

1/25/2018 9:18 AM

Catherine Portuges, University of Massachusetts Amherst: "From *Shoah* to *Son of Saul*: Cinematic Traces and Intergenerational Dialogues"  
*European Psychoanalytic Film Festival epff9 "Interiors/Exteriors" London, November 2017*  
copyright © 2017, not for duplication, citation or circulation

"There is no why here"--*Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann

Although innumerable films have addressed the Holocaust in a variety of representational styles, it was Claude Lanzmann who transformed Holocaust film representation with the release of his magisterial documentary, *Shoah*<sup>1</sup>, commissioned in 1973 by Alouph Hareven, an official in the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who suggested that Lanzmann make a film about the Holocaust from "the viewpoint of the Jews"-- a film that is not "about the Shoah, but a film that *is* the Shoah." Lanzmann discovered that "what was most important was missing: the gas chambers, death in the gas chambers, from which no one had returned to report. The day I realized this, I knew that the subject of the film would be death itself, death rather than survival, a radical contradiction since in a sense it attested to the impossibility of the project I was embarking on: the dead could not speak for the dead. . . . My film would have to take up the ultimate challenge; take the place of the non-existent images of death in the gas chambers." Rising to that challenge meant plumbing the depths of soul and psyche for all involved. Appearing himself in hundreds of hours of daring and controversial conversations with victims, perpetrators and bystanders, filming with a hidden camera in life-threatening circumstances, Lanzmann courageously imposes his vision on what Sartre terms "le

---

<sup>1</sup> (the Hebrew word for catastrophe) *Shoah* (France, 1985, 566 min., in French, Hebrew, Polish, English, Yiddish and German). See also Richard Brody, "Witness: Claude Lanzmann and the making of "Shoah." *New Yorker*, March 19, 2012. (At over 9 hours, the film is approximately the same length as the miniseries *Holocaust*.)

néant," re-visiting the sites of what he has called "les non-lieux de mémoire," or non-sites of memory,<sup>2</sup> seeking to inscribe in viewers' perceptions the massive material and emotional realities whose physical traces had been deliberately and comprehensively effaced by the Nazis. This strategy echoes recent efforts in museological and photographic research to portray actual sites and material objects associated with trauma rather than the experience itself, such as images taken from trains bound for the death camps.<sup>3</sup>

*Claude Lanzmann and Shoah*

To revisit *Shoah* thirty years after its release is to realize that, not unlike in the intimate relationship of analyst to analysand in the consulting room, the documentary filmmaker and his or her subject engage a cycle of transference and counter-transference through the arc of a film's production, which in the case of *Shoah* lasted well beyond a decade. The mutual dynamic of transference as a way of knowing the world (in contradistinction to its function in the consulting room) and its negation that can occlude the space between filmmaker and interviewee/participant may also be seen as both an ethical and an emotional encounter in this form of representational practice. For the filmmaker confronts the challenge of considering how to integrate the pursuit of historical traces through testimony into a narrative inevitably

---

<sup>2</sup> In a reversal of the French historian Pierre Nora's formulation, elaborated in *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, three volumes that analyze the places and objects that are presumed to embody French national memory, perhaps also a play on the French legal term, 'non-lieu' (dismissal).

<sup>3</sup> Annette Wieworka, *La Shoah : témoignages, savoirs, oeuvres* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes), 2000; Ori Gersht, "History Repeating," 8/25/12-1/6/13, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

focused on an absent subject--what Lanzmann had described as a "circle of flames...a limit which cannot be crossed because a certain absolute horror cannot be transmitted."<sup>4</sup>

In Lanzmann's case as in others, a kind of affective bond develops in the necessary collaboration between filmmaker and subject. Here he is compelled to inspire his subjects to speak the unspeakable, at times forcing them beyond what some consider to be acceptable ethical boundaries, guaranteeing that the cost of such emotional risk will ultimately be redeemed by the importance of their participation. Entirely dependent as it is upon verbal testimony, *Shoah* is a work of reflexive filmmaking, devoid of archival footage, newsreels, or re-enactments, with thousands of hours of unused outtakes, parts of which were later re-edited into subsequent documentaries:<sup>5</sup> [*A Visitor from the Living* (1999, 68 min; *Sobibór, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.* (2001, 102 min); and *The Karski Report* (2010, 49 minutes).]

