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Revolt as a Study in Precision: *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.*

> How do you tell such an unlikely truth, how do you foster the imagination of the unimaginable, if not by elaborating, by reworking reality, by putting it in perspective? With a bit of artifice, then![1]

THE SINGULAR MOMENT

How can we wrest singular, unmistakable, memorable moments from the Holocaust? The voices of individual witnesses are crucial. They are moments of incarnation, as Claude Lanzmann puts it with respect to *Shoah*. The multitude of singular and unforgettable voices in *Shoah* accounts for the unique way in which the viewer experiences time: nine-and-a-half hours are at once an eternity and an instant. Lanzmann made his film *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.* twenty-two years after *Shoah*, using one of its many outtakes.[2] It is a film that once again reflects upon the events of the genocide, also and in particular as a temporal experience. However, Lanzmann adopts a markedly different mode of presentation from *Shoah*. One might even say that *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.* forms a precise counterpoint to *Shoah*: it presents not a multitude of witnesses, but a single witness; it lasts not nine-and-a-half, but a mere one-and-a-half hours. Like many other survivors, the witness—Israel-based Yehuda Lerner—gives an account of his persecution by the Nazis, but he also tells of his escape, of resistance, revolts, and liberation—aspects that do not feature in *Shoah* in this way. Lerner was one of the instigators of the uprising. For the meticulous visualization of the revolt in his film, Lanzmann chooses a construction unusual for him, namely, as I will show, centering on the Aristotelian unities of character, place,

1. Jorge Semprun, *Literature or Life*, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Penguin, 1997), 124.

2. The Polish diacritical mark in the name of Sobibór does not appear in the title of the film. I follow this practice, using Lanzmann's spelling when referring to the film and the diacritical mark when referring to the place.

YFS 141, *Lanzmann after "Shoah,"* ed. Levine and Stark, © 2022 by Yale University.

time, and plot. The title of the film states the place and the date, right down to the exact hour: October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.

Using this powerful construction based on the fundamental poetic elements of drama, Lanzmann seeks to wrest a singular moment of interruption from the events of the genocide; in the course of the film, viewers realize that the constructed unities of time and place are made to be broken. It is the heroes of the uprising who bring the place—the Sobibór extermination camp—crashing down. The moment of revolt brings about a unique implosion of time: the hour is broken down into minutes, minutes into seconds, and seconds into split and microseconds. By precisely illuminating each moment of the revolt, this interruption of the annihilation machine—this black out, this crash of the Nazi system—becomes a temporal abyss.

The crash is sensational. But it is also infinitesimally small if we view it on the historical axis of the time and space of the genocide as a whole. The event is in danger of being overwhelmed and overshadowed by the weight of the sheer number of murder victims. Lanzmann knows that it takes a powerful artistic intervention to turn the revolt that transpired here into a true event.[3] By "true event" I mean an event having an impact that is not confined to the past—that is, an event that also makes an unforgettable imprint on listeners/viewers as it is conveyed to them as an auditory and visual event in the present. This means that the event is not by any means universal—for that it is too dependent on the many concrete details from which it cannot be separated. It is highlighted as a singular event and only as such can it be transmitted into the memory of those who come after. Only an act of artistic elaboration is able to accomplish this. This seems to me to be the film's main concern. When we compare it with the raw recording of the interview that Lanzmann conducted with Yehuda Lerner in October 1979 while he was working on *Shoah*, we have to bear in mind the difference between the witness's original statement and Lanzmann's subsequent heavy editing.[4] Research devoted to this film has been sparse to date. Aside from one essay by the

3. Although the Nazis destroyed all of the documentation, the Sobibór revolt has been relatively well recorded. The uprising allowed three hundred prisoners to escape, the majority of whom were killed shortly afterward. Lerner was one of the approximately fifty survivors.

4. The outtake is available under the link: https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1004204 (accessed on May 17, 2021); a transcript of the interview can be found here: https://collections.ushmm.org/film_findingaids/RG-60.5030_01_trs_fr.pdf.

