SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 27

Shoah

Shoah – the title is the Hebrew word for 'Annihilation' – took ten years to complete. It runs in two parts for some nine and a half hours. Its subject is the minutiae of the Holocaust, what occurred, precisely, at Chelmno, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau and in the Warsaw Ghetto. Archive footage and still photographs are not used, although the camera does linger on some melancholy relics – a jumble of enamelled pots and pans; a pile of suitcases, trustingly identified by their owners; a pit filled with cutlery, tarnished 40 years on to the colour of the surrounding ground.

Only one document, an unexceptional railway movement order, is produced as evidence. Raul Hilberg, the historian who decodes it, adds that he particularly values such artifacts. He likes to hold them in his hands because they are tangible proof – among the few tangible proofs to have survived – that communities now obliterated did once exist. This document describes the fate of perhaps 10,000 Polish Jews. It was not marked secret. To have done so would have been to suggest abnormality, and the Holocaust, Hilberg argues, was predicated on a curious, untroubling assumption of normality.

Claude Lanzmann, the director, is eager to hear about such evidence. He later asks for precise clarification as Hilberg describes the content and significance of the diary of Adam Czerniakow, President of the Warsaw Jewish Council, who committed suicide in July 1942, knowing he could do nothing more to save the community he represented. But spoken evidence is what Lanzmann is really after. The survivors of the Holocaust, the victims and the 'functionaries', were traced to Poland, the United States, Switzerland, Germany, Greece and Israel. Their testimony, and the camera's long look at their faces, is the heart of the matter.

During the war, Lanzmann organised resistance to the Nazis at his Lycee in Clermont-Ferrand. He went on to take a degree in French and philosophy and to teach languages in Berlin between 1948 and 49. A friend of Sartre, he was one of the signatories of the 121 Manifesto against the Algerian War. In the 60s, he worked as a journalist for *Les Temps Modernes*, of which he is now one of the directors; he later switched to filmmaking with the documentary *Pourquoi Israel?*, which attempted to answer the question of how a man committed to decolonisation could defend the survival of Israel. He made *Shoah*, he said, because he was asked. 'I said to myself,' he told Anne Head in an interview for *Screen International*, 'that if I knew nothing about the way the death machine functioned, the film had to be made with nothing… from that moment there was a sort of reaction within me, the only way was to make it all be relived on condition that I, too, was involved.'

What the witnesses have to say – the victims, that is: the functionaries have never previously been tricked into quite such unguarded public reminiscence – has been heard before, but not in quite this way or with quite this impact. (Hundreds were interviewed; there were some 350 hours of rushes; the aim was for a certain sort of definitiveness.) Why? The answer lies principally in Lanzmann's approach to interviewing. He prefers, first of all, to speak direct to his subjects. Including French, he has a command of four European languages, and what he sometimes lacks in fluency he makes up for in

confidence. He cannot speak Greek, but, in questioning a survivor of the Jewish community of Corfu, he favours a common third language, Italian, rather than the services of an interpreter. When an interpreter is unavoidable – he has, apparently, no Polish, Hebrew or Yiddish – he listens attentively to the original language and occasionally, if he feels there has been an omission, will sharply tax the translator about exactly what was said or implied. (On film, we see and hear most of these three-cornered conversations.) Once, to save time, his Polish translator Barbara Janica answers one of his supplementary questions without consulting the witness. 'No,' Lanzmann insists, 'ask him.'

Lanzmann does not look like a professional interviewer, nor for much of the time does he conduct himself like one; which is, perhaps, just as well, for he is probing for deep secrets. He is large, stooped, earnest and slightly unkempt; to hide his feelings he sometimes looks away from his subject. Passion never gets the better of him, although he does very occasionally allow himself an ironic aside. He avoids or appears to avoid the impression of interviewing against the clock, even when talking in their own homes to former members of the SS, whom he is secretly filming, and with whom he could not, presumably, afford to linger indefinitely. He often lets a silence hang until it is filled by the witness. He is a good listener, but he is also – when it is time to strike – capable of laying aside his natural sympathy and asking the hard question or, as twice occurs, refusing to turn off the camera.

