own unformulated cinematic message—charge him with the task of undertaking Shoah: of continuing the taxing and creative journey toward the inside and the progression backwards, by setting out to undertake, equally in an unprecedented way, on the still less accessible subject of the Holocaust—on this unspeakable insideness of Jewish history—a film that would nonetheless be really telling: a film that would speak, this time, no longer simply from inside the Jewish (national, political and military) self-determination marked by Israel—from Israel as the embodiment of

25"We jumped into a house," Karski narrates. "He just hits the door: 'Open the door! Open the door! They open the door. We move in... He says: 'All right, all right, don't be afraid, we are Jews'" (173; emphasis mine).
the postwar, post-Holocaust Jewish regeneration and national resistance to annihilation—but rather, from inside the very trap of the absolute exposure to annihilation, from within very process of undergoing—without defense, no ally and no recourse whatsoever—one’s own radical historical and physical erasure. Lanzmann’s problem thus becomes the following: how to speak about—and from inside—erasure, without being reduced to silence, without being oneself erased; how to be heard about—and from inside—erasure; how to make a film from inside annihilation that would speak with equal force, however, both to insiders and to outsiders; how to make a film that would speak, indeed, in a performatively liberating way, not merely by dynamically undoing the exclusion of the inside, but by actively enabling, at the same time, the inclusion of the outside.

**Toward a Black Sun**

*Shoah*—this ultimate stepping inside, this unprecedented face-to-face with the inside and, most specifically, with the inside’s resistance to be faced—is in this way conceived, ironically enough, as yet another task proposed to Lanzmann from outside, as yet another undertaking triggered or initiated not by Lanzmann’s own direct possession and acknowledgment of the sense of his own movement, but by his friends’ perception of the true direction of his journey, by the Israelis’ notion of where it was that Lanzmann—with his unique audacity and his transgressive creativity—was truly heading.

The Israelis . . . asked me if I would consider undertaking a film about the Holocaust . . . I said yes rather quickly, without thinking very much . . . After I started, it became impossible to stop. ([Interview, p. 21](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jvlsources/ch充滿/contents/17332.html#chap31-1)).

Thus begins Lanzmann’s eleven-year involvement with the process of the making of the film, a process which itself inaugurates as yet another journey, a new research, a renewed, continued stubborn search: a constant struggle to assemble—and to reassemble—the material and financial means for the production22, the stubborn

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22Covering fourteen countries, and materializing into 350 hours of film, edited into the nine and a half hours of the actual movie.

23"Shoah" cost between three million dollars and four million dollars—all from France and Israel. Lanzmann took out a loan of four million francs to finish the film. "No American investors could be found," he says. *The Boston Globe*, Nov. 3, 1985, p. 3.
cal positions that were given up ultimately for the film's sake (the wartime activist, the continental scholar, the professional philosopher, the international reporter, the underground visitor, the political and philosophical investigator) are in fact implicitly maintained and productively included in the film's journey and achievement. Between the quick decision, the light acceptance and the unawareness of the start and the race, the anguish of the finish, between the obstacles—the impossibilities of going on and the impossibility of stopping—a work of an unprecedented scope and of an incommensurate dimension is most lucidly and yet unwittingly created.

Unlike the previous biographical and existential voyages, here Lanzmann's movement for the first time knows from the beginning the real destination of the journey: to go toward the Holocaust; to go inside the history of an erasure. And yet the journey, here again, reveals to what extent its own supposed knowledge of its destination is in reality illusory. Lanzmann discovers the many ways in which he does not know what, at the starting point, he unfoundedly believed he knew:

When I started to work on Shoah ... I was like many Jews, I thought I knew: I thought I had this in my blood, which is a stupidity ... When I read Hilberg, for instance, I discovered that in spite of the fact that I had read already many books, I was perfectly ignorant. [Interview, p. 16]

Lanzmann discovers, thus, the way in which the Jews themselves are also mere outsiders to their own history—to their own Holocaust. The ignorance unwittingly discovered does not proceed, in fact, from a deficiency in erudition—from not yet having read the best books on the subject—but from the way in which the Holocaust reveals itself as incommensurate with knowledge, the way in which the Holocaust unconsciously and actively conjures up its own forgetting and resists—above all—its own knowing from inside. "The Holocaust," says Lanzmann, "is very difficult to face":

It is like a black sun, and you always have to struggle against yourself in order to go on. It's what happened during the process [of the making] of the film. I had to struggle against my own irresistible tendency to forget what I had done. It happened ... while I was building some scenes, in spite of the fact that I knew ... that I had shot them, [in spite of the fact] that I had typed all the words, and so on ... Suddenly I was reading and I said, 'But I never saw this.' It was not true. It was repression." [Panel Discussion, p. 39]

I always had to fight in myself a tendency to repulse what I was doing. It was very difficult to face. It was like a black sun. I had to go deep inside myself.33

The journey toward the film, the struggle toward a narration of the Holocaust in light, is thus not simply a historical, unprecedented journey toward erasure, but a journey, at the same time, both into and outside of the black sun inside oneself. To understand Shoah is not to know the Holocaust, but to gain new insights into what not knowing means, to grasp the ways in which erasure is itself part of the functioning of our history. The journey of Shoah thus paves the way toward new possibilities of understanding history, and toward new pragmatic acts of historicizing history's erasures.

V

A Point of Arrival

The crucial testimony about the sense and the direction of Lanzmann's journey is, however, not external but internal to the film itself. It addresses the spectator, right away, in Lanzmann's own voice, from within the very writing on the screen which constitutes the film's silent opening.

Of the four hundred thousand men, women and children who went there, only two came out alive: Mordechai Podhlebnik and Simon Srebnik. Srebnik, survivor of the last period, was a boy of thirteen when he went to Chelmno . . .

I found him in Israel and persuaded that one-time boy singer to return with me to Chelmno. [3:4; emphasis mine]

Something is found, here, in Israel, which embodies in effect a point of arrival in Lanzmann's journey, as well as the beginning—or the starting point—for the journey of the film. "I found him in Israel." I would suggest that the artistic power of the film proceeds, precisely, from this finding: the event of Shoah is an event of finding. Unlike Karski, whose journey into the inside and into Otherness has left him only with the memory of the acute experience of a losing ("I never saw him again.") Lanzmann's journey—even if it has, undoubtedly, encountered losses on its way—has amounted to a crucial finding.

33Quoted in The Boston Globe, Nov. 3, 1985, p. 3.
The Return of the Voice

What is it exactly that Lanzmann, at the outset of the film, finds? He finds, I would suggest, the paths to finding: he finds some further questions which unfold uncannily before him the obscure direction of his own pursuit. He finds, especially, the depth and the complexity, the nonsimplicity and the committed internminability involved in the very process of arriving, reaching, finding. The inaugural event of finding is itself already constituted by a number of implied—and incommensurable—discoveries, which the film sets out to explore on different levels.