German Studies scholar Manual Köppen from 2014, mention must be made of Gary Weissman's recent article of 2020,[5] in which the author is very hard on Lanzmann. Above all, he criticizes the way that Lanzmann distorts Lerner's testimony, his "living word" (as Lanzmann puts it). He argues that the film marginalizes Lerner's testimony and story of survival in order to create an alternative narrative, "with different emphases and effects than the one spoken by Lerner."[6]

The volume in which Weissman's article appears discusses Lanzmann's films against the backdrop of their outtakes and shows in a particularly impressive manner how Lanzmann saw himself: never as a documentary maker, always as an artist and creator. The volume picks up on earlier studies, for example the one by Dominick LaCapra, who stressed early on with respect to *Shoah* that "the role of mise-en-scène in the film is indeed crucial."[7] The editors of the volume even say in their introduction that Lanzmann is a "director" "who wished to retain absolute control over the filmed material's afterlife," and go so far as to add a little later that he "is asserting total control over his film."[8]

This impression is in fact confirmed upon closer analysis of Lanzmann's film *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.* But by that I mean that it is precisely this film that shows how necessary it is for the director to assume this attitude. It is a result, so to speak, of the attitude adopted by the witness at the center of the film, who attributes the success of the revolt in Sobibór to the military principles of organization, control, and precision.[9]

5. Manuel Köppen, "Searching for Evidence between Generations: Claude Lanzmann's *Sobibór* and Romuald Karmaka's *Land of Annihilation*," *New German Critique* 123, German Memory and the Holocaust: New Films (Fall 2014): 57-73; Gary Weissman: "Yehuda Lerner's Living Words: Translation and Transcription in *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.*," in *The Construction of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah and Its Outtakes*, ed. Erin McGlothlin, Brad Prager, and Markus Zisselsberger (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2020), 175-205.

6. McGlothlin and Prager, "Introduction," in McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger, *The Construction of Testimony*, 19.

7. Dominick LaCapra, "Lanzmann's *Shoah*: 'Here There Is No Why,'" *Critical Inquiry* 23/ 2 (1997): 232.

8. McGlothlin and Prager, "Introduction," 6, 10.

9. It must be added in this context that the preparations for the revolt in Sobibór were made by a secret collective led by the Russian-Jewish officer Alexander Petchersky who had been deported to Sobibór. Petchersky had the necessary military know-how to plan such a complex revolt right down to the last detail. Petchersky survived and testified at the Sobibór trial held in Kiev on August 1, 1961, and elsewhere. His

In the following, I will concentrate on Lanzmann's filmic approach, which I will critically appraise as an artistic adaptation of the testimony of Yehuda Lerner, arguing that it is precisely this adaptation that allows us to see the Sobibór revolt as a paradigmatic moment of resistance and uprising in the first place.

THE OPENING OF THE FILM

What is striking but not atypical of Lanzmann's filmic practice is, firstly, the complicated way in which he frames his film. Several thresholds precede the actual interview with Lerner, forming a series of metafilmic moments that reflect upon different modes of approaching the Holocaust.

The film begins with a black and white photograph, an archival image from the museum in Sobibór, in which stalwart SS officers can be made out standing in a circle; one of them has his arm raised in a Nazi salute. It is unclear around what exactly they are standing. The camera spends twenty-three seconds on this silent photo. A caption explains: "SS officers giving the Nazi salute by the coffins of comrades killed during the Sobibór uprising. (Sobibór Museum)." Cut. It is directly followed by a close-up in color—a prolepsis—of the man who will play the main role in this film. After a few seconds, we hear a question off-camera in the voice of Claude Lanzmann: "Had Mr. Lerner killed before?"[10] This is followed by a Hebrew translation in a female voice (that of Francine Kaufmann) and then Lerner's swift response—first in Hebrew, then translated into French: no, he had never killed anybody before. The camera spends a few more seconds on Lerner's face. We see a nervous tick in the left corner of his mouth. Forty-six seconds of the film have passed. Cut. This is followed directly by an aerial color image of dense autumnal forests (in Poland and Belarus), similar to the

statement (in Yiddish) is held at the Central Archives in Ludwigsburg (file BArch, B 162/4437, Blätter 2671 - 2678). See Ayse Sila Çehreli and Tobias Herrmann, "La Zentrale Stelle de Ludwigsburg, entre archives et mémoire," in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 111 (2011/3): 159-69, here 163. Moreover, Petchersky himself, severely wounded in a military hospital, compiled a report on the uprising very early on, which was first published in the Soviet Union in 1945 and was reissued in 2013. I had access to the report in German translation: Aleksandr Petscherski, *Bericht über den Aufstand in Sobibor*, ed. and trans. Ingrid Damerow (Berlin: Metropol, 2018). Lanzmann pays respect to the memory of Petchersky at the beginning of his film (04:24-05:47).