The testimony he elicits is harrowing, comprehensive and relentless. Each witness has a different perspective, and there is in the end very little repetition. The evidence is most telling when it is corroborated, if only in small matters. At one point, for instance, Lanzmann asks the German widow of the Nazi schoolteacher of Chelmno (she had gone East a youthful pioneer: the reality had been somewhat daunting) about a manacled boy prisoner. He was a familiar sight in Chelmno. Did she remember one of the Prussian military songs his captors had taught him and which he used to sing? Her face lights up – of course, and she completes the line Lanzmann has begun.

Earlier, we have seen this boy, Shimon Srebnik, once a child of the Lodz ghetto, now a solid, middle-aged Israeli. Lanzmann persuaded him to return to Poland, and the film opens with Srebnik seated in the prow of a flat-bottomed boat being rowed down the river Narew – as he was rowed years ago to gather alfalfa for the rabbits kept by his guards – singing a Polish folk tune. (Of the 400,000 who were destined to perish at Chelmno – the schoolteacher's widow cannot remember the exact number. 'Four something…' – Srebnik and one other, Mordechai Podchlebnick, whom Lanzmann also questions, were the only survivors.) Srebnik, too, has not forgotten the Prussian song. He sings it, liltingly, to camera. The widow's face lights up with pleasurable remembrance; a sadder, more rueful smile plays across Srebnik's features.

The victims of the Holocaust have repeated their stories many times. But here the effect of this accumulated evidence, related with surprisingly little rancour and balanced against, say, the disinterested recollections of a Polish farmer who worked (and still works) the fields near Treblinka or of a railway engineer who, well fortified with vodka, drove the transports into the camp, is to build a more complete and many-sided picture than we have had before, at least on film. Lanzmann and his chief editor, Ziva Postec, have given the documentary a tone of calm dispassion. The pace is stately and unhurried: we must in a sense make the river journey before we reach the heart of darkness.

The overlapping chronicles are intercut and framed with judicious repetitions and illustrative juxtapositions. The trains – the same trains, it seems, are still in service – shunt back and forth, again and again, along the same tracks, through the same stations. A railwayman at Treblinka crosses the track with Lanzmann and points with a stick: Here the fence ran. We repeatedly approach the entrance of Auschwitz or circle over the great arc of jagged memorial stones at Treblinka. A witness describes the last journey of the victims of Auschwitz and the camera travels along a plaster model, in the camp museum, of the way-stations on the route to death. Unlike Treblinka, much of Auschwitz still stands: the red-brick buildings, the execution wall, the crematoria; the ruined steps leading to one of the gas chambers and the perimeter fence under whose no-longer electrified strands hares now lope.

The uniqueness of *Shoah* does not, however, lie here. The entrance of Auschwitz is, after all, an outline almost as familiar as that of the Eiffel Tower. The Holocaust has its historians: the Germans were punctilious recordkeepers and, as Martin Gilbert has recently demonstrated, we have if not the names then at least the numbers. No, what distinguishes *Shoah* is its subtext: the story told by a man's face.

The deputy of Auerswald, the Nazi commissioner of Warsaw, was one of the few functionaries whom Lanzmann succeeded in talking to openly. Since the war this man has been a publisher of mountaineering books. Lanzmann reminds him of his past by quoting a reference to him in Czerniakow's diary. Is that so, the man says, may I note the date – this is my history, you know. One senses that he already realised it was unwise to have granted the interview. The man's nervous annotations, the manner in which he leans towards Lanzmann, the fixed, uneasy smile on his rounded features tanned by the mountain sun, say far more about the nature of forgetfulness than his stonewalling replies. 'Mr Lanzmann, this is getting us nowhere.' At one point he makes a slip, referring to Auerswald's instead of Czerniakow's suicide.

