

STAGING ABSENCE: SHOAH BY CLAUDE LANZMANN (1985)

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One of the most breath-taking scenes from the documentary filmed by Claude Lanzmann about the Holocaust, *Shoah* (1985), occurs during the second part of the film inside a barbershop. In this scene, during questions to Abraham Bomba, a survivor of Treblinka, Lanzmann, assuming the role of interviewer, repeatedly insists on asking Bomba to remember the most minute details of his traumatic experience as a “barber” for all of the women who, minutes before facing death in the gas chamber, had to have their heads completely shaven. Far from undeterred by the emotional burden of the interviewee’s traumatic memory, the director pushes him to a full remembrance of the past. The interviewee, after initially seeming coy and reserved during the simple description of the events that occurred, is pressed to exactly repeat the gestures and actions he performed during the minutes before the annihilation of hundreds of people. Accurate, detailed, in some cases even banal but always insistent, Lanzmann’s questions

attempt to break the chain of the memories established, tamed by the witness in his memory, not so much to recreate, using the expression of Ora Gelley, the “scene of the crime” (1998: 831), but instead to return to a certain time in the past, to resuscitate the past for the viewer through gestural mimicry that enables Bomba to see himself again in the concentration camp and relive the forgotten moments, translated into his linguistic inarticulateness and inconsolable crying.

Although it is impossible to translate into words the vulnerability and psychic collapse to which Bomba succumbs, revealed by the long pause that occurs in his speech, the classification of “sadistic insistence” by critics such as Dominick LaCapra (1997: 257) to describe the director’s perseverance in extracting Bomba’s memory – “we watch something like torture”, Inga Clendinnen (1999: 178) would say – shows his inquisitive interview practice and the trauma produced in the subject through remembrance. In a clear example

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of the transfer of the documentary to the clinical universe, the interviewer and interviewee take the roles of doctor and patient, with the difference that the discursive emergence of Bomba's traumatic past is not intended to heal through the reincarnation of the past but rather intends to perpetuate the past in the director and the viewer. The director seeks not so much to remove the past pain but instead to resuscitate it before the present viewer to show its accuracy and to demonstrate its durability over time, contributing through its visualization to what Sánchez-Biosca (2009) calls the "pedagogy of horror" [pedagogía del horror]. In the words of Lanzmann, collected in Bernard Cuau and Michel Deguy's edited volume of interviews and articles on the documentary, *Au sujet de la Shoah*, it is exactly when the interviewee relives the scene when, finally, "la vérité s'incarne" [the truth is incarnated] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 298).

This notion of "incarnation" as access to a hidden truth in the individual psyche is interesting to observe in the spatial and discursive adjustment carried out by the director in his strategy to recover and perform memory. After following Bomba from New York to Tel Aviv for more than two years prior to filming the scene, Lanzmann rented a barbershop that would serve as the setting for the interview and hired "extras" who would act as anonymous subjects, not even able to understand the language – English – in which the exchange would occur, on whom Bomba would simulate cutting hair. The adequacy of the situational space to the survivor's testimony – also evident

in the locomotive rented to serve as a Polish train to contextualize the oral account of another witness, Henryk Gawkowski, who was formerly in charge of driving the trains in which Jews were deported to concentration camps during the war, a function it undertakes once again during the interview – exemplifies the director's willingness to *stage* memory. The immersion of the interviewee in the past through objects that act in a Proustian manner as temporary catalysts shows a deeply theatrical sense of rote exercise. Rather than a simple description of what occurred, Lanzmann looks for a real experience of the past, emerging not from a faithful, historiographical stage of it – archival material and the use of historical objects are completely discarded during filming – but instead through situations that trigger memories in the subject being interviewed. To unleash the *re-lived* memory, the director places the witness in a familiar but uncomfortable space – Bomba is (re) contextualized in a barbershop in Tel Aviv, just as Simon Skrebnick, one of only two survivors of a massacre of 400,000 Polish Jews between December 1941 and January 1945, is transferred to the place where it occurred, Chelmno. The physical movement does not seek historical reconstruction but rather the recovery of the experience, the return to *places of memory*, in the meaning of Pierre Nora (1984-1992), housed in the individual's psyche, whose recovery and performance are the only source and mode of access to the objective truth of the traumatic experience of the Holocaust. Lanzmann himself explains this point with clarity, as he proclaims in an interview with Shoshana Felman in 1986: "*Shoah* is not a historical documentary [...], the film is an incarnation, a resurrection" (FELMAN, 2000: 112).