10. The English subtitles are quoted from this edition: *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.* (*Sobibor, 14 octobre 1943, 16 heures*) (France 2 Cinéma, Les Films Aleph, Why Not Productions, 2001), DVD, 95 min.

many takes we see in *Shoah*. We hear the twittering of birds while the credits run over the forested background image. A dedication ends the sequence: "For my friend Gilberte Steg, in memory of her sister Hedy Nissim, gassed at Sobibor in March 1943" (01:17-01:23). Cut. It is only now that an opening moment typical of Lanzmann's films takes place: a five-minute prologue composed of vertically scrolling white text against a black background, which we hear in Lanzmann's voice.

Let us spend a few moments on the incipit. By showing an archival photo from the museum in Sobibór, which is explained in an image caption, Lanzmann makes use of a stylistic device that he had always previously rejected. *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.* was released in 2001, at a time when Lanzmann was embroiled in a heated debate with Georges Didi-Huberman and other French intellectuals about the status of the archival image within the context of Holocaust representations. Is this opening a confession or more a polemical gesture of defense? Probably the latter. For in powerful—but symmetrical—contrast, it is followed by the first color close-up of Yehuda Lerner. Whereas the archival photo is blurry and does not allow us to make out any faces, just the stereotypical Nazi salute and the just as stereotypical black uniforms, in the close-up we can even see Lerner's facial features. Without a caption, the archival photo would remain silent, just as silent as it is when initially displayed. The close-up, however, marks the beginning of speech, which starts with a question: the question of killing. Compared with the understandably predominant historical imaginary, the roles here have been reversed: SS officers are shown as victims and mourners and as the dead; the Jewish Pole-by-birth Yehuda Lerner, now an Israeli, is shown as the one who is alive and who has killed—the one who is alive because he has killed. Is he a perpetrator? Certainly not. The SS are mass murderers; Lerner is an insurgent who carried out an ethically responsible, heroic act of killing at a specific, historically necessary moment in time, whose act would be categorized by the courts as an act of defense or as tyrannicide.

Moving from threshold to threshold, the film begins again shortly thereafter, this time with a prologue/monologue, read by Lanzmann. The text briefly describes the conditions under which the film was shot. Upon closer examination, we realize that Lanzmann has been arguing on the level of film aesthetics from the outset. He thus begins not only by situating the film within the context of *Shoah* but by introducing Yehuda Lerner as the "emblematic hero" of the revolt (02:25). Moreover, the film presents a historico-philosophical

argument that connects *Sobibor* with *Tsahal*, his 1994 film about the Israeli military: "It [the revolt] is a paradigmatic example of what I've elsewhere referred to as the reappropriation of power and violence by the Jews" (02:50-03:00).[11] According to this argument, the origins of Israel's military preparedness can be found in the Jewish records of the resistance and revolts that took place in German concentration and extermination camps.[12] The film thus explicitly sets itself the task of debunking "the two-part myth" (*"double légende"*) (03:19), according to which Jews allowed themselves to be led into the gas chambers and did not mount any resistance against their oppressors.

Lanzmann's return to the 1979 interview more than twenty years later leads him to follow in the footsteps of Lerner—"to go where Yehuda Lerner had been" (*"suivre les traces de Yehuda Lerner"*) (05:52), which for him means traveling once more to Sobibór. There were a number of other options available to him to deal with the recorded material, such as calling upon Lerner again in Israel, where he lives to this day. He also could have made contact with other surviving witnesses. Lanzmann did none of this. His own journey to Sobibór is influenced by the montage of visual material that underlines Lerner's words. Upon his return to Sobibór, Lanzmann notes the changes that have taken place, acknowledging the "small and touching red-roofed museum" (06:34) that has been built, before, however, closing his speech with an apodictic statement that clearly puts in question the archival image that was shown at the beginning: "But museums and monuments instill forgetfulness as well as remembrance. Now we'll listen to Yehuda Lerner's living words" (6:53-7:04).

FAITHFUL REENACTMENT AND TRANSFORMATIVE INTERVENTION

Lanzmann's journey takes him to Minsk and Sobibór via Warsaw. For long stretches, the film seems like a sheer illustration of the words

11. Film critics discussed the film's Zionist mission early on, for example Laurence Giavarini, "Sur les héros de Sobibór: Le dernier film de Claude Lanzmann et la représentation de la Shoah," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 565 (Feb 2002): 46-47.