1. The finding, first and foremost, is the finding of Simon Srebnik, the astonishing winning survivor, “that one-time boy singer” who was literally executed (shot in the head) and yet miraculously, more than once, fooled death and survived:

With his ankles in chains, like all his companions, the boy shuffled through the village of Chelmno each day. That he was kept alive longer than the others he owed to his extreme agility, which made him the winner of jumping contests and speed races that the SS organized for their chained prisoners. And also to his melodious voice: several times a week . . . young Srebnik rowed up the Narew, under guard, in a flat-bottomed boat . . . He sang Polish folk tunes, and in return the guards taught him Prussian military songs . . .

During the night of January 18, 1945, two days before Soviet troops arrived, the Nazis killed all the remaining Jews in the “work details” with a bullet in the head. Simon Srebnik was among those executed. But the bullet missed his vital brain centers. When he came to, he crawled into a pigsty. A Polish farmer found him there. The boy was treated and healed by a Soviet Army doctor. A few months later Simon left for Tel-Aviv along with other survivors of the death camps.

I found him in Israel and persuaded that one-time boy singer to return with me to Chelmno. [3–4]

2. The finding is thus also, at the same time, the finding of a site of entering, the discovery of the unique significance of a place: the discovery of Israel as the place where, on the one hand, the remnants of the extinguished European Jewry could gather (find each other), and where, on the other hand, Lanzmann, coming from outside, can for the first time look inside and discover the reality of the Jews (as opposed to the anti-Semites’ fictions)—a reality materially created and conditioned as the outcome of a history. The discovery of Israel is thus the finding of a place which enables Lanzmann, for the first time, to inhabit his own implication of the story of the Other (Srebnik’s story).

3. The finding is the finding of testimony—of its singular significance and functioning as the story of an irreplaceable historical performance, a narrative performance which no statement (no report and no description) can replace and whose unique enactment by the living witness is itself part of a process of realization of historic truth. Insofar as this realization is, by definition, what cannot simply be reported, or narrated, by another, Lanzmann finds in Israel, precisely, that which cannot be reported: both the general significance and the material, singular concretizations of the testimony (Srebnik’s testimony, as well as others’).

4. Israel becomes the place from which Lanzmann can himself, for the first time, testify from the inside (as both an inside and an outside witness), the place, in other words, in which Lanzmann for the first time finds a voice with which he can say “I” and with which he can articulate his own testimony: “I found him in Israel and persuaded that one-time boy singer to return with me . . .”

The finding is the finding of the power and the function of Lanzmann’s “persuasion,” the finding of his own unique voice and of the necessity and irreplaceability of his own testimony.

5. Finally, the finding is the finding of the film itself: Shoah rethinks, as well, the meaning and the implications of the advent of the event) of its own finding. To find the film is to find a new possibility of sight, a possibility not just of vision—but of revision. While for Karski, the trip inside means first the gaining, but then the losing, of the possibility of seeing and specifically, of “seeing again” (“I never saw him again”), Lanzmann finds precisely in the film the material possibility and the particular potential of seeing again someone like Srebnik whom, after his shooting, no one was likely or supposed to ever see again. Even more astonishingly, the finding of the film provides in general, in history, the possibility of seeing again what in fact was never seen the first time, what remained originally unseen due to the inherent blinding nature of the occurrence.

The Return

The film does not stop, however, at the site of its own finding(s), does not settle at its initial point of arrival, but rather, uses the arrival as a point of departure for another kind of journey, a return trip which, going back to the originally unperceived historical scene, takes place as a journey to another frame of reference, entering into what Freud
calls "eine andere Lokalität"—into another scale of space and time:
"I found him in Israel and persuaded that one-time boy singer to return
with me to Chelmno."

Why is it necessary to return to Chelmno? What is the return about?
Who, or what, returns?

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene

34carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which our names do not appear.

The return in Shoah (and in Lanzmann’s trip) from Israel to Europe
(Poland, Chelmno), from the place of the regeneration and the locus
of the gathering of Holocaust survivors back to the prehistory of
their oppression and suppression, back to the primal scene of their
annihilation, is at once a spatial and a temporal return, a movement
back in space and time which, in attempting to revisit and to repossess
the past is also, simultaneously, a movement forward toward the
future. "I did not want to go to Poland," Lanzmann narrates. "I had a
deep refusal in me to go to Poland. I thought that one can talk about
this from everywhere, from any place—from Paris, from Jerusalem,
from New Haven... And I said, 'what will I see in Poland, I will see
the nothingness, I will see the absence.' And I did not want to go. And
I went there, really, at the very end, and I had to beat myself. But
something extraordinary happened... When I arrived in Poland I was
really loaded with knowledge, with inquiries I had made before—I
was loaded like a bomb. But the fuse was missing. And Poland was
for me the fuse of this bomb."305 The return to Chelmno, therefore, is

3435The film," Lanzmann says, "is at moments a crime film... on the mode of a
criminal investigation... But it is a Western too. When I returned to the small village
of Grabow, or even in Chelmno... Okay, I arrive here with a camera, with a crew, but
forty years after... This creates an incredible... event, you know? Well... I am the
first man to come back to the scene of the crime, where the crime has been committed" (Panel Discussion, p. 53).

p. 22.

37And I started to explode," Lanzmann continues, describing the effect of Poland on
his creative journey. "And to explode means that for years afterward, and during the
whole shooting of the film, I was possessed and I hallucinated. I have filmed these
stones of the Treblinka camp for days and days in every season, because the seasons
are very important in this film... And I remember my camera man telling me, 'But you
are insane! We have already hundreds of shots of these stones, what do you want
to do with it? These are only stones!' But the stones were for me the killed Jews, the
human beings. I had nothing else to film except the stones, and I filmed them with such

both a historical return (a return in time) of Srebnik and a no less
difficult biographical and geographical return (a return in space) of
Lanzmann. Lanzmann’s force of persuasion exercised on Srebnik (“... and I persuaded that one-time boy singer to return”) had to be equally
exercised, no less energetically and forcefully, on himself, for the
return to be put into effect, in this new initiation of a dialogic journey
motivated, once again, by the creation of a "we" (“I persuaded [him]
to return with me to Chelmno”).

The Return of the Dead

The return to Chelmno by the boy singer for whom the Chelmno
period ended with a bullet in the head concretizes at the same time,
allegorically, a historical return of the dead. In a way, the returning
forty-seven-year-old Srebnik (“He was then forty-seven years old” 4),
reappearing on the screen at the site of the annihilation, the improbably
survivor who returns from Israel to the European scene of the
crime against him, is himself rather a ghost of his own youthful
performance, a returning, reappearing ghost of the one-time winner
of chained races and of the boy singer who moved the Poles and
charmed the SS, and who, like Scheherazade, succeeded in postponing
his own death indefinitely by telling (singing) songs. Thus, if Srebnik
on the screen at forty-seven, in the scene of Chelmno of today, embod-
ies a return of the dead, his improbable survival and his even more
improbable return (his ghostly reappearance) concretizes allegori-
cally, in history, a return of the (missing, dead) witness on the scene of
the event-without-a-witness.

