

Prized Writing

WITNESS AND TECHNIQUE: INTERVIEW IN CLAUDE LANZMANN'S SHOAH

William Baker

Writer's comment: Professor Sarah Liu's English 160 class, entitled "Screening the Holocaust," was nothing short of a powerful experience. Not only did the course add to my knowledge of the twentieth century's most horrific tragedy, but on a more fundamental level it forced me to reconsider my previous notions of human morality and personal culpability. The class viewing and subsequent discussion of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* was an important part of this process, both in terms of the people and events detailed in the film and the controversy regarding the methods employed by its director. I felt compelled to write "Witness and Technique: Interview in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*" as a way of resolving my own opinions about *Shoah* and, in a larger sense, of communicating what I perceived to be the role of cinema in documenting and commenting upon the past.

— *William Baker*

Instructor's comment: I first read William Baker's essay, "Witness and Technique: Interview in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*," as a teaching assistant for Dr. Sarah Liu's English 160 (Film as Narrative: Screening the Holocaust). Baker demonstrates more poignantly than a syllabus ever could how this course navigated between history, film, literature and the human emotion embedded in tragedy, fact or fiction. "Witness and Technique" responds to a prompt that asked the students to discuss the effect, along with the moral ambiguities, of Lanzmann's approach to interviewing Holocaust survivors. Baker's paper is exceptional because he manages to elegantly transition from his analysis of *Shoah* to the question at the heart of the Lanzmann controversy. Instead of condemning Lanzmann for his abrasive documentary etiquette, Baker lauds the filmmaker's artistic genius in transforming a standard cinematic form into a remarkable, though agonizing, masterpiece. "Witness and Technique" models Baker's own insight that art is not a term reserved for poetry, novels or Oscar-winning blockbusters.

— *Lyla Kerzner, English Department*

Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* is a unique film, a singularly affecting motion-picture experience. It is not a standard documentary; there is no stock footage, no omniscient narrator, no overreaching dramatic or didactic structure that climaxes with a specific or encompassing moral point. Instead, Lanzmann's *Shoah* is something more nebulous and dramatically challenging: a series of interviews with Holocaust survivors, perpetrators, and bystanders conducted by Lanzmann and his associates during the early 1980s, edited together in only a general thematic pattern and adherent to no strict chronological sequence. As a film with a running time of over nine hours, Lanzmann's *Shoah* presents a wealth of information and emotion that is often difficult to grasp fully; so much thought-provoking material is offered that

it is a challenge to choose one aspect on which to comment. A particularly striking aspect of the piece, though, is the interviewing technique that Lanzmann employs, a style that is surprisingly harsh and probing even when it is being directed towards survivors; such an approach contradicts the more common documentary methods in which victims are gently guided through their tortured remembrances. Lanzmann seems intent on provoking and uncovering the deeply submerged emotions of the survivors at any price, a near-obsession that leads to some of the most powerful and controversial moments in *Shoah*.

The pursuit of emotional truth often leads Lanzmann to adopt methods that would strike most filmmakers as inappropriate. In one notable instance from the film, Lanzmann, seeking to create an environment which will arouse an emotional reaction in his subject, goes so far as to stage an interview with a Holocaust survivor (Abraham Bomba) on a film set constructed by his crew; Lanzmann does not, however, disclose the artificiality of the environment to the audience. On the initial glance this “deception” would seem to be an unpardonable sin, a break of the trust between the documentary filmmaker and the viewer. Ultimately, though, Lanzmann’s approach, while notably unorthodox, is defensible. Never does the interviewing technique employed by Lanzmann affect Bomba’s testimony in a factual sense: the survivor does not change his story or his feelings about his suffering as a result of the fabricated environment. More fundamentally, Lanzmann’s “barber shop” approach is not a particularly radical departure from accepted documentary techniques but merely an extension of common nonfiction filmmaking methods in which the “real” world is subtly altered in order to achieve the goals of the filmmaker.