Claude Lanzmann has described the making of *Shoah* itself as a kind of hallucinatory voyage, positioning himself in the figure of a pioneer in the desolate ruins of the camps, "spellbound, in thrall to the truth being revealed to me...I was the first person to return to the scene of the crime, to those who had never spoken." He chooses to construct his films on the testimony of survivors, perpetrators and bystanders, and it is their words that provide the primary account of the *univers concentrationnaire*: in one of many controversial statements, Lanzmann has denounced visual representations of the death camps as "sacrilegious," asserting

---

<sup>4</sup> cf Introduction by Michael Renov in Agnieszka Pitrowska, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics in Documentary Film* (Routledge, 2013); see also Lanzmann's objections to NBC's 1978 television miniseries in "From the Holocaust to the *Holocaust* (1979/80)" published in *Le Monde* (1994).

<sup>5</sup> I was present for the film's premiere at the New York Film Festival where, in the Q&A that followed the screening, Lanzmann acknowledged: "There are a lot of staged scenes in the film. It is not a documentary," comparing his film subjects to theatrical characters on a stage.

that if he were to discover footage of Jews being asphyxiated in the gas chamber, he would destroy it.<sup>6</sup> *Shoah* nonetheless remains the most significant and celebrated intervention in modern cinematic Holocaust narrative,<sup>7</sup> and a touchstone for subsequent filmmakers.<sup>8</sup>

In reaction to the practice of "organized forgetting" that prevailed during the socialist decades under the Kádár regime in Hungary when ethnic and religious identities were discouraged in favor of communist internationalism, large-scale co-productions featuring multigenerational narratives have been instrumental in drawing attention to the differences between western and eastern European experiences of the Holocaust.

#### *Out of the Past: Transgenerational Fictional Representations*

Perhaps not surprisingly in view of the silence in which the Holocaust was shrouded for almost a generation, fictional representations were among the first to emerge. István Szabó's *Sunshine* (*A napfény ize*, 1999), an English-language film with a predominantly Anglo-American cast, was produced in Canada and filmed in Hungary. With a screenplay co-written by an American playwright and a Hungarian director renowned in the West for a film in German (the Oscar-winning *Mephisto*), it is a transnational epic with a decidedly Hungarian theme: the fate of the Jews in 20th century Europe and its sequellae for Hungarian identity after the Holocaust.

---

<sup>6</sup> Adam Shatz, "Nothing he hasn't done, nowhere he hasn't been" review of *The Patagonian Hare: A Memoir*, in *London Review of Books*

<sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, whose life Lanzmann shared for seven years, later called the film "a monument – one that for generations to come will enable everyone to understand one of the most sinister and enigmatic moments in history." From my conversation with Claude Lanzmann at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, April 2009, following the launch of the English translation of his memoir, *The Patagonian Hare*.

<sup>8</sup> I am deeply grateful to my friend and colleague Professor Barton Byg (University of Massachusetts Amherst) for his close critical reading of an earlier version of this paper.

The subjectivity and interior monologue of a single narrator is the focus of Lajos Koltai's *Fateless* (Sorstalánság, 2005),<sup>9</sup> based on Nobel Laureate István Kertész's autofictional account of his deportation to Auschwitz as an adolescent: "The experience that contributed to writing the novel was about solitude, a more difficult life ... the need to step out of the mesmerizing crowd, out of history, which renders you faceless and fateless." The film transposes the novel's first-person singular voice of the protagonist, fourteen-year-old Gyuri Köves, who recounts his deportation from a Budapest city bus in the fall of 1944 to Auschwitz, and the carceral isolation that ensues. Gyuri knows nothing of concentration camps nor of Nazism: indeed, his knowledge of the Jewish origins for which he is condemned is at once superficial and inexpressible. Kertész has suggested that he did not know even as a child what to make of the Jewishness that had been thrust upon him: "What kind of Jew is one who did not have a religious upbringing, speaks no Hebrew, is not familiar with the basic texts of Jewish culture, and lives not in Israel but in Europe?"<sup>10</sup> *Fateless* shifts the locus of cinematic discourse to a quasi-autobiographical mode with documentary undertones, suggesting--however momentarily--a greater receptivity toward confronting and perhaps even integrating parts of the experience, notwithstanding Kertész's belief that Hungary has yet to face its role in the Holocaust.