Srebnik had, during the Holocaust, witnessed in effect himself, in
Chelmno, a return of the dead—a return to life of the half-asphyxiated
bodies tumbling out of the gas vans. But he witnessed this revival,
this return of the dead, only so as to become a witness to their second
murder, to an even more infernal killing (or rekindling) of the living
dead, by a burning of their bodies while those are still alive and
conscious of their burning, conscious of their own encounter with the
flames by which they are engulfed, devoured:

When [the gas vans] arrived, the SS said: “Open the doors”... The bodies tumbled right out... We worked until the whole shipment was
burned.

a feeling of emergency that they became for me the human beings and that they have
become now for the viewers the human beings." (Evening pp. 4–5).
I remember that once they were still alive. The ovens were full, and the people lay on the ground. They were all 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. [101–102]

Srebniński's witness dramatizes both a burning consciousness of death, and a crossing (and recrossing) of the boundary line which separates the living from the dead, and death from life. But when Srebniński saw all that, he was not really a (living) witness since, like Bomba, like Podchlebnik, he too was already deadened. When I saw all this, it didn't affect me... I was only thirteen, and all I'd ever seen until then were dead bodies. Maybe I didn't understand, maybe if I'd been older, but the fact is, I didn't. I'd never seen anything else. In the ghetto in Lodz I saw that as soon as anyone took a step, he fell dead. I thought that's the way things had to be, that it was normal. I'd walk the streets of Lodz, maybe one hundred yards, and there'd be two hundred bodies. They went into the street and they fell, they fell...

So when I came... to Chelmno, I was already... I didn't care about anything. [102–103]

Therefore, it is only now, today that Srebniński can become a witness to the impact of the falling (and the burning) bodies, only today that he can situate his witnessing in a frame of reference that is not submerged by death and informed solely by Figures, by dead bodies. It is therefore only now, in returning with Lanzmann to Chelmno, that Srebniński in effect is returning from the dead (from his own deadness) and can become, for the first time, a witness to himself, as well as an articulate and for the first time fully conscious witness of what he had been witnessing during the war.

The Return of the Witness

Urged by Lanzmann, Srebniński's return from the dead personifies, in this way, a historically performative and retroactive return of witnessing to the witnessless historical primal scene.

Srebniński recognizes Chelmno.

It's hard to recognize, but it was here. They burned people here... Yes, this is the place. No one ever left here again... It was terrible. No one can describe it... And no one can understand it. Even I, here, now... I can't believe I'm here. No, I just can't believe it. It was always this peaceful here. Always. When they burned two thousand people—Jews—every day, it was just as peaceful. No one shouted. Everyone went about his work. It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now. [6]

Chelmno recognizes Srebniński. The Polish villagers remember well the child entertainer who "had to...[sing when] his heart wept" (p. 6), and they identify and recognize the pathos and the resonance, the lyrics and the melody of his repeated singing:

He was thirteen and a half years old. He had a lovely singing voice, and we heard him.

"A little white house
Lingers in my memory
Of that little white house
I dream each night." [4]

"When I heard him again," one of the Polish villagers remarks, "my heart beat faster, because what happened here... was a murder. I really relived what happened" (4).

Lanzmann places Srebniński in the center of a group of villagers before the church in Chelmno, which, at the time, served as a prison-house for the deported Jews and as the ultimate waystation on their journey—via gas vans—to the forest, where the (dead or living) bodies were being burned away in so-called ovens. The villagers at first seem truly happy to see Srebniński, whom they welcome cheerfully and warmly.

Are they glad to see Srebniński again?

Very. It's a great pleasure. They're glad to see him again because they know all he's lived through. Seeing him as he is now, they are very pleased. [95]

Why does the memory linger? the inquirer would like to know. What motivates this livelihood of the remembrance?

Why does the whole village remember him?

They remember him well because he walked with chains on his ankles, and he sang on the river. He was young, he was skinny, he looked ready for the coffin... Even the [Polish] lady, when she saw that child, she told the German: "Let that child go!" He asked her:
"Where to?" "To his father and mother." Looking at the sky [the German] said: "He'll soon go to them." [95–96]

When Lanzmann gets, however, to the specific subject of the role of the Church in the past massacre of the Jews, the Polish testimony becomes somewhat confused. The evocation of the memories becomes unknowingly tainted with fantasies.

They remember when the Jews were locked in this church?
Yes, they do . . .
The vans came to the church door! They all knew these were gas vans, to gas people?
Yes, they couldn't help knowing.
They heard screams at night?
The Jews moaned, they were hungry . . .
What kind of cries and moans were heard at night?
The Jews called on Jesus and Mary and God, sometimes in German . . .
The Jews called on Jesus, Mary and God!
The presbytery was full of suitcases.
The Jews' suitcases?
Yes, and there was gold.
How does she know there was gold? The procession! We'll stop now.
[97–98]

Like the Nazi teacher's wife (who only "sees things from outside"; 82), the Poles embody outside witness—present an outside view of the Jewish destiny, but an outside view which nonetheless believes it can account for the inside: in trying to account for the inner meaning of the Jewish outcry from inside the church, and in accounting for the inner, unseen content of the robbed possessions of the Jews inside the confiscated suitcases, the Poles bear in effect false witness. Out of empathy in the first case, with respect to the imagined moaning of the Jewish prisoners of the church, out of hostile jealousy and of competitive aggression in the second case, with respect to the imaginary hidden treasures and envied possessions, the Poles distort the facts and dream their memory, in exemplifying both their utter failure to imagine Otherness and their simplified negotiation of the inside and the outside, by merely projecting their inside on the outside. It is to their own fantasy, to their own (self-)mystification that the Poles bear witness, in attempting to account for historical reality. Their false witness is itself, however, an objective illustration and concretization of the radically delusional quality of the event.

The scene is interrupted by the silence—and the sound of the bells—of the procession, a church ritual executed by young girls dressed in white, which celebrates the birth of the Virgin Mary.

