

The Human Part

Gabriel Heller

watch and listen as the Nazi Suchomel explains in precise detail how Jews arriving in Treblinka were beaten and whipped, driven into the undressing room. From there the men were taken directly to the gas chambers, while the women and their children waited in the funnel, as it was called, a kind of corridor that led from the undressing rooms to the gas chambers. It was narrow and enclosed by a barbed wire fence. Branches and leaves, which a brigade of Jewish prisoners known as the Camouflage Squad gathered, were woven through the barbed wire to create a visual barrier. Suchomel's manner as he speaks is calm and matter of fact. He is probably in his late sixties at the time of the interview, but it's hard to tell. He describes how the prisoner workers, along with elderly and sick arrivals to Treblinka and children who arrived without their parents, who had become separated from their parents in the chaos of the transport, were not killed in the gas chamber. Instead, they would always be finished off at what was known as the infirmary. As Suchomel tells it, the infirmary "had a white flag with a red cross. A passage led to it. Until they reached the end, they saw nothing. Then they'd see the dead in the pit." Richard Glazar, a surviving prisoner of Treblinka, corroborates this story. He describes the path to the infirmary, like "a sort of tiny labyrinth." At the end of the labyrinth, there was a short plank, which led out over a pit of corpses, in which "a fire was always present." The victim would be made to stand or sit at the end of the plank, and the SS would "cure" each one with a shot to the back of the neck.

Before I saw Claude Lanzmann's nine and a half hour film *Shoah*, I didn't know what a death camp was. I didn't know anything. I didn't know, for instance, that at Treblinka or Belzec or Sobibor there were no barracks for prisoners, save for the few who were assisting the process of extermination. Jews would come in by train loads, and within hours all the people, as many as twenty thousand, would be stripped naked and gassed or led away to be shot.

When I learned about it in school, it was like a myth, a far-off limit, a solemn but safely abstract warning. But it wasn't real. Even the photographs of naked corpses stacked one on top of another were somehow abstract.

Even my grandfather's experience was unreal to me.

I couldn't fathom the part of him that was not simply my grandfather. When I left his house in Evanston, where he lived first with my grandmother and then after her death with his second wife Anna, it was as if he would just stop existing, and when we returned, he would re-emerge from the void.

In their book, *Trauma Beyond History*, Francois Davoine and Max Gaudilliere explore "the borderlands of discourse", trying to engage language on the level of "what cannot be said." They explore how historical catastrophe manifests itself across generations, how it destroys the power of language to express experience, creating "zones of non-existence" within the survivor, which are then carried down through time: "In this way, a child's gaze can transmit the reflection of a people's disappearance or the vanishing of a social bond on whatever scale." Davoine and Gaudilliere speak of "pieces of frozen time" that must be reintegrated; "these moments excised from history" must be given their rightful place for healing to occur.

Looking at these faces in *Shoah*, I feel something that I rarely feel looking at a work of art. It happens, also, standing before Rembrandt's paintings: this startlingly visceral sense of the subject's presence and wholeness. How easy it is to lose sense of this—for the other to become dim and unreal, a mere object, and therefore expendable.

In Rembrandt's portraits, the faces emerge from a literal darkness.

In *Shoah* the darkness is spiritual.

For nine and a half hours, the film immerses us in the incomprehensible.

The viewer of Lanzmann's film is thoroughly unmoored from the familiar coordinates of understanding by what he hears and sees and by what he does not see and must therefore try to imagine. He must turn testimony into event and in this way actively reconstruct the past. The mind of the viewer becomes the site of an enactment, a kind of stage, as the past is brought back to life with uncanny immediacy.

We are no longer watching from a distance but intimately involved in the process by which history takes shape *within us*. The film is about an inner experience: history alive inside the present.

An invisible shadow seems to fall over everything—the faces, the words that are spoken, the inhuman objects and landscapes that draw Lanzmann's gaze.