*Counter-narratives and Transferential Dialogues: Son of Saul*

---

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Portuges "A Hungarian Holocaust Saga: *Fateless*" in *The Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema* ed Lawrence Baron (Waltham: Brandeis U. University Press/University Press of New England)

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Portuges, "Cinematic Memory of the Holocaust" in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: the Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, eds. Joanna Michlic and John-Paul Himka (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press) 292-300

The fall of communism has led to manifold changes in the representation of the Holocaust, in both Eastern and Western Europe, opening access to archival sources in Central and Eastern Europe that have altered its perception and representation by younger generations of filmmakers. As a counter-narrative to visualizations of the camps discussed earlier, the début fiction feature, *Son of Saul* (Hungary, 2015) brings to the screen a controversial chapter of Holocaust history: the role of the Sonderkommando (the special command unit known as *Geheimnisträger*, bearers of secrets), teams of Jewish prisoners forced to assist the SS in the gas chambers and crematoria, themselves in turn condemned to extermination. The 38-year-old Hungarian director, László Nemes, whose own family were Holocaust victims, was inspired by his discovery of the publication of hidden manuscripts written by Sonderkommandos buried in the grounds of the crematoria in 1944: from 1945-1980, eight sets of documents by five known authors were recovered.<sup>11</sup> Retrospectively known as the Scrolls of Auschwitz, they are of extraordinary immediacy, composed as they were within the *univers concentrationnaire*, and include witness accounts, letters and lists in Yiddish, Greek, French and Polish that raise critical questions with regard to the ethics, memory and interpretation of Holocaust testimony.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *Les voix sous la cendre ou Rouleaux d'Auschwitz-Birkenau, lettres de prisonniers rassemblées entre 1945 et 1980* (Paris: Calmann-lévy / Mémorial de la Shoah, 2005). The following note was found buried in the Auschwitz crematoria, written by Zalman Gradowski, a member of the Sonderkommando who was killed in the 7 October 1944 revolt: "Dear finder of these notes, I have one request of you, which is, in fact, the practical objective for my writing ... that my days of Hell, that my hopeless tomorrow will find a purpose in the future. I am transmitting only a part of what happened in the Birkenau-Auschwitz Hell. You will realize what reality looked like ... From all this you will have a picture of how our people perished." < <https://www.google.com/search?q=yad+vashem&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8>>

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Chare & Dominic Williams, "Searching for Feelings: The Scrolls of Auschwitz and *Son of Saul*," Berghan Journals <<http://berghahnbooks.com/blog/searching-for-feelings-the-scrolls-of-auschwitz-and-son-of-saul>> accessed 2/8/16.

It is October, 1944, the Allies are approaching as the film unfolds over a day and a half in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Saul Ausländer (his family name translates as 'foreigner' or 'stranger' ) stumbles into focus in the square 40mm frame; the camera remains only inches away from him in the chaotic space of his forced labor, following him into a concrete block where the door closes behind them: only at this point do we realize we are in the antechamber of a gas chamber. Convoys arrive transporting deportees; as Saul rescues the corpse of a young boy he believes to be his own son, a fellow prisoner accuses him of having failed the living--the Sonderkommando, then engaged in rebellion against the camp commanders--for the dead. Saul (played by Géza Röhrig<sup>13</sup>) is forced to lead prisoners into the fictitious showers of the gas chambers; in over-the-shoulder point-of-view throughout, extended shots of his impassive face against a blurred background, and an immersive wall of chaotic sound design, Nemes creates a claustrophobic hell of confusion and incomprehension. Indeed, in opposition to Primo Levi's view of the Sonderkommando as numbed servants of the Nazis, the writers of the Scrolls engaged in acts of resistance of which the writings were an important part.<sup>14</sup> Saul's moral dilemma—to participate in the extermination machine or join its victims—is a foregone conclusion. Because the Sonderkommando were summarily executed to remove evidence of Nazi atrocities, his own demise is simply a matter of time. In his influential 1986 essay, "The Grey Zone," Levi uses the Sonderkommando to instantiate the moral dilemmas of Jewish

---

<sup>13</sup> In a television interview broadcast on Charlie Rose (WGBY-TV) on January 4, 2016, Röhrig stated: "Overwhelmingly, the prisoners did not survive--two out of three Jews in Europe were murdered. A few weeks ago we met a Greek Jew, possibly the last surviving Sonderkommando, in L.A. Elie Wiesel said: 'I'm ready to put my name on the line for this film.' I didn't have a chance to meet any of them before the shoot, he's a man who can still smile, there's a spark in his eyes."