This ritual celebration of the images of youth and the predominance of white in the religious ceremony connote the innocence of childhood, the pure integrity and the intactness of virginity, which the ritual is evoking as the attributes of the Holy Virgin. And yet, the presence of Srebnik at the scene reminds us of another kind of child-
The Return of the Voice

hood, and the contiguity of this rather unvirginal and violated childhood (of the child who had to sing when his heart wept) with the immaculate virginity here enacted, of itself creates an almost sacrilegious, and desacralizing, resonance, in an astounding, a vertiginous and a breath-taking cinematic condensation and juxtaposition of different dimensions, of different registers of space and time, of different levels of existence and experience. The sudden, unexpected superimposition of the Holocaust in which the church served as a death enclosure (as the antechamber to the gas vans) and of the present Christian celebration of the birth of the Virgin Mary, brings out a terrible and silent irony, of a church that in effect embodies a mass tomb, at the same time that it celebrates a birth, of a site whose history is stained with blood, at the same time that it is the stage of an oblique celebration of an ethical virginity and of an intactly white immaculateness. Very like the whiteness of the snow covering the forests of Sobibor, Auschwitz and Treblinka, the whiteness of the ritual itself turns out to be an image which, quite literally, covers up history, as the embodiment (and as the disembodiment) of a white silence.

Viewing the procession, one recalls Benjamin's discussion of contemporary art and, particularly, of photography and film as vehicles, specifically, of desacralization, as accelerating agents in the modern cultural process of the "shattering"—and of the "liquidation"—of the cult-values of tradition:

We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind ... [Now] for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction [photography and film] emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual ... The total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, [art] begins to be based on another practice—politics.

It has been a long but sure way from the moment at which Lanzmann, at the head of the Franco-German Seminar on Anti-Semitism in postwar Berlin, was surprised (caught unawares) by the political repercussions of his philosophical considerations, to this surprise translation, by his camera, of the religious into the artistic and of the artistic into the political, to this sudden exhibition, and this uncanny evidence of unexpected depths of political significance in the very ritual of the procession.


The Return of History

After the procession, Lanzmann—who does not forget—returns to the interrupted subject of the inside of the Jewish suitcases.

The lady said before that the Jews' suitcases were dumped in the house opposite [the church]. What was in this baggage?

Pots with false bottoms.

What was in the false bottoms?

Valuables, objects of value. They also had gold in their clothes ...

Why do they think all this happened to the Jews?

Because they were the richest! Many Poles were also exterminated.

Even Priests. [99]

Lanzmann's tour de force as interviewer is to elicit from the witness, as in this case, a testimony which is inadvertently no longer in the control or the possession of its speaker. As a solicitor and an assembler of the testimonies, in his function as a questioner but mainly, in his function as a listener (as the bearer of a narrative of listening), Lanzmann's performance is to elicit testimony which exceeds the testifier's own awareness, to bring forth a complexity of truth which, paradoxically, is not available as such to the very speaker who pronounces it. As a listener, Lanzmann endows the interlocutor with speech. It is in this way that he helps both the survivors and the perpetrators to overcome their (very different kind of) silence. Facing Lanzmann, the Polish villagers, in turn, exhibit feelings that would normally be hidden. But the silent interviewer and the silent camera urge us not simply to see the testimony, but to see through it: see—throughout the testimony—the deception and the self-deception which it unwittingly displays, and to which it unintentionally testifies.

Why do they think all this happened to the Jews?

Because they were the richest! Many Poles were also exterminated.

Even Priests.

In response to Lanzmann's question, Mr. Kantorowski, the player of the organ and the singer of the church, finds his way out of the crowd which surrounds Srebnik and, pushing himself in front of the camera, overshadows Srebnik and eclipses him:

Mr. Kantorowski will tell us what a friend told him. It happened in Myndewycze, near Warsaw.

Go on.

The Jews there were gathered in a square. The rabbi asked an SS man: "Can I talk to them?" The SS man said yes. So the rabbi said that
around two thousand years ago the Jews condemned the innocent Christ to death. And when they did that, they cried out: “Let his blood fall on our heads and on our sons’ heads.” Then the rabbi told them: “Perhaps the time has come for that, so let us do nothing, let us go, let us do as we’re asked.”

He thinks the Jews expiated the death of Christ?
He doesn’t think so, or even that Christ sought revenge. The rabbi said it. It was God’s will, that’s all. [99–100]

Through the voice of the church singer which seems to take on the authority to speak for the whole group, and through the mythic mediation both of archetypal stereotypes of anti-Semitism and of the Christian story of the Crucifixion, the Poles endow the Holocaust with a strange comprehensibility and with a facile and exhaustive compatibility with knowledge: “It was God’s will, that’s all . . . That’s all. Now you know!” (100). It is by dehistoricizing the events of recent history, and by subsuming them under the prophetic knowledge of the Scriptures, that the Poles are literally washing their hands of the historical extermination of the Jews:

So Pilate washed his hands and said: “Christ is innocent,” and he sent Barabas. But the Jews cried out: “Let his blood fall on our heads!
That’s all. Now you know. [100]

Thus the Poles misrepresent, once more, the Jews from the inside and the objective nature of the Jewish destiny and slip, once more, across

“On the generalizable historical significance of this passage, see Peter Canning’s remarkable analysis in “Jesus Christ, Holocaust: Fabulation of the Jews in Christian and Nazi History”: “The compulsory ritual of accusing the Jews of murder (or betrayal, or well-poisoning, or desecration of the Host) and attacking them is inscribed with bodies in history; it is not prescribed but only implicitly suggested in the New Testament, which preaches love and forgiveness. In the Gospel it is ‘the Jews’ who call down the wrath of God on themselves: ‘Let his blood be on us and on our children!’ (Mt. 27:25) Reciting this text, the Polish villagers whom Claude Lanzmann interviewed . . . excuse themselves, the Germans and God—all are absolved of responsibility for the Holocaust. Once again, ‘the Jews brought it on themselves.’ The Crucifixion was their crime. The Holocaust was the punishment which they called down on their own heads, and on their children.

“The Biblical myth functions as an attractor, not only of other narratives but of ongoing events which it assimilates. What I must risk calling the Hoio-myth of Christianity—divine incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection—is not the one source or cause of the Holocaust, it attracted other causal factors to it (the war, inflation, political-ideological crisis, socio-economic convulsions), absorbed them and overdetermined their resolution . . . Those other critical factors, and their resolution in a fascist syncretism, were not alone capable of turning anti-Semitism into systematic mass murder. Nazism reactivated the cliché it had inherited from the Christian Holo-

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the boundary line between reality and fantasy: they unwittingly begin again to dream reality and to hallucinate their memory. In testifying to a murder which they go as far as to call suicide, the Poles bear once again false witness both to the history of Nazism and to the history of the Jews.

But once again, this misrepresentation (this false witness) is itself attributed precisely to the Jews and represented as their inside story. Like the Nazis, who make the Jews pay for their own death traffic and participate—through “work details”—in the management of their own slaughter, the Poles pretend to have the Jews provide their own interpretation of their history and their own explanation of their murder. Kantorowski thus claims that his own mythic account is in fact the Jews’ own version of the Holocaust.