What was concentration camp like? I asked. My eleven-year old voice sounded strange and disembodied.

My grandfather took a breath that I could hear.

I don't know how to answer such a question, he said.

Did you see people die? I asked.

Yes, he said. Many people died.

In the gas chamber?

In Buchenwald there was no gas chamber, he said angrily.

My face became hot.

Where was the gas chamber?

Many places. In Auschwitz, there was gas chamber. In Birkenau, there was gas chamber.

In Treblinka, there was gas chamber.

I felt my face burning.

Were you afraid?

Of course I was afraid, he said. We were always afraid. But one had to try to go on, as if...

As if what?

He shook his head. As if! As if! As if we would survive. As if life would one day be normal again.

I felt pummeled by his words.

How did you get free? I asked, suddenly close to tears.

You must know this.

I was quiet, because I didn't know, I had no idea, and I knew I'd really start to cry if I tried to say anything more.

This is very basic information, he said. Of course you know this.

I shook my head.

What? *What?* You are American, you are an American boy, and you don't know it was the Americans who liberated Buchenwald. It was your people! Your soldiers! What do they teach you

in this school of yours? When I was in *gymnasium* we studied history. We knew history. How can you understand anything if you have no understanding of history. It is not an education anymore. It is something else, but not an education.

Lanzmann seems to be working from a moral imperative to collapse as much distance as is possible, to overwhelm. I see the trees on the side of a rutted road, the grass, the tangle of shadow and light. The ground moving, changing, as the camera leads us into the forest.

Who's vision is this?

A particular human being with all her depth and wholeness was led down this road into a forest, I think, a road that I am seeing, as Lanzmann's camera slowly zooms into a darkness among the trees.

This whole film is about getting close. He can approach, and yet the distance remains. Of course it does. What do we know of the particular men and women who died in this forest?

But for a moment, it's as if I almost see what she saw in the moments before a man raised a gun and killed her.

My grandfather never talked to me about his mother, who was killed in Minsk—in the Maly Trostenets extermination camp.

She was transported from Theresienstadt and likely taken directly off the train into the forest.

She must have known she was going to die. She saw the ground moving at her feet. Dirt and leaves. Thoughts went through her mind. Her feelings welled up inside her.

What is the difference between a witness and a spectator? A witness is called upon to produce testimony in the service of a greater, ethical task. A spectator, on the other hand, bears no such responsibility. A spectator is driven, at the end of the day, by the pleasure of looking, by voyeurism.

“‘What does it really matter?’ Is a line we like to associate with bourgeois callousness,” writes Theodore Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, “but it is the line most likely to make the individual aware, without dread, of the insignificance of his existence. The inhuman part of it, the ability to keep one’s distance as a spectator and to rise above things, is in the final analysis the human part....”

As a philosopher, Adorno seeks to oppose the nullifying violence of abstraction. For this to happen “the human part” must be actively opposed by what he calls a “self-reflection of thinking”, a ceaseless dialectical need to undercut the mind’s own flights into spectatorship.

How does one avoid the position of the detached onlooker, the bystander, the voyeur? What is this self-reflection of thinking that Adorno proposes?

Lanzmann and his Polish translator interview the Polish peasants who tended their fields outside the death camp of Treblinka, fields that came right up to the barbed wire. They were victims too, but with a crucial difference.

“While all this was happening before their eyes, normal life went on, they worked their fields?” Lanzmann asks in French, speaking to his translator, who then addresses the peasant in Polish. The translation of the Polish is not provided with subtitles, so we must wait for the translator’s translation to Lanzmann. When the peasant finishes speaking, he squints his eyes, looks around, an almost dazed expression on his face. “Certainly they worked,” the translator

says to Lanzmann in French, summarizing what the peasant has told her. "But not as willingly as usual. They had to work, but when they saw all this they thought, 'What if our house is surrounded and we're arrested?'"