12. Lanzmann expressly commented on this connection between *Tsahal* and *Sobibor* in a long 2001 interview given upon the release of the film to the *Cahiers du Cinéma*. See Lanzmann, "Sur le courage," interview with Claude Lanzmann conducted by Patrice Blouin, Franck Nouchi, and Charles Tesson, in *Cahiers du Cinéma* 561(October 2001): 46-57. Köppen analyzes this connection in more detail, especially on 63-65.

and sentences of Lerner's testimony, something to which Lanzmann, on other occasions, was decidedly opposed. Here, however, in an almost mimetic way, the images filmed on Lanzmann's journey cleave to Lerner's testimony, virtually merging with it. More than a mere illustration, we could speak of a kind of visual reenactment. In fact, together, words and images burn themselves into the skin of the filmstrip (the proximity to skin persists in the French *pellicule*).

When Lerner, for instance, recounts how he escaped from a camp and survived by eating the roots he found in the fields, the camera ranges at length over harvested fields. When Lerner tells the story of how he was once again captured after an attempted escape and then transported to another camp in a truck, the viewer travels with him through a camera that is directed at a truck: we experience sensory impressions of a journey over a bumpy forest road, while the dark edges of the forest jerk across the screen.

The extreme, nearly literal conformity of the cinematic, visual reenactment to Lerner's words, on the one hand, contrasts with Lanzmann's powerfully transformative interventions, on the other. The tension between cinematic reenactment, which follows from Lanzmann's fidelity to Lerner's account, and the sovereignty of his directing, evident in the editorial control he exerts over the interview, is pushed to the limit in the scene with the geese (39:51-41:18), one of the most impressive points in the film in terms of image and sound. Lerner tells the story of a flock of geese that had been bred by the Nazis. The geese would be startled during gassing operations so that their honking would drown out the screams of the prisoners being murdered in the gas chambers. This in itself grotesque, shocking detail in Lerner's account is accentuated filmically by a flock of geese that marches in rank and file, turning in a circle. Their honking gets louder and louder, and even drowns out the presence of the interview and Lerner's own speech for a few seconds. Then the sound is slowly turned down and the image disappears. This powerful filmic intervention does not just connect the historical account with the geese that still honk in present-day Sobibór; Lanzmann also suggests that a certain honking still threatens to mute the testimony of the survivors.[13] However, he also portrays himself as the one who, like a *deus*

13. Lanzmann comments on this risky montage in the interview he gave to *Cahiers du Cinéma*: "There are geese in *Shoah*, at Treblinka and in the surrounding villages. I saw many geese in Poland. But there, it was a gigantic troop of eight hundred

ex machina, can end the honking of the geese and will once again allow the testimony to be heard in an even stronger sense.

Gary Weissman criticizes Lanzmann's interventions for heavily editing Lerner's "living word," to which I would respond that Lerner's statement is brought to life by the ways it is edited, crafted, and dramatized. It is treated in a way that intensifies its aesthetic impact.

DRAMATIZATION OF TESTIMONY

In order for a revolt against the well-organized, systematic, punctual Nazi logistics of extermination to succeed, it had to work with the same means. This is one of Lerner's central statements. It is difficult to overlook his own fascination with punctuality and precision. It is also difficult to overlook Lanzmann's embrace of the two cinematographic principles of editing and montage that are at the heart of the precision work he carries out on the recorded material. In Lanzmann's dramatic editing, Lerner's account becomes a kind of clockwork or "*machine infernale*" (Jean Cocteau), which brings the infernal system of extermination crashing down in a veritable *coup de théâtre.* Lerner's account heads straight toward the climax of the dramatic arc—the splitting of an SS officer's skull with an ax.

The slightly simplified argument that I would like to make on the basis of this observation (to which I will return at the end of the essay) is that Lanzmann forms Lerner's account into a classic, pyramidal drama, divided into five acts and based on the classical unities of time, place, and action: Act One, exposition: Lerner's removal from the Warsaw ghetto, the beginning of his deportation at the *Umschlagplatz* (holding area); Act Two, rising action: imprisonment in various camps, repeated escape, deportation to Sobibór; Act Three, climax in resistance and revolt: first blow of the ax; Act Four, falling action: second blow of the ax, escape; Act Five: collapse, sleep—and termination of the interview by Lanzmann.