He thinks the Jews expiated the death of Christ?
He doesn’t think so, or even that Christ sought revenge. The rabbi said it. It was God’s will, that’s all [100]

In forging, so to speak, the rabbi’s signature so as to punctuate his own false witness and to authorize his own false testimony, Kantorowski disavows responsibility for his own discourse. In opposition to the act of signing and of saying “I” by which the authentic witnesses
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The silence reenacts the event of silence. "It was always this peaceful here," Srebnik had said. "Always. When they burned two thousand people— Jews—every day, it was just as peaceful. No one shouted. Everyone went about his work. It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now" (p. 6).

Indeed, the church scene is not just a hall (a mirroring) of silences, but the very stage of the performance—of the execution and the repetition—of an act of silencing. Although Srebnik here personifies the return of the witness—the return of witnessing into the very scene of the event without a witness, what the church scene puts into effect and plays out, not in memory but in actual fact (and act), is how the real witness, in returning back to history and life, is once again reduced to silence, struck dead by the crowd. The scene is even more complex, since what the crowd points out as the Jews' crime and as the reason for the Holocaust is the Crucifixion, or the Jews' murder of Christ. But the Polish villagers are not aware that they themselves are in turn acting out precisely such a ritual murder story; they are unaware of the precise ways in which they themselves are actually enacting both the Crucifixion and the Holocaust in annihilating Srebnik, in killing once again the witness whom they totally dispose of, and forget.

What Kantorowski's testimony chooses to deny—his signature, his voice, the Poles' responsibility—it thus performs, reenacts before our eyes. What is not available in words, what is denied, what cannot and what will not be remembered or articulated, nonetheless gets realized. What takes places in the film, what materially and unexpectedly occurs and what returns like a ghost is reference itself, the very object—and the very content—of historical erasure.

I would suggest that what the film shows us here, in action, is the very process of the re-forgetting of the Holocaust, in the repeated murder of the witness and in the renewed reduction of the witnessing to silence. The film makes the testimony happen—happen inadvertently as a second Holocaust. The silent Srebnik in the middle of this picture—with his beautifully dignified and tragic mute smile, and with his mutely speaking face (a face signed by his silence) is in effect a ghost: a ghost which, as such, is essentially not contemporaneous; which is contemporaneous, in reality, neither with the voices of the crowd which surrounds him, nor even with himself—with his own muted voice. What the church scene dramatizes is the only possible

*Quoted in "A Monument against Forgetting", The Boston Globe, Nov. 3, 1985, p. 3. Cf. Lanzmann's remarks in his interview with Roger Rosenblatt, for Channel 13 (Public Television: WNET) in 1987: "When one deals with the destruction of the Jews, one has to talk and to be silent at the same moment... I think there is more silence in Shrou than words."

encounter with the Holocaust, in the only possible form of a missed encounter."  

I would suggest precisely that the film is about the essence of this missed contemporaneity between Srebnik and the semi-circle which surrounds him, between Srebnik's voice and his own silence, and fundamentally, between the Holocaust experience and the witness of the Holocaust experience.

Shoah addresses the spectator with a challenge. When we are made to witness this re-enactment of the murder of the witness, this second Holocaust that appears spontaneously before the camera and on the screen, can we in our turn become contemporaneous with the meaning and with the significance of that enactment? Can we become contemporaneous with the shock, with the displacement, with the disorientation process that is triggered by such testimonial reenactment? Can we, in other words, assume in earnest, not the finite task of making sense out of the Holocaust, but the infinite task of encountering Shoah?

VI

The Return of the Song

If the church scene is thus punctuated, signed by Srebnik's silence, where is Srebnik's testimony, here lost, to be found? The film includes, indeed, an element through which the very silencing of Srebnik's voice can be somehow reversed, through which the very loss of Srebnik's testimony can be somehow recovered, or at least resist its own forgetting and itself be re-encountered, in the repetition of the melody and in the return of Srebnik's "melodious voice" in his reiterated singing. In spite of his own silencing and of his silence, the return of the witness undertaken by the film nonetheless persists, takes over, and survives in the return of the song. In the absence—and the failure—of the contemporaneity between the Holocaust and its own witness, the song nevertheless creates a different kind of contemporaneity between the voice and the historical (revisited) site of the voice, between the song and the place at which the song is (and was) heard,

between the voice and the place to which, at the beginning of the film, the song in fact gives voice:

... it was here ... Yes, this is the place. [5]

The song creates, indeed, an unexpected contemporaneity between its reiterated resonance and the very silence of the place.

It was always peaceful here. Always ... It was silent. Peaceful. Just as it is now. [6]

At the same time, this contemporaneity between present and past, between the singing voice and the silent place remains entirely incomprehensible to, and thus noncontemporaneous with, the witness.

No one can understand it. Even I, here, now ... I can't believe I'm here.
No, I just can't believe it. [6]

It is in hovering between the ways in which it is at once contemporaneous with the place and noncontemporaneous with the witness (with the singer) that the song returns to the inconceivable historical site of its own singing, and that the harmonies and the disharmonies of this return of the song provide an entrance, or a threshold, to the film. It is the song which is the first to testify, the first to speak after the voiceless opening of the narrator. The song encroaches on—and breaks—at once the silence of the landscape and the muteness of the writing on the screen. Through Srebnik's voice, the film introduces us into the soothing notes and the nostalgic lyrics of a Polish folk tune which itself, however, dreams about, and yearns for, another place.

A little white house
lingers in my memory
Of that little white house
each night I dream. [4]

The White House

Srebnik's voice inhabits his own song. But does anyone inhabit the "white house" of which he sings? Who can enter the white house? Does the "I" of Srebnik (the "I" who "can't believe he's here") inhabit what his voice is so dreamily and yearningly evoking? What in fact is there inside the "little white house"? What is there beyond the threshold, behind the whiteness of the house?

The longing for the white house recalls the white virginity of the procession. The white house seems as safe, as wholesome, as immacu-
late in its invitation and its promise, as the white procession of the youthful virgins. And yet, we know that it is not only virginity, but an aberrant violation of lives and of the innocence of childhood, that is implied ironically and silently by the juxtapositions of the church scene, and by the whiteness of the ritual ceremony.

Virginity is what is not written upon. The white is, on the one hand, the color of the virgin page before the writing—the white house sung before the writing of the film—but also, on the other hand, the very color of erasure. 65 For the viewer who has seen the film, and who has come full circle—like the film, like the song—to start again at the beginning, the “white house” brings to mind not just the snow that, whitely covering the peaceful meadows, covers up the emptied graves from which the dead bodies were disinterred so as to be reduced to ashes, burned away, but similarly in a different sense, the later image of white houses in the Polish village of Wladowa, a village once inhabited by Jews but whose Jewish houses have been since vacated (like the graves under the snow) by their original inhabitants (obliterated in extermination camps) and are now occupied, owned and inhabited by Poles. The little white house yearned for thus turns out to be itself, ironically enough, a ghost house; a ghost house that belongs at once to dreaming (“Of that little white house / Each night I dream”) and to memory (“A little white house / lingers in my memory”).