"Were they afraid for the Jews as well?" Lanzmann asks, his arms clasped across his belly, visibly uneasy.

The translator repeats Lanzmann's question to the peasant. The peasant responds. Then he shrugs, chuckles, and looks away.

Lanzmann shifts back and forth on his feet.

The translator says to Lanzmann: "Well, he says it's this way: 'If I cut *my* finger, it doesn't hurt *him*.'"

The intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra finds in Lanzmann's immersive method a turning away from a crucial intellectual and ethical task: for LaCapra any art that seeks an engagement with a traumatic reality must seek to engage it critically—with the distance that such an engagement requires. Only through this kind of encounter do we learn to move beyond trauma, beyond a compulsive return and acting out, to a more productive stance in which actual healing can take place.

He is critical of the techniques that Lanzmann brings to the filmmaking—his relentless immersion in survivor testimony, his shunning of archival footage, his pointed refusal to critically confront the question of why:

The particular problem in Shoah is the motivation and insistence of Lanzmann in trying to bring this reliving about so that he may share or relive it himself. One may well believe that there is something awe-inspiring about Lanzmann's

willingness to subject himself to traumatization or shattering of the self and to relieve the extreme suffering of others. And at times Lanzmann realizes that his wish is impossible to fulfill and that he too can only go through a sort of suffering related, however indirectly, to the trauma of victimized survivors.

LaCarpra is right that Lanzmann does, at times, seem driven by a “willingness to subject himself to traumatization” as a way of bringing about a radically new form of understanding, but at the same time the film conducts a relentless dialogue with its own constraints. LaCapra misses the deeply critical and self-critical core of the film. *Shoah*, in the end, is not only about the limits of what can be suffered, inflicted, and communicated, but also about its own limits as a film to represent traumatic experience.

I keep re-reading this passage from *Negative Dialectics*:

Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems. But it is not wrong to raise the less cultural question whether after Auschwitz you can go on living—especially whether one who escaped by accident, one who by rights should have been killed, may go on living. His mere survival calls for the coldness, the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity, without which there could have been no Auschwitz; this is the drastic guilt of him who was spared. By way of atonement he will be plagued by dreams such as that he is no longer living at all, that he was sent to the ovens in 1944 and his whole existence since has been imaginary, an emanation of the insane wish of a man killed twenty years earlier.

Is Adorno right that that “the basic principle of bourgeois subjectivity” is “the coldness”, the turning a way, the hardening of the heart in the face of another’s suffering? What a claim Adorno makes here: that to live in the world as we’ve made it, one must call upon the same “basic principle” that leads to genocide.

By surviving the victim becomes complicit with the perpetrator, and the only way out of this complicity is death. A retroactive death. To go back in time to the moment of selection and reverse the outcome.

“I don’t know why I was selected to have such a hard time,” my grandfather said to me on his deathbed.

Not selected for the gas at the gates of Auschwitz almost sixty years earlier but selected instead to have *such a hard time*.

Still, I know he was able, at times, to take real pride in knowing that he had accomplished much after the war: having children, grandchildren, a successful career as a medical researcher, which led to important breakthroughs in the treatment of sickle cell anemia and other diseases.

The room was quiet. Outside the summer evening light was slanting through the trees. We sat in silence, and he seemed to be gathering his thoughts.

I looked at the picture above the shelf that held his records. It was a wheat field. The wheat curved in such a way that it seemed to open a passageway. The birds swirled above in the sky. The whole sky swirled above the wheat field.

I felt like I should say something, but I had no words.

I was thirteen years-old.

When I was your age, we could never imagine what was in store for us, my grandfather said. We thought of ourselves as German.

But you were Czech?

Yes, he said impatiently. But this was only a technicality. Surely, you have learned of the Austrian Empire.

No, not really, I said.

What? A young man must learn things, must know things. Without a feeling for the past, we are like sleepwalkers in the present. Do you understand what I'm telling you?