Before all the talk of “artificiality” and documentary ethics leads us astray, we must discuss at length the actual sequence involving Abraham Bomba. The interview itself, devoid of any notions of stages or cinematic trickery, is shattering: Bomba, a professional barber, describes how he was forced to cut the hair of naked female victims in the gas chambers at Treblinka (105). The discussion between Lanzmann and Bomba is ostensibly filmed in Bomba’s crowded barber shop in Israel; the aging survivor talks while cutting the hair of a customer, surrounded by employees and patrons. The exchange, while difficult for Bomba, progresses for several minutes (“Every haircut took about two minutes, no more than that because there were a lot of women to come in and get rid of their hair”) (105); eventually, though, a particular memory proves too much to handle, and Bomba breaks down. The viewer looks on with pity, sadness, and perhaps consternation as Lanzmann, alternately compassionate and insistent, forces Bomba to continue: A friend of mine worked as a barber--he was a good barber in my hometown--when his wife and sister came into the gas chamber...

Go on, Abe. You must go on. You have to.

I can't. It's too horrible. Please.

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. (107-108) It is a powerful moment, and one that is not easily forgotten or justified; the viewer is left to decide if Lanzmann is to be admired for forcing the truth from Bomba or criticized for bringing about more pain in the life of an already tortured soul. This sequence with Bomba climaxes in a display of raw, unexpurgated emotion; how shocking it is, then, to find out that the moment was staged. The truth is that Bomba had not worked as a barber for several years. The “shop” was a rented space furnished to look like a real location; the customers and coworkers were actually hired extras. The knowledge that the scene was at least partially the result of artifice cannot help but seem like a betrayal: the viewer, once so emotionally invested in Bomba’s pain and breakdown, feels alternately shocked by and angry with Lanzmann and his associates for creating such an environment solely to provoke the emotions and memories of Bomba. After all, what right has Lanzmann to do this, to play with people, places, and pain for his own artistic satisfaction while wrapping himself in the self-righteous veil of documentarian “truth”?

When we as audience members overcome our initial shock, however, and consider the

Bomba interview logically, the supposed “betrayal” seems far less devious. Has Lanzmann lied to the audience? No; the film never actually claims that the barbershop is a real location. Instead, the viewer makes this assumption, albeit a reasonable one given the context. Does the false nature of the location alter Bomba’s testimony? No; it would be fundamentally unfair to allow any supposed indiscretions by Lanzmann to cast aspersions upon the testimony of this brave survivor. More importantly, does the alleged “deception” on the part of Lanzmann affect the way one views Bomba’s breakdown? This is a more debatable issue, but again one is forced to defend Lanzmann: the memories and emotions that come to the surface during the interview are provoked by but not dependent upon the physical environment of the set. In fact, all of these points may actually serve to validate Lanzmann’s approach: one finds the true importance and power of Bomba’s testimony by empathizing with the pain of this man, regardless of how that pain is revealed.

Beyond the actual Bomba interview, however, the controversy over staged interviews raises more fundamental questions about the documentary as a genre and the placement of *Shoah* in that genre. More specifically, at what point do we as audience members choose to accept or not to accept the use of artifice in nonfiction films? Despite what one may choose to believe, the documentary is a very subjective genre: the authors of such films present certain information in a certain fashion in order to elicit a certain response from viewers. The process of editing, fundamental to the creation of any film, changes perceptions, selectively choosing which images are relevant or important enough to disclose. This is an overtly deceptive approach--the expurgated information does not exist for the audience--yet nearly all viewers readily accept some amount of such deception in order to watch a documentary. Nearly all documentaries create artificial scenes and moments for the overall effect of the work; even in *Shoah* one finds other scenes which, to a degree, have been staged. However, these sequences are not subject to controversy because they fall under the category of common, widely accepted documentary techniques. When Lanzmann brings survivor Simon Srebnik back to the remnants of the Chelmno death camp in Poland, it is a very calculated move--Srebnik would not have returned to that terrible place on his own. As in the Bomba interview, Lanzmann has put the subject in an unnatural situation in order to elicit an emotional reaction: “It’s hard to recognize, but it was here. They burned here. . . . No one ever left here again” (3). Here, though, one is not shocked by Lanzmann’s method: many documentary filmmakers take a subject back to an important location in his or her life for the sake of having a relevant or provocative setting for an interview.