Calling us into a dream, the white house, paradoxically, will also force us to wake up. Plunged into the dreamy beauty of the landscape and into the dreamy yearning of the melody of the white house, the spectator as a witness—like the witnesses of history—has to literally wake up to a reality that is undreamt of, wake up, that is, into the unthinkable realization that what he is witnessing is not simply a dream. We will be called upon to see the film—and to view perception—critically, to discriminate reality from dream, in spite of the confusing mingling of memory and dream, in spite of the deceptive quantity of what is given to direct perception. On the borderline between dreaming and memory, the song—as a concrete, material residue of history—is that “small element of reality that is evidence that we are not dreaming.” 66 The residue of an implicit violence (the unquantifiable ransom with which Srebnik has to keep buying his life)

which at the same time is luringly soothing, the song incorporates the real both in its literal, and yet also, in its deceptive quality. As a purveyor of the real, the song invites us, at the threshold of the film, to cross over from the landscape and the white house into an encounter (a collision) with the actuality of history. It melodiously invites us to a crossing of the distance between art and reference. And no one can suspect that this melodious invitation was in history, and is now in the film, an invitation to the shock of an awakening; of an awakening to a reality whose scrutiny requires a degree of vigilance, of wakfulness of and of alertness such that it exceeds perhaps human capacity. No one can suspect that what awaits us from behind the white house is not simply a nightmare, but the urgency of waking up into a history and a reality with respect to which we are not and perhaps cannot be, fully and sufficiently awake.

The place from which the song invokes us at the threshold of the film and to which it points, at the same time as the locus of the real and as the origin of singing, designates. I would suggest, the place of art within the film: the song becomes itself a metaphor for the whole film which is inaugurated by its melody, and which registers the impact and the resonance of its returns. Opened by the song, the film does not simply show itself: it calls us. It calls us through the singing it enacts. It is asking us to listen to, and hear, not just the meaning of the words but the complex significance of their return, and the clashing echoes of their melody and of their context. The film calls us into hearing both this clash and its own silence. It calls us into what it cannot show, but what it nonetheless can point to. The song inaugurates this calling and this act of pointing.

Yes, this is the place . . .

Shoah begins with the apparent innocence of singing, only to thrust us more profoundly and astonishingly into the discrepancy between the lyrics and their context, only to point us more sharply toward the ambiguity that lies behind that innocence:

A little white house
lingers in my memory . . . [4]

repeats sweetly the song. But another voice proceeds to speak over the resonance of the song:

When I heard him again, my heart beat faster, because what happened here . . . was a murder. [5]
The Return of the Voice

He sang Polish folk tunes, and in return the guard taught him Prussian military songs. [3]

You, girls, don't you cry,
don't be so sad, for the dear summer is nearing . . .
and with it I'll return.

A mug of red wine, a piece of roast
is what the girls give their soldiers.

Therefore.—Why? Therefore.—Why?
[Darum.—Warum?, Darum.—Warum?]

When the soldiers march through the town,
the girls open their doors and windows.

Therefore. Why? Therefore. Why?
Only because of this [sound]
Tschindarrassa / Bum! [Cymbals, drum] (6) ⁷

The two songs sung by Srebnik are contrasted and opposed in many ways. Although they are both folk tunes and are both—by implication or explicitly—about returns, the dialogue between the tune in Polish and its counterpart in German is more than a mere dialogue of foreign tongues. Whereas the song about the white house concretizes a dream of arrival—an implicit dream of reaching—the Prussian military song is marked by a departure and a passage and is a ritual, not of arriving or of coming to inhabit, but of leaving. The act of leaving, at the same time, is disguised, denied and masked by a discursive rhetoric of coming back and by a promise of returning. Apparently, the Prussian song is as sweet in its yearning and as harmless as the Polish song. And yet, the elements of lure on the one hand, and on the other hand of a subordinating force become (almost) apparent. By virtue of its function as a military march, and through the forceful beats of its percussions (“Tschindarrassa, Bum!”; “Darum, Warum”), the Prussian song⁶ incorporates the latent rhythms of artillery and bombs. Hinting at both the malignancy of the deception and the violence to come, the song implicitly includes the military connotations—and the metaphorical, tactile contiguity—of war, of bloodshed (“a mug of red wine”), of brutality (“a piece of roast”) and of physical invasion (“the girls open their doors and windows”). The whole song, with the beats of its repeated rhymes between its ques-

⁷Translation modified and expanded, transcribing all the German lyrics that are clearly audible in the film.
⁶In my analysis of the Prussian song, I owe both gratitude and inspiration to Dr. Ernst Prelinger, who has provided me with a sophisticated explanation of the original German lyrics of the song, an explanation which informs my discussion of it here.

Thus testifies, in Polish, the first voice-over—whose origin is not immediately identifiable, locatable—in the words of one of the bystanders, one of the Polish witnesses of history.

Then Srebnik's face in a close-up—the face that carries both the lightness, the enticing sweetness of the song and the weight, the outrage and the cruelty, of history—twists the silence of its pain into a smile and gazes vacantly, incredibly, incredulously through survival, death and time, through piles of vanished burned bodies into the green trees, the brown earth, and the perspective of the blue horizon:

Yes, this is the place . . . No one ever left here again. [5]

Darum, Warum

The contradictions riddling the very beauty of the first song are aggravated, underscored and sharpened with the second song which, narratively, is a singing replica—or a melodious counterpart—to the first song but which, rhetorically and musically, sets up a dissonance and a sharp contrast with the harmonies and with the innocence of the initial invitation.
tions and its answers ("Darum, Warum"), and with its metaphorically female gifts of drinking, eating, and of opening ("the girls open their doors and windows"), is a figure for a sexual interplay; but the interplay is one of conquest and of transitory military and sexual occupation. It is as though the enigma of the white house—the enigma of a space that is inviolate and intimate, sung in the first song—were, so to speak, invaded, cancelled out, forced open by the second. No wonder that, behind the lure of its enticing surface, the charm of the German song (which primarily plays out a sexual tease) turns out to be itself a sadistic tool by which the singing child becomes a hostage to the Germans, an instrument of torment and abuse through which young Srebnik is reduced by his adult spectators to a chained, dancing marionette transformed—playfully and cruelly—into a singing toy.

The Return of the Voice

we want to serve, to go on serving,
until a little luck ends it all. Hurray!

