

**Shoshana Feldman** / from: Introduction to Claude Lanzmann's Speech, 'The Obscenity of Understanding'

CLAUDE LANZMANN, Cathy Caruth and David Rodowick, 'The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann'  
American Imago, Vol. 48, No. 4, PSYCHOANALYSIS, CULTURE AND TRAUMA: II (WINTER 1991), pp. 473-495

Claude Lanzmann was born in Paris some sixty years ago to a Jewish family that had cut its ties with the Jewish world. During the Second World War, he was a student resistance leader in France organizing, at the age of seventeen, his fellow high school students as a resistance group against the Nazis. After the war, he was an investigative reporter: as such, he crossed over to East Berlin and sent back to France the first reports from East Germany on the cold war; later, he travelled to Israel to report about the situation in the Middle East.

In 1970 Claude Lanzmann turned his attention to film making. Besides serving as the director of the very important periodical in Paris, *Les Temps Modernes*, founded by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, Claude Lanzmann has produced two films: *Pourquoi Israel?* (*Why Israel?* released in France in 1973), and in 1985 the film *Shoah*, which scribed by critics immediately upon its appearance as "the film event of the century." We know today that it is more than the film event of the century, because it is not simply a film, but a truly revolutionary artistic and cultural event. And this is what we are still trying to discuss in the years following the appearance of the film, and what so many people in the United States and in Europe are still trying to study and to understand.

In what ways has *Shoah* (both in its contents and in its procedures) opened up new ways for an understanding of culture, politics, history, and the trauma of our century? One of the things that have been most frequently remarked upon, especially in Europe, about the film *Shoah*, is the amazing psychoanalytic presence of Claude Lanzmann on the screen, and the way in which the film incorporates—in ways that go beyond a simple understanding—the most revolutionary and the most radical psychoanalytic insights. I will try to point out the ways in which the film appears to be relevant—crucially relevant—to psychoanalysis, and the ways in which psychoanalysis, as another cultural revolution in our century, is crucially relevant to the film.

On the one hand, there are questions of content that are very obviously common to the film and to psychoanalysis: first of all, the fact that the central subjects that each indelibly researches are suffering, love, hatred, fear, sadism, and violence. But what is even more striking than the question of content is the question of procedure that seems to be common to the film and to psychoanalysis. Of course, we have to understand the radical differences between the two: they are not at all the same kind of enterprise. But it is still striking to take note of the following points. First and most obvious is the fact that the film is a quest, a search for truth, in much the same way that psychoanalysis consists in an investigation of truth; and both are a search for truth through the act of talking, through dialogue, through the act of interlocution. And the process of generating the truth, or bringing it forth, is contingent, both in psychoanalysis and in the film, on a presence, the presence of the listener on the screen and behind the couch. There is an extraordinary presence of Claude

Lanzmann throughout the film, a presence tangible both the depth of his silence, and in the efficacy of his speech—in the success of his interventions in bringing forth the truth. But the presence itself consists first and foremost in a bodily and a physical presence, and this material presence is an essential factor in the process of generating that truth. The second point is that both the film and psychoanalysis institute a quest of memory, a quest for the past which nevertheless chooses to take place through the present, through images and events of the present and of the present alone, through the contemporaneous eventfulness of speech. Something happens in the present in speech and this is what brings about a revelation of the past in both psychoanalysis and in the film.

The third common denominator is related to the temporality of the film, which disrupts chronology, disrupts a certain kind of linear temporality, even though it deals with history. The film, very much like psychoanalysis, works through repetition and through ever-deepening circles: its progress is achieved only through the process of going around in circles. The temporality of the film is also reminiscent of the process of psychoanalysis with regard to the factor of the tempo, the necessity of prolonged time, the fact that the process of the revelation of truth takes time and cannot really take place without taking time: the film in effect lasts nine and a half hours. This may not compare to some nine and a half years of psychoanalytic therapy, but it is almost as long for the viewer with respect to the habits of cinematic viewing. And it took Claude Lanzmann eleven years to produce the film, so the necessity of the process is obvious on every level. The production of the film, like psychoanalysis, takes time and occurs slowly, and cannot really occur more quickly and without this process which evolves in time.

The fourth factor that is common to the approach of the film and to psychoanalysis is the interest in details and the interest in specifics, in the very, very particular detail. There is a constant passage in the film from abstract questions to concrete, minutely detailed questions, and from historical events that are ungraspable in their generality to the physical presence of particular, concrete fragments of memory on the screen.

The fifth point—and perhaps this is the most interesting because it reveals what is common both the film and to the approach of psychoanalysis, and also what specifically differentiates the two procedures in a radical way—is that they both work at the limit of understanding. The relation to understanding is something that is very profound both in the film, and in the discipline of psychoanalysis as a new and innovative discipline: in psycho-analysis as inherently a new relation to understanding and to consciousness.

The film and psychoanalysis both work through gaps in understanding and at the limit of understanding, and even though the film incorporates, as I said, the most radical psychoanalytic insights, it is very important to recognize that it is not a psychological film, and that it incorporates a refusal of psychological understanding, and in a vaster sense a refusal of understanding as such. This is the most difficult thing to understand about the film. However, this attitude is present implicitly in psychoanalysis as well, and especially in certain trends of psychoanalysis. I think that one of the most difficult and most crucial things about the work of Claude Lanzmann is his refusals, and I would like to venture some remarks about the complex significance of these refusals. But first I would like to quote from a passage from the work of a psychoanalytic thinker which in turn addresses the question of

understanding. The citation is by a compatriot of Claude Lanzmann, Jacques Lacan, and I believe it is a reminder very relevant to the attitude of the film. Lacan writes:

What counts, when one attempts to elaborate an experience, is less what one understands than what one doesn't understand— How many times have I pointed it out to those that I supervise when they say to me— I thought I understood that what he meant to say was this, or that—one of the things which we should be watching out for most, is not to understand too much, not to understand more than what there is in the discourse of the subject. Interpreting is an altogether different thing from having the fancy of understanding. One is the opposite of the other. I will even say that it is on the basis of a certain refusal of understanding that we open the door onto psychoanalytic understanding. (Lacan 1975,87-88)

And now I would like to quote from Claude Lanzmann on a completely different level another formulation, concerning his own refusal of understanding in *Shoah*. Paradoxically enough, this refusal has to do, in my opinion, with the fact that his work allows us to understand so much more than what we had understood before about the Holocaust. Claude Lanzmann writes:

It is enough to formulate the question in simplistic terms—Why have the Jews been killed?—for the question to reveal right away its obscenity. There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of *Shoah*. I had clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude. This blindness was for me the vital condition of creation. Blindness has to be understood here as the purest mode of looking, of the gaze, the only way to not turn away from a reality which is literally blinding ... "Hier ist kein Warum": Primo Levi narrates how the word "Auschwitz" was taught to him by an SS guard: "Here there is no why," Primo Levi was abruptly told upon his arrival at the camp. This law is equally valid for whoever undertakes the responsibility of such a transmission [a transmission like that which is undertaken by *Shoah*]. Because the act of transmitting is the only thing that matters, and no intelligibility, that is to say no true knowledge, preexists the process of transmission. ("Hier ist kein Warum," Lanzmann 1990,