<sup>14</sup> N. Chare and D. Williams, "Searching for Feelings: The Scrolls of Auschwitz and *Son of Saul*"

prisoners who 'compromised themselves by collaborating,' addressed in his book, *The Drowned and the Saved*:

"The arrival in the Lager was indeed a shock because of the surprise entailed. The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model, the enemy was all around but also inside, the "we" lost its limits, the contenders were not two, one could not discern a single frontier but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers, which stretched between each of us."<sup>15</sup>

As if apostrophizing Levi, Nemes explains his own conception of the film's visual representation:

The camera is hand-held, we planned all the camera positions and the movement of the main actors in the background action, but as everything is moving, introduces a sort of chaos into the scene, this idea that it's unpredictable, and that you're in a place that is very well known to the public but at the same time we believed it was never shown the way it was. Having this chaos and organization at the same time--this frenzy, the voices, the languages, the lack of information--everything about that and the fact that much is left to the viewers' and their imagination, these things are put in place in the very first moments of the film.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike in other Holocaust films motivated by a redemptive narrative, there is no savior here, no heroic or rescuing figure, only victims trapped in the killing zone. "I didn't want to make a film with a distant, detached point of view," says Nemes, instead seeking to "place the

---

<sup>15</sup> Primo Levi, 'The Memory of the Offence' in *The Drowned and the Saved* (London, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> László Nemes analysis, "Anatomy of a Sequence: *Son of Saul*" video by Mekado Murphy (03:35) *New York Times* January 22, 2016.

audience from the point-of-view of one person in the middle of the killing machine. Otherwise the Holocaust becomes an abstract concept and the audience can back away.” This relentless use of close-ups, shallow focus and long takes denies spectators the possibility of de-cathecting or distancing ourselves from Saul's experience, nor are we allowed the relative comfort of abstracting his existential fate. Through its insistence on a relentlessly personal, subjective perspective, subjectivity itself thus becomes in a sense the film's own subject while paradoxically denying the audience access to Saul's inner world. Yet *Son of Saul* conveys a sense of loss by virtue of these very cinematic strategies, distinguishing itself from the films referenced at the beginning of this essay and, in so doing, radically reinventing film language for a subject at risk of losing resonance seventy years on.<sup>17</sup>

Nonetheless, as a descendant, so to speak, of *Shoah*, *Son of Saul* is perhaps after all not a film about the Holocaust, seeking neither to denounce nor describe its horrors; rather, it places the spectator in the Sonderkommando's cinematic body, evoking the sensation of seeing through his terrorized gaze, hearing strictly what he sees and hears. Every shot is tightly framed and often in close-up, accompanied by a disorienting sound mix of SS voices in Hungarian, German, Polish, Russian and Yiddish, mixed with concentration-camp slang. The set, designed by Hungarian architect László Rajk, who was also responsible for designing the Hungarian exhibition at Auschwitz, is essential to the film's taut energy. Long takes, at times of as much as four minutes duration, executed with a hand-held camera, required sets of

---

<sup>17</sup> Cited from Nemes's presentation at the Golden Globes Foreign Language Film Symposium, to which I was an invited participant, January 11, 2016, Egyptian Theater/American Cinematheque, Hollywood, California.

complete rooms that could accommodate 360-degree takes for which Rajk recreated a Nazi crematorium in an abandoned 1912 warehouse on the outskirts of Budapest:

Assigned to the gas chambers whose functioning he must oversee, Saul robotically scrubs the showers, removes cadavers, collects clothing and effects from those who have been gassed, loads the ovens, scatters ashes in the neighboring river, believing (or imagining) he recognizes his own son among the victims. The boy has not died in the gas chamber, and the doctor intends to administer a fatal injection. In a scene between Saul and the camp doctor, the following dialogue takes place: CLIP

It is at this point that Saul seems to realize that, in Röhrig's reading, "this boy belongs to him and he belongs to the boy. Even for a second the boy survived the gas chamber--he survives and then is killed by the Nazi doctor." This death, then, is different from the others, offering Saul a moment of emotion, of empathy and identification. Whether or not it is his own son--a question left ambiguous in the film--through Saul's seemingly random dedication to the fate of this one individual, can the viewer, too, engage authentically with the otherwise overwhelming reality of the Shoah? Desensitized and psychologically annihilated by his inhuman tasks as a Sonderkommando, Saul is suddenly galvanized, consumed by the desire to recover the child's body for burial and to identify a rabbi to recite the mourners' Kaddish.<sup>18</sup> The dénouement, criticized by some critics as a *reductio ad absurdum*, sees Saul swept up in the Sonderkommandos' attempted escape that takes him across a river, where the precious body he has 'saved' drifts away in the current, and ultimately taking refuge in a shed in the