Filmmakers can, of course, if they choose, make men into monkeys. Lanzmann, however, is not interested in scoring points off the functionaries. The enormity is too huge and the hour too late. He lets their half answers stand. The mountain air, he observes in closing, must be fresher than that in the Warsaw Ghetto. Oh, yes, Auerswald's deputy agrees in relief, believing himself off the hook.

The first and most striking feature of the Jewish witnesses is that, in their very different ways, they all look like survivors. They have, of course, grown into middle age, but in several of them experience seems to have slowed down the aging process. They are survivors in the way that generals of whatever army are generals: their presence commands attention.

Shimon Srebnik has the least to say. He is erect and slow moving, his face betrays little. Lanzmann took him to Chelmno and placed him in a curious, welcoming crowd outside the Roman Catholic church. It was here thousands of Jews were gathered before being herded into the gas-vans, the forerunners of later, more sophisticated methods of mass extermination. Srebnik stands quietly in the midst of this jabbering, excited throng (he is something of an exhibit), occasionally looking from side to side and nodding if he appears to be in agreement with what had been said.

A rather forced example of documentary reconstruction, it might be thought; and sure enough, the scene is punctuated with an antisemitic outburst, all the worse for being an unwitting antisemitic outburst – 'It wasn't me who said

these things [that the extermination of the Jews was retribution for the death of Christ], but a rabbi, about to die, addressing his congregation…' But one is compelled against the hubbub to wonder just what thoughts must be running through Srebnik's mind. He was 13 years old when he was taken, an orphan, from Lodz to Chelmno. Really, he said, all he had ever known was death: death rather than life seemed the natural order of things. Perhaps, if he had been older, he would have thought differently, he would have been affected by the tasks the Nazis set him. This disclaimer is half the story. His watchful face outside the church is the other half. In Chelmno now, silence and the smiling nod is the most politic behaviour for a Jew.

Shimon Srebnik survived by chance. As the Russians advanced, he was shot in the head and left for dead. The bullet missed his brain and a Soviet doctor saved his life. Rudolf Vrba, who was saved from execution of another kind and set to work as a registrar at Auschwitz, where there was a large group of non-Jewish prisoners, saved his own life. Of all the witnesses, he is the one whose demeanour, whose frank, ironic smile, whose precise, organised speech, would lend support to the theory that some people, given the circumstances, are innate survivors. Vrba tells the story of the Theresienstadt 'family group' which was kept at Auschwitz for an unprecedented six months before being exterminated in March 1944, and of how on the day before they were due to die he helped prepare for a coordinated rebellion in the camp. The story is involved and dramatic. It ends with the attempted suicide of one – Freddy Hirsch, the leader of the family group, who, for fear of what would happen to the children under his care, according to Vrba, chose suicide over revolt.

Vrba tells this story with a notable sense of his own detachment from it, even though he was, it seems, in the role of go-between, one of the leading participants. A month after the extermination of the Czech family group, Rudolf Vrba, concluding that a rebellion was impossible, made a successful escape. It was a logical decision, reached only after he had tried, as far as he was able, everything else. Vrba speaks in English; after the war, it appears, he emigrated to North America and, judging from what we see, made a success of his life. All of which decisively colours his story. On the page it would have read very differently.

Jan Karski, a former courier for the Polish Government in exile, and now a university professor in New York, puts the reason for this concisely. He was asked by Warsaw's Jewish leaders to inform the world of the plight of the ghetto and the fate of Europe's Jews. One of those who urged him to undertake this mission – and, Professor Karski adds, this lodged in his mind – said that his testimony would carry far greater weight when he spoke to those in power far from Poland, if he could assert 'I saw this with my own eyes.' He therefore visited the ghetto and was utterly appalled by what he saw.