To the extent that the director's personal experience is more important than historicity and that feelings are more important than facts – the former being precisely the authentic historiographical foundation of the second – it is not a surprise to submit the witnesses and survivors interviewed

in the documentary to this high degree of theatricality. Robert Skloot states that “Lanzmann wants to put the perpetrators, victims, and bystanders in his film ‘on stage’” (2012: 266). The director himself recognized this point in 1985, in an interview titled “Le lieu et la parole” collected in the volume edited by Cuau and Deguy, in which he explained the need to fictionalize witnesses and survivors, turning them into “characters” on “stage” (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 301). The simple description of what occurred is not enough for Lanzmann; it is necessary to relive it: “[...] Il fallait qu’ils la jouent, c’est à dire qu’ils irréalisent. C’est ce qui définit l’imaginaire: irréaliser. C’est toute l’histoire du paradoxe sur le comédien. Il fallait les metre non seulement dans une certaine disposition d’âme mais dans une certaine disposition physique. Non pas pour les faire parler mais pour que la parole soudain devienne transmissible et se charge elle-même d’une autre dimension” [They must act it, or undo it. That is what defines the imaginary: undoing. It is the central theme of the actor’s paradox. We had to put them in a certain physical position. Not to make them speak, but so that the word would suddenly become transmissible and charged with another dimension] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 301). His allusion to the “actor’s paradox” unfailingly refers to a pioneering eponymous text from French performance theory written during the Enlightenment by Denis Diderot from 1773 to 1777, and it reveals a concern for the fundamentals of the actor’s mimicry and reproduction of reality. Synthesized in the displacement that Diderot raises between “acting with the soul” – that is, feeling the emotions interpreted – and “acting with intelligence” – accurately reproducing without feeling what is interpreted – Lanzmann relied on the former of these two possibilities, advocating a total reliving of the past that publicly bares the subject, identified with the sentiment expressed.

Precisely this will to incarnate, to revive the memory, forces the director to relinquish all images from the archive. Although *Night and Fog*, by

Alain Resnais (*Nuit et Brouillard*, 1955), has passed to posterity through what Thomas Doherty calls “the imagic equilibrium between the archival and the creative material” (1987: 4), *Shoah* has absolutely rejected the inclusion of any image that does not refer to the *present* of the survivors and the camps. Unlike the cohort of documentaries about the Holocaust that preceded and followed *Shoah*, Lanzmann conceived a completely bare film, exclusively consisting of current oral history provided by the witness, the survivor, or the criminal – the minutes that gather, through a hidden camera, statements by the Nazis themselves about what occurred are a distinctive landmark of the documentary – and a camera that tracks the existing scenarios of the genocide.

Such austerity in the iconographic use of archival material appears to be explained by the director’s interest in resurrecting a memory and reincarnation through the survivor’s speech, rather than confining it to the stasis of the photographic image. Lanzmann’s narrative stance, focused on the mental images that assail the viewer based on narration rather than images that could be displayed “as a docudrama”, seeks greater freedom and imaginative depth. Faced with the imposition of the visualization based on what is perceived solely in the displayed image, the director chooses the conceptual opening of the story, organically renewed in the imagination of each of the recipients. For Lanzmann, archival material is nothing more than fixed testimony, devoid of all vitality, and fictitious because it is partial. The archival image seals the memory, devitalizes it, and neutralizes its survival; the memory is mummified, and it is reduced to that particular image, anchored in the past. By contrast, through the oral, live story, the director tells us that memory is renewed and perpetuated and is reincarnated in a *performative* speech act (SÁNCHEZ-BIOSCA, 2009: 132) by which the action is *recreated*, recollected, thereby fading its anachronistic historicism, directly interrogating us as the recipients thereof.