---

<sup>18</sup> In many commentaries on this point, Talmudic scholars and others have noted that it is not strictly speaking required that a rabbi be present for Kaddish to be said at a burial.

forest where his fellow fugitives plan their next moves. Suddenly, a small blond (Polish, we imagine) boy appears, glimpses the men and quickly runs off. The ambiguous conclusion may be read as a moment of transcendence for Saul, whose face grows beatific at the sight of him, perhaps imagining in his madness that his 'son' is alive, or simply from the joy of seeing a living child. <sup>19</sup>

Unlike Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, in refusing to depict the Holocaust as 'décor'--a trivialization for which Lanzmann has strongly reproached Spielberg--Nemes proposes instead to limit himself to the raw reality of quotidian details while resisting the lure of voyeurism, instead de-coupling each frame from familiar or unquestioned representational modes. This is accomplished through Saul's gaze alone in images often blurred, out of focus or oblique, and through the deafening, often unbearable diegetic noise heard off-screen. Resisting the kind of redemptive discourse prevalent in certain Holocaust films and rejected by Lanzmann, Saul's obstinately determined struggle may be read as leaving open the possibility of a hopeful gesture even from the depths of despair. Indeed, in a sense recapitulating the affective bond between filmmaker and subject referenced earlier, Lanzmann states: "...[László Nemes] is young, intelligent, handsome, and he has made a film about which I will never say anything negative...*Son of Saul* is the anti-Schindler's list. It doesn't portray death, but rather the lives of those who were forced to lead their own to death."<sup>20</sup> The French philosopher/art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, author of *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic*

---

<sup>19</sup> cf Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Lost in Auschwitz: *Son of Saul*" posted February 7, 2016 From the *Chicago Reader* (January 28, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Claude Lanzmann, *Télérama*, <http://www.telerama.fr/festival-de-cannes/2015/claude-lanzmann-le-fils-de-saul-est-l-anti-liste-de-schindler,127045.php>

*Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (MIT Press, 2004), devoted a slim volume to *Son of Saul* in the form of an open letter addressed to László Nemes, published immediately following the film's Cannes premiere, commending an intelligence that justifies the film's brutal cinematic strategies:

What a demanding test, this crush of images, this hell of sound that incessantly cadence your narrative! Yet what a necessary and fertile test! [...] Your story (your fiction), out of the dark, itself 'carries' the secret [that of the Sonderkommandos], transporting it toward the light.<sup>21</sup>

The protagonist is driven to expiate an ambiguous, perhaps fantasized 'paternal' sorrow or guilt through the symbolic enactment of rescue, despite the fact that the object of his obsession is no longer among the living.<sup>22</sup> *Son of Saul* thus reframes the camp without engaging in the kind of 'mirroring' or repetition of violence that has been the object of much critical debate Holocaust representation. Its boldly existential terms counter the more conventional narrative approach of a film such as *Fateless* a decade earlier (with its embrace of iconographic images of beauty despite horror) without betraying and Lanzmann's ethical

---

<sup>21</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Sortir du noir* (Éditions de Minuit, 2015); my translation from the original French: [Quelle épreuve que cette foule d'images et que cet enfer de sons rythmant inlassablement votre récit ! Mais quelle épreuve nécessaire et féconde ! [...] Votre histoire (votre fiction) sort du noir, : elle-même « porte » ce secret [celui des Sonderkommandos], mais pour le porter à la lumière] See Jacques Mandelbaum, *Le Monde*, 4 November 2015. <[http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.com/f/index.php?sp=liv&livre\\_id=3184](http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.com/f/index.php?sp=liv&livre_id=3184)>

<sup>22</sup> László Nemes, *Son of Saul* (Saul Fia, 107 min, in Hungarian, English & Yiddish, 2015). 68th Cannes Film Festival, May 2015. Following a bidding war, the film was acquired on May 17, 2015 by Sony Pictures Classic for North American distribution. Nemes, the son of director András Jeles, served briefly as assistant to Béla Tarr whose insistence on an austere and rigorous film practice is legendary. Since its Cannes premiere in May 2015, *Son of Saul* has thus far won 36 international awards, 17 for best foreign film. It is worth noting, however, that the positive reception by most Hungarian critics and audiences has been tempered by dissenting voices, including those from the far-right Jobbik party who claim that *Son of Saul* is part of "a booming Holocaust industry," and that Hungarian filmmaking should focus on other parts of Hungary's history.