"Once more, but louder," Lanzmann requests, in response to Suchomel's completed singing. Suchomel obliges Lanzmann. "We're laughing about it," he says with a mixture of complicity and condescension, "but it's so sad."

No one is laughing.
Don't be sore at me. You want history—I'm giving you history.
Franz wrote the words. The melody comes from Buchenwald. Camp Buchenwald, where Franz was a guard. New Jews who arrived in the morning, new "workers Jews," were taught the song. And by evening they had to be able to sing along with it.
Sing it again.
All right.
It's very important. But loud!
Looking squarely ahead, brave and joyous, at the world,
the squads march to work.
All that matters to us now is Treblinka.
It is our destiny.
That's why we've become one with Treblinka.
in no time at all.
We know only the word of our commander,
we know only obedience and duty;
we want to serve, to go on serving,
until a little luck ends it all. Hurray! [105-106]

Having thus repeated once again this song, Suchomel, proud and bemused at his own memory, concludes:

Satisfied? That's unique. No Jew knows that today! [106]

The self-complacency, the eagerness of Suchomel in obliging Lanzmann suggests that he, too, in effect enjoys and takes implicitly sadistic pleasure in the act of his own singing, in his own staged, imitative musical performance and in the inconceivable discrepancy of his own representation of the victims. "You want history—I'm giving you history." Can history be given? How does Suchomel give history, and what does the act of "giving"—the gift of reality—here mean? Ironically enough, the song is literally history insular as it conveys this historical discrepancy and this sadistic pleasure, at the same time that it speaks through the historical extinction of the message and the objectification of the voice. As a literal residue of the real, the song is history to the extent that it inscribes within itself, precisely, this historical discrepancy, this incommensurability between the voice of
its sadistic author and the voice of its tormented singers. What is historically “unique” about the song is the fact that it is a Nazi-authored Jewish song that “no Jew knows today.” “You want history—I’m giving you history.” In the very outrage of its singing doubly, at two different moments (in the camp and in the film, by the victims and by Suchomel) in a voice that is not, and cannot become, its own, the song is, so to speak, the opposite of a signed testimony, an anti-testimony that consists, once more, in the absence and in the very forging of its Jewish signature. Like Mr. Kantorowski’s mythical account of the Holocaust, the Nazi narrative of the Jews’ victimization (both in the camp song and in Suchomel’s reviving of it) is a speech act that can neither own its meaning nor possess itself as testimony. “You want history—I’m giving you history.” As the extinction of the subject of the signature and as the objectification of the victim’s voice, “history” presents itself as anti-testimony. But the film restitutes to history—and to the song—its testimonial function. Paradoxically enough, it is from the very evidence of its enactment as an anti-testimony that the song derives the testimonial power of its repetition, and the historic eloquence of its unlikely and ghostly return: “Sing it again... It’s very important. But loud!”

The Quest of the Refrain, or the Imperative to Sing

I would suggest that the imperative, “Sing it again,” is the performative imperative that artistically creates the film and that governs both its structure and its ethical and epistemological endeavor: to make truth happen as a testimony through the haunting repetition of an ill-understood melody; to make the referent come back, paradoxically, as something heretofore unseen by history; to reveal the real as the impact of a literality that history cannot assimilate or integrate as knowledge, but that it keeps encountering in the return of the song.

“Our memory,” writes Valéry, “repeats to us what we haven’t understood. Repetition is addressed to incomprehension.” We “sing again” what we cannot know, what we have not integrated and what, consequently, we can neither fully master nor completely understand. In Shoa, the song stands for the activation of the memory of the whole film, a memory that no one can possess, and whose process of collecting and of recollecting is constantly torn apart between the pull, the pressure and the will of the words and the different, independent pull of the melody, which has its own momentum and its own compulsion to repeat but which does not know what in fact it is repeating.

The whole film, which ends only to begin again with the return of the song, testifies to history like a haunting and interminable refrain. The function of the refrain—which is itself archaically referred to as “the burden of the song”—like the burden of the vocal echo which, as though mechanically, returns in the interviewee’s voice the last words of the discourses of his interlocutors, is to create a difference through the repetition, to return a question out of something that appears to be an answer: Darum—Warum? (“Therefore.—Why?”). The echo does not simply reproduce what seems to be its motivation, but rather puts it into question. Where there had seemed to be a rationale, a closure and a limit, the refrain-like repetition opens up a vacuum, a crevice and, through it, the undefined space of an open question.

The flames reached the sky.
To the sky... [6]

The Singer’s Voice

What gives this refrain-like structure of the film—the repetition of the song and of its burden, the return of the resonance of the refrain—the power not merely to move us but to strike and to surprise us, the power each time to astonish us and to impact upon us as though for the first time? When Srebnik sings the two songs of the opening, and when the echo of the second song puts into question the apparent harmony and innocence of the first tune, what constitutes the power of the singing and the strength—the eloquence—of Srebnik’s testimony through it, is neither the lyrics nor even the music (someone else’s music), but the uniqueness of the singing voice. The uniqueness of the voice restores the signature to the repeated melody and to the cited lyrics, and transforms them from anti-testimony into a compelling and unequaled testimony. What makes the power of the testimony in the film and what constitutes in general the impact of the film is not the words but the equivocal, puzzling relation between words and voice, the interaction, that is, between words, voice, rhythm, melody,

“Shoa,” says Lanzmann, “had to be built like a musical piece, where a theme appears at a lower level, disappears, comes back at a higher level or in full force, disappears, and so on. It was the only way to keep several parameters together.” (Panel Discussion, p. 44)
images, writing, and silence. Each testimony speaks to us beyond its words, beyond its melody, like the unique performance of a singing, and each song, in its repetitions, participates in the searching refrain and recapitulates the musical quest of the whole film. Like Lanzmann, Srebnik facing an unspeakable event at thirteen and a half, and again at the beginning of the film—as a singer who remained alive because of his "melodious voice"—is in turn a sort of artist: an artist who has lost his words but who has not lost the uniqueness of the singing voice and its capacity for signature. What is otherwise untestifiable is thus transmitted by the signature of the voice. The film as a visual medium hinges, paradoxically, not so much on the self-evidence of sight as on the visibility it renders to the voice, and on the invisibility it renders tangible, of silence. The film speaks in a multiplicity of voices that, like Srebnik's, all transmit beyond what they can say in words. In much the same way as the singing crematorium witnessed and evoked by Philip Müller, the film resonates like a whole chorus of testimonies and of voices that, within the framework of the film, sing together:

The violence climaxed when they tried to force the people to undress. A few obeyed, only a handful. Most of them refused to follow the order. Suddenly, like a chorus, they all began to sing. The whole "undressing room" rang with the Czech national anthem, and the Hatkeah. That moved me terribly . . .