The rejection of all archival documents, in addition to the resurrection of the lived moment, inexorably anchors the image and the story in this narrative and the viewer's present, fusing conventional temporary regimes. The past and the present are diluted, overlapping through a story and an image whose goal is to create an aesthetic and a moral effect. Thus, the denial of keeping the Holocaust in the past and its update to the present are essential for understanding the ultimate goal of the documentary. "Le pire crime, en meme temps moral et artistique qui puisse être commis lorsqu'il s'agit de réaliser une oeuvre consacrée à l'Holocauste, est de considerer celui-ci comme passé", says Lanzmann [The worst moral and artistic crime that can be committed in a drama about the Holocaust is considering it an act from the past] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 316). Therefore, the film can only be an "enquête sur le présent de l'Holocauste" [investigation into the present of the Holocaust], an inquiry into the wounds and scars left by those who experienced it and that persist today, plunging them into what he calls a "hallucinante intemporalité" [hallucinatory timelessness] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 316). To the extent that, for the director, the Holocaust is not embedded in the past but in the present, the strategies to recover memories seek to confirm the inevitable circularity of the traumatic experience, the need to revive and pass it on into the present, recreating what Gabriele Spiegel called the metaphysical and theatrical *presence of the now* (2002: 150).

It is inevitable to note the similarity between Lanzmann's practice and the principles articulated in the Jewish liturgical commemoration. In this sense, the documentary has been conceived as a testament not only of cultural solidarity but also of religious faith. In the words of Doherty, "Lanzmann is interested in the Holocaust not only as a serious scholar but also as a 'Jew'" (1987: 3). The consideration of historical experience as a perpetual reincarnation of the main events of one's culture through oral recitation is based on

an attempt to revive, in the present, through the sacred rite, past events that articulate one's identity. The ultimate goal of the event is identical to that of the director: to fuse two time frames into one – Lanzmann would speak of "l'abolition de toute distance entre le passé et le présent" [the abolition of all distance between past and present] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 301) – combining in a single transmitting and receiving entity a type of unique collective umbrella of shared and transmitted experience that makes a concept immersed in the cycle of the liturgical memory from the absence of a present element and history (SPIEGEL, 2002).

THE FILM OSCILLATES CONSTANTLY BETWEEN THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE, BETWEEN ABSENCE AND ITS SIGN, A PROBLEM SUMMARIZED IN THE CONSISTENT OXYMORON IN THE NEED TO BEAR WITNESS A FACT WHOSE TELOS WAS NONE OTHER THAN THE ANNIHILATION OF THE PRESENCE OF ALL WITNESSES

The sacramental tone of the staging of absence conducted by Lanzmann exactly fits the classical theatrical ritual as a space for viewing the prohibited image. The film oscillates constantly between the visible and the invisible, between absence and its sign, a problem summarized in the consistent oxymoron in the need to bear witness a fact whose *telos* was none other than the annihilation of the presence of all witnesses. The director himself acknowledges the difficulty of making visible the invisible when explaining that the greatest difficulty in the film was confronting the "disparition des traces: il n'y a plus rien, c'est le néant, et il fallait faire un film à partir de ce néant" [disappearance of the remnants: there is nothing,

it is nothing, and I had to make a film from that nothing] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 295). It is this vacillation between the known and the impossibility of knowing – what Maurice Blanchot, in *L'écriture du desastre* (1980), summarizes in the paradox of never forgetting what one will never know – that confirms the most significant theatrical essence of the film.