proscription of fictionalized portrayals of the *univers concentrationnaire*--indeed, of representation itself--as if cognizant of Adorno's proscription that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."<sup>23</sup>

In press conferences at the film's Cannes premiere and often thereafter, the lead actor, Géza Röhrig, urged greater understanding of-- and renewed debate on-- the controversial role of the Sonderkommando. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, published in 1986, the year after *Shoah* was released, Primo Levi, inclined as he was to sympathize with those who had experienced such humiliation for so many months and years, remarked that those who had worked in the special squads could not be trusted to tell the truth about what they had been forced to do and their motives. These survivors, he wrote, would more likely utter "a lament, a curse, an expiation, an attempt to justify and rehabilitate oneself: a liberating outburst rather than a Medusa-faced truth." As a result of such characterizations and condemnations, in the aftermath of testimony by witnesses at early trials of Nazi criminals, most retreated into anonymity, haunted by what they had seen and done, and understandably fearful of attempts at retribution to which they were subjected.<sup>24</sup> Claude Lanzmann continues to believe that this period should not be approached through the prism of fiction, insisting that: "Un certain absolu de l'horreur est intransmissible."<sup>25</sup> Considering that cinema may always be regarded with

---

<sup>23</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Sherry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), 34.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Stuart Liebman, "Lanzmann's Theater of Memory," Criterion Collection. A 2001 film, *The Grey Zone*, based on a book by Dr. Miklós Nyiszli, takes its title from a chapter in *The Drowned and the Saved* by Holocaust survivor Primo Levi. The film tells the story of the Jewish Sonderkommando XII in the Auschwitz concentration camp in October 1944, the month and year during which *Son of Saul* takes place. These prisoners were made to assist the camp's guards in shepherding their victims to the gas chambers and disposing of their bodies in the ovens.

<sup>25</sup> "A certain absolute horror is not transmissible" Lanzmann writes in *La Tombe du divin plongeur* (Gallimard, 2012).

suspicion with regard to the Holocaust, these debates continue to fuel controversy. As Lanzmann has noted, the autumn of 1944 was a particular moment in the chronology of Auschwitz when some 250 Jews assigned to the Sonderkommando unit organized a mutiny, succeeding in exploding crematorium No. IV and the adjacent gas chamber before being massacred by the Nazis. The revolt, a real historical event, is suggested in *Son of Saul* as background to the fictional narrative of a man seeking to bury a child with dignity.<sup>26</sup>

Thirty years after the release of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a documentary, *Claude Lanzmann: Spectres of the Shoah*, written, directed, and produced by British filmmaker and journalist Adam Benzine, was scheduled for release on Holocaust Remembrance Day, 2016.<sup>27</sup> Benzine secured exclusive access to the director who sat at length to discuss the making of *Shoah* in a riveting portrait of a tough, determined and uncompromising man. Lanzmann movingly recalls his efforts to convince traumatized death camp survivors to relive their

---

<sup>26</sup> Olivier Bouchara, interview with Claude Lanzmann.< <http://www.vanityfair.fr/culture/cinema/articles/fils-de-saul-shoah-cinema-cannes/25988>> In the same interview Lanzmann compares the film *The Grey Zone* (1997) to *Son of Saul*: Il est vrai que les ressemblances sont troublantes. *The Grey Zone* raconte la révolte des Sonderkommandos d'Auschwitz du 7 octobre 1944 en empruntant un ressort fictionnel du même ordre : les détenus découvrent une jeune fille – vivante – sous un amas de corps dans la chambre à gaz. Ils décident de la sauver puis de la garder auprès d'eux, au secret, dans les baraquements, tout en préparant la mutinerie. Contrairement au héros de Nemes qui veut inhumer son fils à tout prix (il menace même les détenus qui se mettent sur son chemin), les personnages de *The Grey Zone* n'échappent pas aux questionnements sur l'obligation morale de sauver la jeune fille quand leur propre vie est en jeu. En ce sens, parce qu'il soulignait l'impossibilité d'être un homme parfait à l'intérieur d'un camp de concentration, *The Grey Zone*, qui a été très peu diffusé en France et en Europe, était peut-être plus troublant et moins acceptable que *Le Fils de Saul*, lauréat du Grand Prix du festival de Cannes 2015."