Lanzmann’s desire to stir up the past is even more obvious when he accompanies Motke Zaidel and Itzhak Dugin, survivors of the Vilna camp, to an Israeli park and suggests similarities to the Lithuanian forests: “The place resembles Ponari: the forests, the ditches. It’s as if the bodies had been burned here. Except that there were no stones in Ponari” (5). The manipulation in this instance is undeniable, yet somehow we as viewers accept the situation because we are privy to the deception. Perhaps the differences in attitudes towards the artificiality of the Bomba interview and the staged aspects of Srebnik’s scenes or the Zaidel/Dugin sequence suggest a certain smugness on the part of the audience: we demand truthful or honest depictions in nonfiction films, yet as non-professionals we cannot truly identify all the subtle degrees to which an interviewer or a documentary filmmaker shapes the reality of a piece. In fact, if one considers the issue, the entire concept of an interview is somewhat manipulative. An interview is not a spontaneous eruption of feeling or fact, as one is led to believe; rather, it is an often unnatural, staged event in which one person steadily tries to drag information from another person in order to achieve a specific journalistic or artistic goal. Once again, though, the audience tends to be comfortable with this technique because of its ubiquity and pretense of normality--what could be more human, more natural than a conversation?

Lanzmann’s staged barbershop exchange, then, is not a fundamentally new approach to the interview but merely an extension of various documentary techniques that viewers have come to accept. Rather than disconcerting it is actually rather refreshing to find a filmmaker who embraces artificiality as a way of eschewing pretense. Lanzmann refuses to designate

some methods of interviewing as real and others as fake; instead, he understands that all such approaches are inherently unnatural and chooses to concentrate on finding emotional truth among the survivors, regardless of the particular technique he may utilize. What Bomba says, how he says it, how he cuts hair while answering questions, how he moves across the room and covers his face to avoid Lanzmann's gaze—these elements of the interview are far more important than where or when Bomba made his remarks. This is not to say that it is unreasonable to question Lanzmann's methods; his techniques are admittedly unorthodox and therefore ripe for controversy. However, Lanzmann's work cannot exist in a vacuum; a discussion of staged scenes in *Shoah* must force an examination of the extent to which one can accept the documentary as a fundamentally accurate medium.

Again, it's strange to think that a nonfiction film is somehow considered more intrinsically real or accurate than a fiction film. In truth, the documentary is perhaps the more deceptive of the two genres. One expects a fiction film to play loose with the facts for the sake of drama; by comparison, a nonfiction film is alleged to be factual by nature. Nothing could be further from the truth: take the recorded speech of any political leader into an editing bay and you can emerge a short time later with a series of altered remarks that are different in meaning, intentionally misleading, and surprisingly difficult to identify as false without an awareness of context. Such remarks are not meant as a condemnation of the documentary but merely as a warning. If we as viewers cannot indulge the experiments of someone like Lanzmann, then we run the risk of becoming rigid and close-minded, of only being able to digest information if it is presented in the classic documentary format (a definition which is itself impossible to pin down or agree upon). To gain perspective on any issue, one must be able to approach the topic from a number of viewpoints; otherwise, the open discourse of ideas is stifled. So let Lanzmann do things his way: the audience can accept or dismiss his methods at whim, but new approaches and ideas must be explored if viewers are to be challenged intellectually and the documentary is to evolve as a cinematic genre.

Work Cited

Lanzmann, Claude. *Shoah: The Complete Text of the Acclaimed Holocaust Film*. 1985. Preface by Simone de Beauvoir. New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1995.