As with religious ritual and Lanzmann's documentary, the theatrical event is based on an incarnate word, uttered and received, resulting in collective and community participation in the act, whose most visible demonstrations are the Dionysian festivals originating in Greek theatre. As in classical Greece, the theatrical event represents an epiphany: a revelation of the image of divinity, hitherto sheltered and protected from the viewer until its placement on the altar or *thymele*. The classical *skéné*, a term from which the contemporary *scene* derives, acquires a symbolic significance on the border between what is shown and what is hidden. Behind this, the divine is hidden and invisible, manifested on the *proskenion* and *orchestra* through the actor and representation (SURGERS, 2007: 24-25). The etymology of the theatrical space – *theatron*, derived from the verb *theomai* – shows exactly this place where the viewer goes not only to see but also to contemplate a spectacle, to be a victim of a reverie, of a *vision* (SURGERS, 2007: 24). Lanzmann himself alludes to the visionary potential inherent in the incarnate word by claiming to have received a letter from a viewer who claimed to have seen and heard for the first time through the documentary the cry of a child entering the gas chamber: "Il m'arrive de rencontrer des gens qui sont convaincus d'avoir vu des documents dans le film: qui les ont hallucinés" [I happen to find myself with people who are convinced they have seen documents in the film: they are hallucinations]. He concludes: "Le film fait travailler l'imagination" [the film activates the imagination] (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 297). As theatrical text, *Shoah* acquires its force through

its incarnation rather than by reading: the film is the materialization of the staged word, brought to life through acting, one that overcomes the merely read, narrated, or shown.

The theatricality of the documentary is further reinforced by its rigorous compliance with the classical triple unity of spatial, temporal and actantial coordinates of the compositional parameters prescriptively established in Aristotelian poetics. Despite the wide variety of scenery, the unit of symbolic meaning of the film gives it a clustered and confined spatiality and chronology. Largely with the transposition of the enclosure and impenetrability, characteristic of the time and concentration camps and trains – the latter leitmotiv widely repeated throughout the film as a symbol not only of the movement of the deported individual but also of the mobility of memories recovered in the present – the documentary is the product of multiple spaces that only refer to one and the same universe: the enclosure of the *lager* and of the prison of mental memory. The drama emerges precisely from the fact that, despite the variety of geographical locations, all flow together in a single reference – the camp – which causes significant condensation, thus intensifying the pathos of what is told.

This spatial condensation, metonymically locked in the uniqueness of personal experience, is a chronology in line with the synthesis of the broad into the concrete. *Shoah* rejects building the story around a linear, chronological progression, in line with the evolution of historical events. The division of the documentary into two parts, titled "First Era" and "Second Era", is not as much temporal as it is moral and political: as noted by Jay Geller, this partition responds to the initial process of acquiring knowledge about what occurred, while in a second moment, the need for action regarding that knowledge is evoked – which the author summarizes in the opposition "getting knowledge" vs. "what to do with knowledge" (1985: 31). Thus, although the oral testimony

of witnesses can trace the Jewish genocide during World War II, the beginning and end of the film do not coincide with the emergence of the “final solution” and the end of the war. Similarly, the privacy of witnesses is not revealed to the viewer: their identity is exclusively subject to the recreation of what occurred, ignoring their previous or subsequent fate. Therefore, the temporary score is always uneven, as arbitrary as the selection of the survivors whose testimonies go back and forth in time. It is not so much a fact as an experience that Lanzmann wants to capture. Thus, compared to conventional chronological distribution, the director emphasizes disordered, random, live memories, identical in their (dis)organization to the random reminiscence of the trauma suffered and the psychological and moral reactions it triggers.