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geese. Filming that was just stupefying. When they turned in a circle, forming an immaculate white disc, they did that all on their own. I didn't stage that, I didn't tell them, 'Do that.' [. . .] It seemed to me impossible to use that footage, which, I thought, could only appear obscene. It was everything I detest: it has nothing to do with the question of representation, but rather with *illustration*. [. . .] I told myself: 'The geese cover up the cries of the people being murdered' and then I had the idea, I was quite proud of it, believe me, to have Lerner's voice fight against the geese." ("Sur le courage," 53, trans. Jared Stark)

What is the motivation behind this kind of dramatization? Let us go back to the prologue once more. Here, Lanzmann already speaks in poetic and literary terms:[14] he describes Lerner as an "emblematic hero," a "surprising figure." That he is "emblematic" means he is stylized in the form of an allegory. That he is a "figure" means he is presented as a character or protagonist in a drama or film. Lanzmann also speaks of the "the two-part myth" of the helpless and passive Jew, that is, of a narrative that we must decidedly work against by reading it (in the literal sense of the *légende* or legend: that which can be read)—reading it against the grain, and creating a counter-myth. It takes powerful aesthetic means to construct such a counter-myth. Lanzmann finds these means in Aristotelian poetics, which is almost unavoidable but for Lanzmann in every sense astonishing—*unavoidable* because Aristotle's poetics have shaped the Occidental construction of drama up to the modern age, even in firm rejections of it. French classical drama took these poetics to their highest precision. The Aristotelian influence is astonishing because Lanzmann's film aesthetics have always rebelled against these kinds of classical narrative forms and dramatizations of the Holocaust. They are more a thing of Hollywood cinema—and there is nothing more removed from Lanzmann's approach to film than Hollywood. Finally, of course, *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.* cannot be mistaken for a melodramatic heroic narrative like *Schindler's List*.[15] And yet, I maintain that Lanzmann here subversively appropriates elements of classical drama and expropriates them from Holocaust kitsch in order to utilize them in his construction of a counter-myth: the new myth of the Jewish fighter, the myth of the birth of the Israeli actively defending himself in National Socialist camps.

14. *Shoah* also begins, as Francine Kaufmann rightly puts it *in nuce*, in the mode of fiction: "Like a work of fiction, *Shoah* begins with the written words: 'The story begins in the present at Chelmno, on the Narew River, in Poland.'" She mentions Lanzmann stating that he wanted to get his interviewees to "perform" their testimonies as "actors" and as "characters." See Francine Kaufmann, "The Ambiguous Task of the Interpreter in Lanzmann's Films *Shoah* and *Sobibór*: Between the Director and Survivors of the Camps and Ghettos," in *Interpreting in Nazi Concentration Camps*, ed. Michael Wold (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 162.

15. Köppen mentions other film portrayals of the Sobibór uprising, in particular Jack Gold's box-office hit *Escape from Sobibor* (1987). This film is based on the book by Richard Rashke, *Escape from Sobibor* (1982), in which Rashke interviews twenty survivors of the uprising, including Lerner. (For references, see Köppen, 62-63.) Köppen describes the film as an "exciting and dramatic narrative of resistance," "with effective fictionalizing strategies," similar to the TV series *Holocaust* (63).

The way that Lanzmann artistically intervenes in Lerner's testimony becomes quite obvious and aggressive at the end, when he terminates Lerner's account at an extremely precise moment. Lerner is in the midst of describing how, after completing the act of revolt—the climax of his drama, to which I will return in more detail shortly—he escaped, collapsed in the forest out of exhaustion, and fell asleep. Lanzmann's off-camera voice terminates the interview at this point with the following metadiegetic intervention: "We'll stop here. It's so beautiful when he collapses in the forest. The rest is an adventure of freedom. The extermination devices and gas chambers were demolished by the Germans immediately after the uprising. No more convoys arrived at Sobibór station. There, at least, the extermination had been stopped" (1:32:03-1:32:32).

"It's so (*trop*) beautiful . . .": At this point, Lanzmann lifts Lerner's faithful, historical account of uprising and escape into the realm of the "beautiful" for a short moment and reflects upon it according to aesthetic criteria. Lanzmann has left his role as an interviewer; he speaks as a theater director and then, shortly thereafter goes even further, usurping the place of his character. Now, he speaks *about* him and summarizes the events that follow in the most concise manner.[16] Why this sudden shift of roles and rhythms? It is almost as though Lanzmann were himself completing his blow of the ax here, as if the only way that he could avoid letting go of the moment of interruption—which is what this revolt in the midst of a genocide was—the only way to hold on to it for eternity, is by making this hard cut.