Yes, I said, but I was not interested in the past. When I did learn about it, anything beyond the most general facts, I forgot it immediately. It didn't stick in my mind.

When I was your age, we studied German, we studied Czech, we studied Latin.

Did you like school?

Like school? It wasn't a question of liking. Do you like mountains? Do you like trees? Like is beside the point. It was what was. I wanted more than anything to be a conductor. By the time I was your age, I was familiar with all the great composers.

What were your parents like?

My mother was a very kind woman. She was shy but very intelligent. My father was stern, not so fond of children. We weren't close, my father and I, although when I was about your age, or perhaps a little younger, sometimes he would take me on his horse and buggy to pay house calls to his patients in town. This I liked very much. He was the town doctor, you see, a very well-respected man in the community. Everyone knew him. This is how it was. People got along. Yes of course we were aware of anti-Semitism, but it was distant from our lives. It was a thing we knew about, but rarely did we feel it in any personal way.

What about Hitler?

Hitler did not come to power until much later. In the twenties, Hitler was not at all on our minds.

How did he come to power if there was no anti-Semitism before?

I did not say there was no anti-Semitism, only that we did not feel it personally. As Jews, we could live our lives. We hardly even considered being Jewish. First and foremost, we thought of ourselves as German. Neither of my parents were religious. Similar to how it is for you, I imagine.

When did you come to America?

After the war, of course. In 1946. After the war, I went from Paris, then to London, then to New York, where your grandmother was living in an apartment on Lexington Avenue. What a shock to the system, coming from those lost years. To arrive in New York City. I thought I was dreaming. Perhaps in fact, I had died in the gas, and this was all a dream, some kind of strange heaven. So many people in the street, busy living their lives. I was one of them again. I had been restored to the world of the living. I was very grateful to be there, to be alive. No, it was not a dream. Somehow I had escaped the ovens. It was not as it should have been, but it was somehow that I had come through. And there I was, thirty-one years old, still in many ways a young man. And now, I must make up for lost time; that was the only thought in my head.

I study the human face of the inscrutable Suchomel, filmed by Lanzmann's hidden camera. His face is ugly and swollen. His lips are wet.

Next to my computer on which the DVD plays are stacks of books and papers, tangled electrical cords, an almost-empty cup of cold coffee.

"How is your heart?" Lanzmann asks at the beginning of the interview. Suchomel says it is ok, since the weather has been better lately.

It is the summer of 2016. My grandfather has been dead almost fifteen years.

Out the window I see blue sky, crisscrossed by wires. Shadows fall on the beige umbrella that protects the table in our backyard, while Suchomel explains the killing mechanism at Treblinka, following the construction in 1942 of the camp's large gas chamber. "A primitive but efficient production line of death," he calls it.

What happens when the realm of the beyond, which once was the realm of a just, benevolent God, becomes a space of catastrophe? How does the philosopher or the artist respond? What does it mean for a filmmaker to exist in a dialectical relationship to a catastrophic space?

"If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept," Adorno writes, "it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of the victims."

He is talking about the incomprehensible, what "eludes the concept"—not to attempt to explain what cannot be explained, not to offer false consolation, not to conceal the darkness, "like the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of the victims," but to shine a light into it, which means to think in a way that holds the unthinkable paradoxically in mind and draws us into contact with "the extremity" that is the impenetrable backdrop of everything that can be depicted and named.

Lanzmann's film is dialectical in the deepest sense. It stages a relentless conversation between what can be known and what must remain unknowable. Without abandoning a

rootedness in tangible particulars, *Shoah* represents the furthest limit of art, a limit that all art must measure itself against. It is the greatest film about reality that I have ever seen.

Gabriel Heller's writing has appeared in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Fence*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Sun*, and other publications. He is the recipient of the 14th Annual Inkwell Short Story Award as well as a Special Mention in the 2018 Pushcart Prize Anthology.