<sup>27</sup> *Claude Lanzmann: Spectres of the Shoah* (Canada, 2015, director/screenwriter/producer Adam Benzine, 40 min). HBO Documentary Films has acquired the US Television rights. World premiere, April 25, 2015, Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, in Toronto. I attended a screening at NuArt Theater, Los Angeles, May 14, 2015, for Academy Award consideration. The film marks the directorial début of Adam Benzine who states: "Claude Lanzmann is a filmmaking icon and a Jewish hero. His 12-year journey to make what is now considered to be the definitive Holocaust opus was really an against-all-odds story of defiant resilience in the face of tremendous adversity. I am deeply honored that he agreed to participate." <http://www.screendaily.com/news/hbo-to-debut-spectres-of-the-shoah-doc/5087182.article>.

experiences, confessing to the life-threatening dangers he encountered while tracking down and secretly filming SS officers with a hidden camera. Now 90, he speaks of his engagement in the French Resistance as an adolescent, his romance with Simone de Beauvoir, and his friendship with Jean-Paul Sartre, admitting that he deceived *Shoah*'s financiers who expected a two-hour screening time. It is perhaps an act of poetic justice that Lanzmann, himself a voting member of the Academy who has never been nominated, attended the ceremony for the first time ever, witnessing the triumph of *Son of Saul*,<sup>28</sup> although *Lanzmann: Spectres of the Shoah* failed to win the Oscar in the short documentary competition. Documentary films, many of which, as I have suggested, are inevitably influenced by or in some way in conversation with *Shoah*, occupy a consequential position at least equal to that of fiction in Holocaust reconstruction and memorialization.

#### CINEMA/PSYCHOANALYSIS/SHOAH

In a remarkable counter-transferential moment in the filmmaker/subject relationship, Benzine asks Lanzmann to narrate for the camera a dramatic episode during the production of *Shoah* in which he and an assistant conducted secret undercover filming of former Nazi Heinz Schubert using a hidden camera, the 'Paluche,' during which he director was brutally attacked, sustaining physical injuries requiring hospitalization. Visibly reluctant and disturbed by this request, Lanzmann at first refuses, then relents when Benzine says: "Je sais que c'est difficile," echoing

---

<sup>28</sup> During the five-year editing process, Lanzmann was repeatedly confronted by hundreds of hours of footage of atrocities. The film features previously unseen material shot by the director and his team in the 1970s. The filmmakers are continuing to work with the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Israel's Yad Vashem, who jointly own this material, to restore and digitize it. HBO will produce DVD and BluRay versions in 2016 including supplemental interviews. Sincere thanks to the director, Adam Benzine, for personal communications. Nominated for an Academy Award for best short documentary, the film is the only Holocaust-themed documentaries to have failed to win the award, and the first in that category to use the word "Shoah" in the title.

the words Lanzmann had used to urge Bomba, the barber, to confront the worst atrocity he had experienced when incarcerated in Treblinka: the sight of a fellow barber forced to cut the hair of his own wife and child in the gas chamber, a scene that has been the subject of voluminous debate on the part of film scholars, philosophers and psychoanalysts.<sup>29</sup> "We must do it," Lanzmann insisted then, explicitly using the first-person plural. Lanzmann's primary consideration, then, is not to provide emotional support to his survivor witnesses, but rather to persuade them to give testimony in the very *lieux de mémoire* of exterminations which some had to witness a second time when corpses were exhumed and burned in an effort to further disguise traces. Some of his questions cannot be answered: "You survived, but are you really alive?" thereby allowing no clear point of entry for empathy, denying the viewer the catharsis or sense of superiority that condemnation can elicit. As spectators, we are outsiders as we enter Lanzmann's film; yet even after reactivating the past over nine hours, we emerge understanding relatively little about the internal world of its subjects.

As viewers, we inescapably we join the 'now' of the film in its *longue durée*, which in turn becomes our own present tense; the strategy of filming and translating in real time gives the slowed-down space and time to reflect, imagine, and place ourselves in its narrative. Composed of real-time testimonies by witnesses remembering and working through layers of resistance to excavate their memories, not unlike the psychoanalytic process itself, *Shoah* makes meaning of the unimaginable past in the present by its very refusal to resort to archival evidentiary substantiation. Unlike other films on the aftermath of genocide, it offers no

---

<sup>29</sup> cf Dominick LaCapra, 1998; Joshua Hirsch, 2004; Agnieszka Piotrowska, 2013.