THE LOGIC OF THE "I'D RATHER" (*PLUTÔT*) AS A TRANSITION TO ACTIVITY

The division of Lanzmann's film into dramatic acts that I have somewhat exaggerated and that has never been explicitly described as such by Lanzmann himself is complicated by other forces. For one of the fundamental questions posed by Lerner's testimony is how a person who has been persecuted and who is physically extremely debilitated is able to find his way out of the abuse he has suffered and take ac-

16. In his article about Lanzmann's late film *Napalm*, Michael G. Levine points out how, at a crucial point in his film, Lanzmann describes his role as film director as a role that he plays, thereby falling out of his role.

tion in the form of revolt. This transformation is not to be understood from the telos of the revolt but is born of an energy that is the subject above all of the first half of the film. It would be too simple to describe this energy as a positive will to live. Lerner escaped from eight camps within the space of six months. Lanzmann asks almost incredulously: "Why such determination (*rage*) to escape? Or was it simply easy?" (20:09-20:11). Lerner describes this *"rage de l'évasion,"* as Lanzmann puts it, as a negative energy within the realm of total negation and annihilation. The drive comes from what Francine Kaufmann translates repeatedly with the adverb *plutôt*: "I'd rather [French: *plutôt*] be shot or hung than starve like this" (19:02). Shortly afterward: "I have nothing to lose. I'd rather attempt anything than live this nonlife" (20:45-47). And a little later: "Only death awaited a Jew. But I'd rather take a bullet than go back there" (22:13-22:19).

"I'd rather" expresses a philosophical attitude and a guiding principle. Close to death, in an absolute lack of freedom, it creates a tiny space for maneuver. In this tiny space, fortunate coincidence befalls Lerner time and again. "Luck" and "chance" are other keywords in Lerner's account: they are elements that stand in the way of the strict tragic necessity of a drama that takes place according to the principle of clockwork.

The French word *plutôt*, which sets the tone in the original version of the film, then, also expresses the precision of temporal preemption, the successful anticipation that will ultimately prove itself to be crucial to the success of the revolt.

We see here how the pyramidal form of dramatic progression is altered by a circular movement driven by a relativistic *plutôt*, which "luck" will prove right time and again: the hero destined for death avoids his fate on this circular path; he revolts, that is, he pivots and turns against his tragic trajectory.

BLOWS OF THE AX

In Act Three—the act of revolt—his repeated luck (*"chance"*) becomes "our only chance was to kill the German" (48:20). It is only possible "to kill the Germans" with "précision" (incredible punctuality) (49:57). And in fact, the climax of the dramatic account is the precise implementation of a meticulous plan that includes a temporal consideration: namely, that the Germans are always on time. This

time, punctuality, the foundation of the Germans' power, will prove to be their weakness, because punctuality makes them predictable.

On October 14, at exactly 1600 hours, the sixteen SS officers dwelling in the camp were called into the various workshops. Lanzmann asks, underlining the temporal precision: "À quatre heures précises?" ("At 4:00 p.m. sharp?") (01:06) Lerner responds, underlining the precision of the moment in hand gestures: "Exact comme une montre!" ("just like clockwork") (1:06:56): "In fact, our whole plan was based on that. We knew the Germans were very punctual. We only succeeded because Germans are so punctual" (1:07:04-1:07:16).

Lerner stood by with another prisoner in the tailor's workshop—both armed with axes that had been pilfered from the woodworking shop. At exactly 4 p.m., SS Officer Greischütz showed up for his appointment to have an overcoat tailored. As Greischütz, whom Lerner describes as a giant monster (1:08:42-1:09:41), bent forward, Lerner produced his ax and split Greischütz's skull in two.

In Lerner's words, translated by Francine Kaufmann, the scene is visualized as follows:

> J'ai pris la hache, j'ai fait un tout petit pas vers lui et tout a duré peut-être un millième de seconde . . . C'était même . . . tellement rapide que je peux même pas vous . . . Imaginez, c'était un quart de millième de millième de seconde et tout s'est fini [. . .] La hache est entrée exactement au milieu de son crâne [. . .]. je peux dire que je lui ai coupé le crâne en deux, exactement . . ."
> (English subtitles: "I gripped the ax and took a tiny step towards him. It all took a 1/1000th of a second. It was even . . . so rapid that I can't even say—it was over in a quarter of a millionth of a second. [. . .] In one blow, the whole ax went into his head. [. . .] The ax went right into the middle of his skull.") (1:13:35–1:14:26)[17]

17. Gary Weissman examines this passage precisely and illustrates the differences between Lerner's choice of words in Hebrew and Kaufmann's translation. Of interest for my purposes, Lerner speaks twice of a "fraction," once of a "fraction of a thousandth of a second," then of a "fraction of a second" (Weissman, 192). This word does not appear in Kaufmann's translation; however, this illustrates the idea of the division of time even more clearly. In this context, I would like to note that Weissman is certainly right in criticizing Lanzmann for obviously not being interested in retrospectively providing Lerner's original statements with subtitles. Kaufmann relied on consecutive interpretation without the opportunity to take notes (see Kaufmann, "The Ambiguous Task"). The film is thus, like *Shoah*, a film that is conceived in French.