Perhaps the reason for this mode of expression of this temporality is precisely the symbolism associated with the documentary itself. One of the main hallmarks of *Shoah* in relation to its film counterparts is its long duration, both in the period of its preparation, execution, and editing and in the case of its viewing. On multiple occasions, the director has specified the laborious process of preparing the documentary – more than one decade elapsed between its inception in 1974 and its release to the public in 1985. This period consists of six years of searching for survivors by Lanzmann, four years of interviews summarized in 350 hours of dialogue filmed, a laborious editing process by Ziva Postec and Anna Ruiz, and a final length of 563 minutes, or approximately nine and a half hours. Even the physical conditions required for screening show the magnitude of the project. *Shoah* was released in cinemas through marathon sessions of almost ten hours condensed in one day or segmented into two halves of almost five hours that could be watched over two days of the week. The printed version published by Gallimard, composed of a condensed volume of

approximately 200 pages, is thus no more than a pale reflection of the filmed original.

Undoubtedly, this temporary prolonging shows in the sense of ennui that many critics have perceived in some viewers, but it is highly effective from the perspective of the emotion and intellectual commitment sought in them. Through the continuous juxtaposition of descriptive accounts of the murder of the Jewish people, Lanzmann attempts to reproduce the cyclical, oppressive reiteration of the actions. The full extent of the Nazi bureaucracy of mass destruction appears before our eyes through a rhetoric of repetition (of trains ghostly returning, again and again, transporting thousands of deported Jews and of the cleaning operations of the ramps and gas chambers). The long duration of *Shoah* is above all a material embodiment of its epic nature, a corollary to the magnitude of the devastation of a people and the huge exercise required in the viewer to not be able to understand it or even to imagine it. The expression of time in the documentary becomes a narrator and a character. The gigantic temporal proportion of the film allegorizes the lasting extermination. Form and essence are joined, and the insistence on the leitmotiv of repetition becomes the verbal and imaginary expression of the repetition of death, reincarnated again and again in the testimonies, spaces, and silences that punctuate the film’s nearly 600 minutes.

Because of its duration, Fred Camper says the film produces among its viewers an “ineffable sadness” (2007: 104). The extensive duration of the documentary becomes an organic testament to the weight of time in the concentration camps. The repetition of spaces, stories, survivors, mem-

THE EXTENSIVE DURATION OF THE DOCUMENTARY BECOMES AN ORGANIC TESTAMENT TO THE WEIGHT OF TIME IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS

ories, long shots, theatrical pauses, and silences for approximately 10 hours contribute to this dilation of time, the expression of the infinite time lived in the camp. Due to the repeated accumulation, time, in *Shoah* as in the camps, seems to stop. The actions are repeated, one after another, and it is the reiteration that negates the individuality of all, making them uniform, converting them into one and the same. Lanzmann uses repetitive syntax to create the density of the camp, the difficulty of escaping the deadly cycle of the concentration camp, to the systematic nature of human destruction. These mechanisms are materializing and make palpable the weight of ossified time before death, imposing, in the words of Liebman, “an uncommon burden on the spectators” (2007: 17). Thus, the viewer appears locked in a space and time that he or she cannot escape, condemned as a prisoner of the camp and train, and as an individual who recalls his memories, the traumatic Sisyphean repetition of experiences. In the words of Timothy Garton Ash, Lanzmann “deliberately uses the dictatorial powers of the director to lock you up in a cattle wagon and send you for nine and a half hours down the line to Auschwitz” (1985: 28).

The dilation of time is also endorsed by the multiplicity of languages quoted in the documentary, a symbolic example of the Tower of Babel that was the camps themselves. Juxtaposing a linguistic melting pot that mixes English, French, German, Polish, Hebrew, Greek, Italian, and Yiddish, the exercise of translation conducted by Lanzmann and an interpreter and transferred to the viewer with the help of subtitles contributes to the pause and the extension of the discursive periods. Through the numerous testimonies in different languages, the viewer witnesses the transfer from one language to another, causing inevitable communication delays to the viewer. If the flow of the exchange is affected, the comprehension of the scene is not. The spectators’ need to follow the subtitles, by not knowing the lan-

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guages used by the director and his interviewees, allows us to focus on the visuals, which are not initially noticed. The slowdown in the communication process allows for greater detention in the suprasegments and in the actors’ gestures – what Moser called “disturbing corporal language” (2010: 76) with regard to gestures such as those of the Polish peasant Gawkowski, horizontally sliding his finger over his neck – facilitating introspection and assimilation of what is reported.