reassurance nor catharsis, instead enduring as a monument to what has been lost, to a catastrophe whose sequellae continue in the present. Lanzmann thus retrospectively bears witness to his own epic struggle, enacting the 'law' he established for himself during the making of *Shoah*: "...rester froid pour le film...il ne fallait pas que ce soit facile."<sup>30</sup> Describing himself as having felt as if he were at total war with everything and everyone while making *Shoah*, his truest confidante and unfailing supporter, emotionally and financially, was Simone de Beauvoir: "I was proud of what I achieved, definitely, yes," confides Lanzmann, who was 87 during the filming of *Spectres of the Shoah*: "But it did not relieve me from anguish," acknowledging a "feeling of bereavement" on the day *Shoah* was finished: "I was swimming in the ocean in Jerusalem, nearly drowning from fatigue, and not happy to be saved [by a passing boat]; I rather wanted to commit suicide," arguably a reference to Primo Levi's death in 1987 at age 67. After falling down the stairwell of his apartment building in Turin, Italy, his fellow writer and survivor Elie Wiesel delivered an epigrammatic coroner's report: "Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later."

Two generations later, Nemes acknowledges *Son of Saul* as a direct descendant of *Shoah*, the film that inspired him throughout his life. Abraham Bomba's testimony, and the film that immortalized it, are systematically evoked by László Nemes as one of the major sources of *Son of Saul*. To embody the daily life of an Auschwitz Sonderkommando, Nemes chose a hybrid representational mode, neither fully fiction nor documentary, inhabiting a 'grey zone' in the interstices of the inferno: "Even in the darkest hours of mankind, there might be a voice within us that allows us to remain human. That's the hope of this film. Nemes believes Hungarians

---

<sup>30</sup> "Remain calm for the film...it was important that it not be easy..."

have not dealt with the trauma of the Holocaust, during which during which some 600,000 Hungarian Jews perished, almost all after Nazi Germany invaded in March 1944. "Every kid should watch it," he said of the film, "not because the cinemas should be full, but that many of them lack empathy."<sup>31</sup>

Like Spielberg, who approached the Holocaust via the true story of a thousand Jews rescued by a single German industrialist, Nemes tells the singular story of a man determined to bury a boy he believes to be his son. But the comparison ends there, according to Lanzmann, who famously reproached *Schindler's List* for using the Holocaust as 'décor.' He is interested in *Son of Saul* precisely as a Hungarian film, having devoted numerous scenes in *Shoah* to the deportation of Hungarian Jews in the spring of 1944, particularly through the testimony of Auschwitz survivors Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler. Lanzmann seems to have found in Nemes an heir worthy of him and of his memory work, having purportedly whispered to Nemes, in an Oedipal moment on the Croisette in Cannes: "You are my son," declaring in press interviews *Son of Saul* to be "a film I will never denigrate."<sup>32</sup> Thus does Lanzmann perhaps wish no longer to be the one who condemns, instead choosing for himself, *in extremis*, a classic mode of survival--a symbolic son, like the boy chosen by Saul. Although such an intergenerational bond, at once affective and artistic, may be traced through many of the works referenced here, it is, I believe, most powerfully present between Lanzmann and Nemes. Both have created works that incarnate terrifying reality, neither sparing us as viewers nor offering a comforting

---

<sup>31</sup> <http://news.yahoo.com/son-saul-film-holocaust-hell-earns-oscar-050113737.html>

<sup>32</sup> Rachel Donadio, *New York Times*, 'In 'Son of Saul,' Laszlo Nemes Expands the Language of Holocaust Films' December 15, 2015. [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/15/movies/in-son-of-saul-laszlo-nemes-expands-the-language-of-holocaust-films.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/15/movies/in-son-of-saul-laszlo-nemes-expands-the-language-of-holocaust-films.html?_r=0)

distancing or separation between present and past. Their images are fiercely embodied, as if wrenched directly from the nightmare, yet rendered with an audacity, urgency and intimacy that nonetheless complicates prior representational strategies. Both compel us to think visually, through a radically personal and original point of view, in images that are themselves tantamount to originary experiences transformed cinematically into a continuous present tense. Seventy years after the end of WW II, under often precarious financial, political and psychological circumstances, these filmmakers are reframing a legacy of guilt and sorrow into artistic projects that engage viewers in transformative encounters, reckoning with its long aftermath in dialogue with themselves and each other, and with the films that continue to resonate across generations.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> "Jewish Identities and Generational Perspectives in Hungarian Cinema" *A Companion to Eastern European Cinemas*, ed Anikó Imre (London: Wiley-Blackwell) 101-124