The precise, complete splitting of the skull coincides with the splitting of time into microunits that are no longer perceptible. Lerner's rhetoric is testament, on the one hand, to the obsessive precision, within which all power and violence seem to be embedded, that is unleashed in this fraction of a second. On the other hand, what he says touches upon temporal dimensions that cannot be registered by any consciousness and that—speaking psychoanalytically—violate perception and consciousness, leaving behind permanent traces in another system, the unconscious, as shock or trauma. It is no longer a moment in time, but a splitting of time, the splitting of an atom that unleashes powerful energies that crush the Nazi system but also leave lasting marks on the testifying subject. I will come back to this later on. "[U]nimaginable"—"incredible" (1:17:45)—something that blows our powers of imagination to pieces—is what this act is. It is just as "incredible" that, after this precise blow of the ax, exactly five minutes later, the next SS officer was due to appear to try something on in the tailor's workshop. It is unimaginable that they were able to remove the body including the blood stains within five minutes so that the next officer would not suspect anything. Lerner (in Kaufmann's translation, translated into English): "Yes, it seems impossible, but everything depended on German punctuality and our own rapidity. The Germans were punctual and our plan worked like clockwork" (1:18:05-1:18:11).

Act Four, the extension of the climax, which delays it and slows it down, begins with the entry of the second officer at exactly 1605 hours. He steps on the arm of the body of his colleague, which inadvertently juts out from a pile of coats. "So the German started shouting, Was ist das? Was ist das? What is it?" (1:20:05-1:20:13).

This moment of reaction becomes the moment in which the next blow falls: "Immediately, my comrade leapt forward and struck him. The German collapsed from the blow, and I quickly gave him a second blow. I think I'll always remember—the ax struck his teeth and made a sort of spark" (1:20:16-1:20:56).

The drama of the moment is grounded in the matter itself. It is intensified by the spark struck from the violent splitting of the skull. The spark ignited by the blow is reflected in the sparkling eyes of the hero recounting this moment thirty-six years later. And when we see the film forty-two years after the interview, it is still as if this powerful blow had just fallen. The spark struck by the revolt illuminates

the night in a flash—the night that fell early on October 14, 1943, the night of the history of the oppressed, which continues to this day.[18]

Lanzmann insists that Lerner be precise in his description of the act of killing. Lerner goes into more and more detail; his otherwise seemingly calm and sovereign body begins to speak with him, he imitates the gesture once again on camera, and the collapse is expressed onomatopoetically (a loud "wrah!") (1:14:02). Köppen draws the following conclusion from this moment: "*Sobibor* seeks to stage a cinematic monument: the Israel Defense Forces and modern Israeli identity find a point of origin in the swing of Lerner's ax."[19] And Weissman interprets it similarly: "The skull-splitting moment captures what Lanzmann, in the film's introductory scroll, calls 'the reappropriation of power and violence by the Jews.'"[20]

Without a doubt: mythically speaking, it is David who triumphs over Goliath here, and Lanzmann has set us up for this interpretation. The ax as an archaic instrument is not just a weapon but also a tool for cutting and splitting that can be used to build something new.

But Lanzmann's insistence on the detailed performance of skull splitting seems to me to indicate that there is also another obsession at play. Lanzmann's autobiography begins with his repeated haunting by the guillotine as an instrument of killing; in *Shoah*, Lanzmann has Polish farmers repeat the gesture of "off with his head" again and again, the silent and cynical gesture that announces death in the camps to the deported Jews peeking out through the narrow windows of the railroad cars, a gesture that—as many surviving witnesses emphasize—was not understood. Lanzmann's third-to-last film (*The Last of the Unjust*, 2013) about Benjamin Murmelstein, the Jewish Council leader in Theresienstadt, is predominantly about the shots that the Nazis fired into the back of the necks of the members of the *Judenrat* to murder them. In all of these manners of death, the focus

18. The Austrian poet Ilse Aichinger, who wrote a brief film critique of *Sobibor* upon its release, notes aptly: "Yehuda Lerner erzählt seine Geschichte mit der Axt, wie Geschichten von Dostojewskij erzählt sind, auch in ihrer Exzentrizität." (Yehuda Lerner tells his story with the ax in the way that Dostoyevsky tells stories, in their eccentricity as well.) *Der Standard*, Oktober 27/28, 200, https://www.derstandard.at/story/757976/16-jahre-alt-ist-jehuda-lerner-als-er-im-konzentrationslager-sobibor-einen-deutschen-bewacher-mit-einer-axt-den-schaedel-spaltet (accessed on May 17, 2001).