Therefore, Lanzmann shows a reflection of time in which the weight of the pauses serves as a turning point, a change of scenery and scene, though only illusorily, because they only give way again to testimony that is to that which preceded it. The multiple narratives create a false sense of relief, breaking with what was reported earlier, resulting in a type of hope that never materializes and the frustration of repetition. Although dramatic, the silences have a pedagogical aspect. They are necessary for the viewer to commit, assume, and internalize the story, to breathe and catch one’s breath before continuing on in the immersion into barbarism. Perhaps the pause is also necessary because the only response to what is reported by both the director and the viewer is none other than silence.

The end result is a stage in which the absence – of places, victims, or words broken in aseptic euphemisms – is revealed to the viewer through a projection into the past and back to the present time. The indicative manipulation of memories by Lanzmann is evident in the large number of

omissions in the story of trauma. There are no traces of survivors, witnesses, or even the French accomplices who survived or contributed to the slaughter. Nor do women have an overwhelming presence in the narrative, making the film, as Ferzina Banaji noted, “a largely male text” (2010: 127). The film has a much smaller presence of members of other cultures, religions and sexual orientations who were dissidents of Nazi ideology. Lanzmann does not seek a historiographical narrative that attempts to answer the why of the crime because any response defies understanding and, what is worse, would banalize the experience through its adaptation to a false argument – “Hier ist kein Warum” [here there is no why], says Primo Levi in *Se questo è un uomo* (1947), recalling the major rule of Auschwitz. In *Shoah*, Lanzmann also presents an end to the debate over the possibility of an image to represent trauma. Such an image does not have to be shown but *resuscitated*, in the words of Stuart Liebman, to “wound his audience” (2007: 9). The film thus becomes the only valid visual document that acts as a witness to a historical moment whose truth lies in its transposition into the present and its call to knowledge as a source of action – Lanzmann was not the *protégé* of Jean-Paul Sartre and his successor at the head of the magazine *Les Temps Modernes* in vain – as well as in frustration – given the impossibility of precisely performing all actions. Perhaps the only conclusion is a commitment to the transmission of knowledge, responsibility, and commitment to memory. “Oral testimony”, says Lawrence Langer, “is a form of endless remembering” (1991: 159). The inherent theatricality of the documentary endows it with strength from living testimony, which is renewed and reincarnated in the present – “j’ai revécu cette histoire au présent” [I relived this history in the present], Lanzmann would later say (CUAU & DEGUY, 1990: 301) – such as the dramatic text, in every action and every viewing, overcoming the natural setting of the film and making *Shoah* an historic event in itself. ■

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the elements of theatricality employed in Claude Lanzmann's film, *Shoah* (1985), so as to stage the concept of absence. First, I will analyse the performative and discursive procedures used in order to resuscitate the witness' past experience. Secondly, I will examine the director's symbolism of concentrationary time and space as agents enabling the visualization of the trauma.

Key words

Holocaust; Trauma; Memory; Concentrationary space; Theatre.

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ESCFENIFICAR LA AUSENCIA: SHOAH, DE CLAUDE LANZMANN (1985)

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es rastrear los parámetros de teatralidad presentes en el film de Claude Lanzmann *Shoah* (1985) con el fin de escenificar el concepto de ausencia. Atenderemos, en primer lugar, a los procesos discursivos y actorales empleados para resucitar la experiencia vivida por el testigo para, en un segundo momento, analizar la simbología del espacio y tiempos concentracionarios empleados por el director como agentes de visibilización del trauma.

Palabras clave

Holocausto; trauma; memoria; espacio concentracionario; teatro.

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