He is the most reluctant of Lanzmann's 'sympathetic' witnesses; at the start of his interview he loses his nerve and with the camera running gets up and leaves the room. Yet when he begins his testimony, which he delivers with a damped-down but ever increasing emotion somewhat at odds with his cool, aristocratic bearing, one can see the infernal spectacle (which he has not spoken about for 35 years) swimming up before his clear, watery blue eyes. Retracing his walk through the Warsaw Ghetto and describing what he cannot forget, Professor Karski brings us, in 1986, as close perhaps as we shall ever get to a re-experience of the Holocaust. Such is the intensity of his

involvement in the story that he seems at times about to become lost in silent reverie, until Lanzmann skilfully jogs him back into the present.

There is, however, one survivor who stands out from the rest. Filip Muller is a Czech Jew. He worked in the 'special detail' at Auschwitz, in the crematoria and on the threshold of the gas-chamber, and survived five liquidations or periodic changes of the special detail. He has a melodious voice and as he gives his testimony, quietly and intently, he varies his pitch (for expressiveness, he is equalled only by Rudolf Vrba). The climax of his story is the murder of the Theresienstadt family group, who were exceptional because unlike almost all the thousands who preceded them they knew, as they were forced into the undressing room, exactly what fate awaited them. One can see the vision before Filip Muller's eyes as he describes the extreme brutality with which they were treated and the refusal of some to obey orders. What makes the evidence of Jan Karski and Filip Muller so uniquely poignant and meaningful is that we are watching men not just telling a harrowing story but in a sense sending themselves back into the past.

Up to this point in Filip Muller's testimony, he has shown no sign that he is not completely in control of himself. But now he breaks off. Lanzmann will not turn off the camera. The victims, fellow Czech Jews, he goes on, began to sing, the Czech National Anthem and the 'Hatikva'. He then realised that his life had lost its meaning, and that all he had borne up to then had been for nothing. He stepped into the gas-chamber resolved to die. But a group of women dissuaded him. His death would be futile. He must live and bear witness. Retribution of a sort, as we know, was taken. Many years later, Claude Lanzmann has given Muller his moment to bear witness in another, more lasting fashion.

Shoah is not above politics. It passes some harsh judgments on antisemitism in present-day Poland – indeed a showing at the National Film Theatre in London earlier this year was leafleted by protestors claiming Lanzmann had traduced the Poles. Though these judgments, it should be noted, are offset by Professor Karski's evidence of how some Christian Poles did attempt to do something for their Jewish fellow countrymen. The Germans, from the widow of the teacher of Chelmo to one of the Treblinka guards (Lanzmann asks him to sing the Treblinka Song a second time, louder, for the benefit of the hidden microphone), display a chilling complacency. One knows, by the end, exactly where Lanzmann stands: he names the functionaries (even going so far as to assure one of them that, of course, he will not); and he is not above reminding us that Saurer, the firm that built the gas-vans of Chelmno, is still in business.

The war and the fate of the Jews will not go away, as – to take three random examples – the 'confirmation' of Josef Mengele's death, the uproar over President Reagan's visit to the Bitburg cemetery and the revelations of the shrouded war record of the former Secretary-General of the United Nations have recently confirmed. But Lanzmann's purpose, and this is where his monumental film differs from all previous films about the Holocaust, has been to explain how this awesome tragedy occurred (the why is another question altogether), to honour its victims and then, perhaps most importantly, to draw a line. He leaves us at the end of nine and a half hours gazing at a huge, detailed, unforgettable canvas. Its cautionary moral, of course, is beware lest this happen again: there may not be a Filip Muller then to step back from the jaws of death to bear witness to the next generation.

