

An Archive of the Catastrophe: The Unused Footage of Claude Lanzmann's Shoah

FENWICK, James <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1261-7150>>

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An Archive of the Catastrophe: the unused footage of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*

JENNIFER CAZENAVE, 2019

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Rewatching Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) recently, I was reminded how the documentary is just as much about the unseen as it is about capturing the memories of Holocaust survivors, witnesses and perpetrators. Conspicuous in its absence is any historical footage, the film composed instead of contemporary testimonies and spectral images of the death camps as captured by Lanzmann and his crew. The trauma of the Holocaust is retold through the voices of those who lived through it. But in recording the interviews over a period of close to six years, Lanzmann accumulated 350 hours' worth of footage, which he then edited into a final cut ten-hour film. The hundreds of hours of outtakes were subsequently purchased by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. But the sheer length of the outtakes – around 220 hours' worth – returns us to the question of the unseen in *Shoah*. For why did Lanzmann choose to include the material he did? And given the amount of outtakes, what were the possible routes and directions the film could have taken? Is there an unseen *Shoah* that would tell a very different story?

These are the questions that Jennifer Cazenave explores in her book *An Archive of the Catastrophe*, detailing the production of the film and offering a comprehensive analysis of the unused *Shoah* footage. In the process, the reader is left not only questioning the intellectual, and even emotional, motivations of Lanzmann, who Cazenave deems a 'docu-auteur', but also of the fundamental nature of documentary and how they are constructed and tell stories. Cazenave's book is impressively researched and presents the 'shadow' history of *Shoah*. In recovering the outtakes and reconstructing the intellectual, artistic and production

contexts that shaped Lanzmann's thinking, we are presented with a very different understanding of the final film and its meaning, most pertinently whether it is really a film that presents a gendered history of the Holocaust.

After all, what remains most unseen in the final film are the voices of the women survivors of the Holocaust. Instead, Lanzmann's documentary is primarily told through the male perspective, something that Cazenave's archival research indicates to have been a partially conscious decision on the director's part. Lanzmann, rather than being an impartial, disembodied filmmaker, was actively involved in controlling the testimony of the survivor's he interviewed, going so far as to 'appropriates the speech and process of remembrance of the other as his own to elicit and mold accordingly' (p. 73). But while in the finished film, Lanzmann's presence is represented as being largely that of an off-screen voice, the outtakes reveal a gendered perspective, Lanzmann positioning himself with male survivors as a 'masculine subject within a shared generational space that is defined by resistance' (p. 86).

This privileging of men in the final film leads to what Cazenave calls the 'gendered limits' (p. 150) of the representation of trauma and death, which Lanzmann mediates through the male perspective and whom he 'posits as unique witnesses of the extreme' (p. 149). But in the unused footage, Cazenave recounts harrowing testimony Lanzmann recorded with Ruth Elias, an Auschwitz survivor who suffered experimentation at the hands of Josef Mengele. During the interview, Elias reveals how she was forced to kill her own child by lethal injection to prevent Mengele starving it to death. This unseen footage presents what Cazenave refers to as a 'gendered account of trauma', in which women were equally close to the extermination process, if not more so given that 'the distance between life and death is abolished and a mother – the giver of life – is rendered "the murderer of [her] child"' (p. 150).

Throughout the book, Cazenave aims to understand the process of *Shoah*'s production and of Lanzmann's own evolving directorial intent. Chapter 1 looks to establish Lanzmann's intellectual and emotional connection to the Holocaust and of his previous encounters with it. Cazenave sets out Lanzmann's 'paradigm', in which he wanted to respond to works such as Jean-Francois Steiner's *Treblinka* (1966) that positioned the so-called *Sonderkommando* as Jewish collaborators; these were Jewish men not immediately killed on arrival at the Treblinka extermination camp and forced to bury the bodies of the victims in mass graves. Lanzmann disputed the claims by those like Steiner, and instead aimed to recover the men of the *Sonderkommando* as heroes, not collaborators (p. 15). Chapter 2 explores Lanzmann's interviewing process and his desire to have survivors re-experience their trauma, rather than merely describe it. The chapter focuses on the unused interview with Ada Lichtman, a survivor of the Sobibor camp, and how her testimony leads to a gender role reversal, in which 'memories of men permeate [her] account of the catastrophe' (p. 69). She recalls that a mute boy had first tried to communicate seeing the lifeless bodies of the Jewish men being buried at Sobibor. All through Lichtman's testimony, her husband sits beside her silent. Perhaps this role reversal was ultimately what led to the exclusion of Lichtman's interview from the final film. Chapters 3 and 4 continue the theme of the gendered perspective of *Shoah* and Lanzmann's concern in recovering the reputations of the Jewish police in the Łódź ghetto. His desire to achieve this impacted on those he chose to interview and the way he interviewed them. Once again, the outtakes reveal that the women who were interviewed by Lanzmann were done so because of his desire to recover the reputation of the Jewish ghetto police, rather than their own feminine testimony (pp. 127-128).

An Archive of the Catastrophe is a towering achievement, particularly in the way Cazenave recovers the voice of women survivors that exist in the *Shoah* outtakes. And while the book can at times be overwhelming and exhausting given the sheer amount of archival

work involved – indeed, one can relate to the way Lanzmann himself was exhausted and overwhelmed by the production of *Shoah*, the director even allowing his emotions to overcome him towards the end of the production, the outtakes showing Lanzmann collapsing into the arms of one survivor (100) – it is ultimately rewarding, offering up a wider discourse about the construction of documentaries and how the unseen can shape and transform the meaning of that which we can see.

JAMES FENWICK

Sheffield Hallam University

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j.fenwick@shu.ac.uk