19. Köppen, 67.

20. Weissman, 194.

is on the neck, that which connects head and torso, that which is destroyed by horizontal cuts and shots. But here, in *Sobibor*, it is about an act of skull splitting imagined vertically, a Jewish act of revenge on the Nazis, which stands in marked contrast to the other techniques of killing. One might even go so far as to say that this vertical act of symbolic splitting strikes through the other ways of killing in order to usher in a fundamentally different course of history. The blow of the ax also strikes through time—in the sense of chronologically measurable, historical time. It is at precisely this point that history reaches beyond itself into an a-historical, mythical realm extending far beyond the previously noted connection to the Israeli army and its readiness to defend itself.

Act Five, the final act—Lerner's escape from the camp and his collapse and exhaustion in the forest near the camp—is told quickly. For it is Lanzmann, as I noted above, who swings the ax here. He cuts off Lerner so that he can be the one to speak in his place at the moment of his collapse. The film ends with an epilogue, in which Lanzmann reads aloud a text that appears as a black rolling title with white letters (as at the beginning). While his hero sleeps, Lanzmann holds a wake, spending eight minutes reading the dates of all of the transports to Sobibór. Intoned in his deep and unmistakable voice, the recitation has the sound and significance of a kaddish. The last transport arrived from Treblinka on October 20, 1943, with one hundred prisoners onboard. In the end, the dead numbered over 250,000.

PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS

Although it once more proclaims the end of camp terror, this ending actually highlights the fact that the Holocaust does not have a narrative, only statistics, as the historian Dan Diner once observed.[21] The ending also refutes the argument that I made at the beginning about *Sobibor* being based on a classical dramatic structure. At most, this structure is used to lend Lerner's account a dramatic quality in the middle part of the film, ensuring that it will remain seared into the viewer's memory.

21. Dan Diner, "Gestaute Zeit. Massenvernichtung und jüdische Erzählstruktur," in Diner, *Kreisläufe. Nationalsozialismus und Gedächtnis* (Berlin: Berlin Verlag 1995), 125-39.

The film almost incidentally records the fact that Lerner's drama does not have an end, without addressing it. We do not learn anything about how he lives in Israel. A sturdy fifty-year-old man sits before the camera with distinctive furrows in his brow and lively eyes. He seems self-possessed and self-confident. His emotional state is only addressed once, when Lanzmann observes that Lerner turns pale when he recounts how he killed the SS officer with the ax. Lerner's response seems a little like a stuttered denial:

> Of course I'm pale. When you recall things like that—the joy of succeeding—when you recall things like that, you can't help but feel something bubbling up inside. It's a feeling of joy at having succeeded, but you have tears in your eyes because so many died there. It's the satisfaction of succeeding in avenging those who died and the feeling of having done the right thing. [. . .] An experience like this happens once in a lifetime. It's the experience of life and death. (1:22:12–1:23:59)

When the interview moves on to the subject of his feelings, Lerner no longer speaks in the first person, trying instead to translate his speech into a general "one" (*on*). He wants there to be an umbrella term for what he has recounted and remembered in detail, a term that does not exist. It remains "a thing like that" ("*une chose comme ça*")—something unnamable. What the collision between the triumphant feeling of revenge and the simultaneous awareness that 250,000 people were killed in Sobibór does to someone remains unnamable and unsayable. Its only traces are barely noticeable symptoms.

I would like to conclude by dwelling on these symptoms. There is the sudden total exhaustion of which Lerner speaks that makes him collapse and fall asleep once he has barely escaped, while he is still near the camp and therefore in extreme danger. In Lanzmann's film *Tsahal*, an Israeli soldier speaks of a similar experience: during the Six-Day War, the nervous tension among the members of the tank crew was so high that they repeatedly fell asleep for a matter of seconds between one shelling and the next.

But there is also the nervous twitch at the left-hand corner of Lerner's mouth, which speaks along with him, unsolicited and silent. This is not a place for psychological speculation. But on the formal level of the film, it is striking that the fracturing of the seconds, the breaking through of time that Lerner speaks of, becomes visible on the film's surface as a tic.

Lanzmann's kaddish at the end of the film is based on a calendar that can state when the killings in Sobibór ended.

Time stands still in Yehuda Lerner's face; the hand keeps ticking and ticking in him as in a broken clock, always stuck at the same place.

—Translated by Lydia J. White

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