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 with them, resolved to die. With them. Suddenly, some who recognized me came up to me . . . A small group of women approached. They looked at me and said, right there in the gas chamber . . .: "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 . . . the injustice done to us." [164–165]

The singing of the anthem in the crematorium signifies a common recognition, by the singers, of the perversity of the deception to which they had been all along exposed, a recognition, therefore, and a facing, of the truth of their imminent death. The singing, in this way, conveys a repossession of their lost truth by the dying singers, an ultimate rejection of their Nazi-instigated self-deception and a deliberately chosen, conscious witnessing of their own death. It is noteworthy that this is the only moment in the film in which a community of witnessing is created physically and mentally, against all odds. Erasing its own witnesses and inhibiting its own eyewitnessing, the historical occurrence of the Holocaust, as we have seen, precluded by its very struct-

ture any such community of witnessing. 51 But this is what the film tries precisely to create in resonating with the singing chorus of the dying crematorium, whose many signatures and many voices are today extinguished and reduced to silence. The film, as a chorus of performances and testimonies, does create, within the framework of its structure, a communality of singing, an odd community of testimonial incommensurates which, held together, have an overwhelming testimonial impact.

The Disappearance of the Chorus

Müller wishes to die so as to belong, to be part of this community, to join the singing. But the dying singers have it as their last wish to exclude him from their common death, so that he can be not an extinguished witness like them, but a living witness to their dying and their singing. The singing challenges and dares the Nazis. The act of singing and of bearing witness embodies resistance. But for Müller, the resistance cannot mean giving up life; it has to mean giving up death. Resistance spells the abdication of suicidal death and the endurance of survival as itself a form of resistance and of testimony. Resistance signifies the price of the historical endurance—in oneself—of an actual return of the witness. As a returning delegate of the dead witnesses, Müller’s act of testifying and his testimonial afterlife can no longer be, however, part of a living community. Facing his singing compatriots in the crematorium, Müller understands that the gift of witness they request from him, and his responsive, mute commitment to bear witness, leave him no choice but to stand alone, to step outside of the community 52 as well as of shared cultural frames of reference, outside of the support of any shared perception. The holding and the inner strength of the common singing empowers Müller and allows him to escape and to survive. But his survival

51 See above, Chapter 7, 1, "The Occurrence as Unwitnessed."

52 Compare Rudolph Vrba’s decision to escape, after the suicide of Freddy Hirsch that aborts the Resistance plan for the uprising of the Czech family camp: "It was quite clear to me then that the Resistance in the camp is not geared for an uprising but for survival of the members of the Resistance. I then decided to act . . . [by] leaving the community, for which I [was] co-responsible at the time. The decision to escape, in spite of the policy of the Resistance movement at the time, was formed immediately . . . As far as I am concerned, I think that if I successfully manage to break out from the camp and bring the information to the right place at the right time, that this might be a help . . . Not to delay anything but to escape as soon as possible to inform the world" (195–196).
The Return of the Voice

cannot simply be encompassed by a common song, and his afterlife of bearing witness cannot now lose itself in a choral hymn. If his living voice is to speak for the dead, it has to carry through and to transmit, precisely, the cessation of the common singing, the signature of the endurance, the peculiarity and the uniqueness of a voice doomed to remain alone, a voice that has returned—and that speaks—from beyond the threshold of the crematorium.

Müller, Srebnik, and the others, spokesmen for the dead, living voices of returning witnesses that have seen their own death—and the death of their own people—face to face, address us in the film both from inside life and from beyond the grave and carry on, with the aloneness of the testifying voice, the mission of the singing from within the burning.

Suddenly, from the part of the camp called the death camp, flames shot up. Very high. In a flash, the whole countryside, the whole camp, seemed ablaze... And suddenly one of us stood up. We knew... he'd been an opera singer in Warsaw... His name was Salve, and facing that curtain of fire, he began chanting a song I didn't know:

"My God, my God,
why has Thou forsaken us?

We have been thrust into the fire before
but we have never denied the Holy Law."

He sang in Yiddish, while behind him blazed the pyres on which they had begun then, in November 1942, to burn the bodies in Treblinka... We knew that night that the dead would no longer be buried, they'd be burned. [14]

A Winning Song

The entire film is a singing from within the burning of a knowledge: "We knew that night..." The knowledge of the burning is the knowledge—and the burning—of the singing. At the beginning of the film, Srebnik's song incorporates the burned bodies with whose death and with whose burning it still resonates. In singing, on the one hand, as he has been taught, about the girls "opening the doors" to soldiers who pass by, in the very way that he himself, uncannily, is commanded by the SS to "open the doors" of the arriving gas vans so as to receive—and to unload—the bodies to be burned; in singing also, on the other hand, his original melodious yearning of and for the sweetness of white house, Srebnik's singing and his singular, compelling voice, is the bearer of a knowledge—and a vision—not just of the ashes but of the living burning, of the burning of the living—a vision of the half-asphyxiated bodies coming back to life only to feel the fire and to witness, conscious, their encounter with, and their consumption by, the flames:

When [the gas vans] arrived, the SS said: "Open the doors!" We opened them. The bodies tumbled right out... We worked until the whole shipment was burned...

I remember that once they were still alive. The ovens were full, and the people lay on the ground. They were all 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...

When I saw all this, it didn't affect me. I was only thirteen, and all I'd ever seen until then were dead bodies. [101-102]

The deadening of the live witness, the burn of the silence of the thirteen-year-old child who is "not affected," passes on into his singing. The unique expression of the voice and of the singing both expresses and covers the silence, in much the same way as the unique expression of the face—of Srebnik's figure at the opening of the film—both covers and expresses the deliberate and striking absence of dead bodies from Shoah's screen. It is indeed the living body and the living face of the returning witness that, in Shoah, becomes a speaking figure.
for the stillness and the muteness of the bodies, a figure for, precisely, the Figuren. What the film does with the Figuren is to restore their muteness to the singing of the artist-child, to revitalize them by exploring death through life, and by endowing the invisibility of their abstraction with the uniqueness of a face, a voice, a melody, a song. The song is one that has won life for Srebnik, a life-winning song which, framed within the film and participating in the searching repetition of its refrain, wins for us a heightened consciousness and an increased awareness, by giving us the measure of an understanding that is not transmittable without it. As a fragment of reality and as a crossroad between art and history, the song—like the whole film—enfolds what is in history untestifiable and embodies, at the same time, what in art captures reality and enables witnessing. In much the same way as the testimony, the song exemplifies the power of the film to address, and hauntingly demands a hearing. Like Müller coming back to testify and speak—to claim an audience—from beyond the threshold of the crematorium, Srebnik, though traversed by a bullet that has missed his vital brain centers by pure chance, reappears from behind the threshold of the white house to sing again his winning song: a song that, once again, wins life and, like the film, leaves us—through the very way it wins us—both empowered, and condemned to, hearing.