John Pym, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1986

SHOAH

Director: Claude Lanzmann
Production Company: Historia Films
Assistance: Ministère Français de la Culture
Production Company: Films Aleph
Production Managers: Stella Gregorz-Quef, Séverine Olivier-Lacamp
Production Administrator: Raymonde Badé-Mauffroy
Research Assistants: Corinna Coulmas, Irène Steinfeldt-Levi, Shalmi Bar Mor
Photography: Dominique Chapuis, Jimmy Glasberg, William Lubtchansky
Assistant Photographers: Caroline Champetier De Ribes, Jean-Yves Escoffier, Slavek Olczyk, Andrès Silvart
Editor: Ziva Postec
Editor (one of Treblinka sequences): Anna Ruiz
Sound Recording: Bernard Aubouy
Sound Recording (Israel): Michel Vionnet
Sound Re-recording: Bernard Aubouy
Sound Editors: Danielle Fillios, Anne-Marie L'Hôte, Sabine Mamou
Subtitles: Alexander Whitelaw, W. Byron
Interpreter from Polish: Barbara Janica
Interpreter from Hebrew: Francine Kaufmann
Interpreter from Yiddish: Mrs Apfelbaum

France 1985
566 mins + intervals

There will be three 30 min comfort breaks during screenings, which will follow the below timings:

13:33 to 14:00
16:01 to 16:30
18:56 to 19:40

The screening will end at 22:06

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles
Wed 1 Mar 18:00; Thu 2 Mar 18:50; Sat 11 Mar 18:50

Philosophical Screens:
Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles
Wed 1 Mar 21:30 Blue Room
Daisies (Sedmikrásky) + Meshes of the Afternoon
Wed 1 Mar 20:50; Wed 8 Mar 18:20 (+ intro)
Au hasard Balthazar Thu 2 Mar 20:50; Mon 6 Mar 18:30
Taxi Driver
Thu 2 Mar 21:00 BFI IMAX; Fri 3 Mar 18:10; Mon 13 Mar 20:40
La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)
Fri 3 Mar 14:30; Sat 4 Mar 13:20; Sat 11 Mar 18:05
Persona Fri 3 Mar 18:30; Thu 9 Mar 21:05
Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu)
Fri 3 Mar 20:30; Wed 8 Mar 20:30
Do the Right Thing Fri 3 Mar 20:35; Sat 11 Mar 18:10
Singin' in the Rain Fri 3 Mar 20:40; Thu 9 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Miles Eady, Film Writer and Curator); Tue 14 Mar 14:30
Man With a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom)
Sat 4 Mar 15:30; Sun 5 Mar 10:30 BFI IMAX; Thu 9 Mar 20:50
Playtime Sat 4 Mar 17:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:30
The Searchers Sat 4 Mar 17:40; Tue 7 Mar 20:35
Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai)
Sat 4 Mar 18:50; Tue 14 Mar 18:40
Apocalypse Now: Final Cut
Sat 4 Mar 19:40; Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX
Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari)
Sat 4 Mar 20:15; Fri 10 Mar 18:00; Wed 15 Mar 14:30
Shoah Sun 5 Mar 11:00; Sun 12 Mar 11:00
Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans
Sun 5 Mar 11:45; Mon 6 Mar 14:00; Mon 13 Mar 20:35
The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d'Arc)
Sun 5 Mar 14:00 (with live accompaniment); Wed 15 Mar 20:40 (with score)
Citizen Kane Sun 5 Mar 16:15; Tue 7 Mar 20:30
Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7) Sun 5 Mar 17:45; Wed 8 Mar 21:00
2001: A Space Odyssey Sun 5 Mar 19:00; Thu 9 Mar 18:00
Vertigo Mon 6 Mar 20:30; Thu 9 Mar 14:30; Wed 15 Mar 18:10
In the Mood for Love (Fa yeung nin wah)
Mon 6 Mar 20:40; Fri 10 Mar 21:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:30
Late Spring (Banshun)
Mon 6 Mar 20:45; Tue 7 Mar 14:30; Sun 12 Mar 18:20
The Night of the Hunter Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45
Mulholland Dr. Tue 7 Mar 20:10; Tue 14 Mar 20:15
Beau Travail
Wed 8 Mar 14:30; Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King's College London)
Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik) Fri 10 Mar 18:30; Wed 15 Mar 20:50
The Godfather Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15

Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit
Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk
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