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**GENDERED TRANSLATIONS:
CLAUDE LANZMANN'S *SHOAH***

The film is made around my own obsessions.

Claude Lanzmann

To live, as well as to die, a Jewish father needs to know that the future of his child is secure.

Sigmund Freud

The cinema is the medium that reaches far into Hades.

Klaus Theweleit

There are moments when gender does not impose itself as a category of analysis, when, displaced by other factors, it virtually disappears from view. The Holocaust is such a moment. While the experience and the representation of war generally places women and men in radically different positions — on the home and battle front, for example — the Holocaust, at least for its victims, seems to be a moment that recognizes no gender differences, that erases gender as a category. Nazism would exterminate all Jews, regardless of gender, class, nationality, professional or economic status. If Jews are vermin, as Hitler insisted, then distinctions among Jews normally applied in social interaction become irrelevant. In the elaborate “Final Solution” plan devised by the Nazis during the early 1940’s, all victims were to be stripped of difference and rendered powerless. The Holocaust’s

victims were thus to be “degendered” by the process of persecution and extermination.

The opening scene of Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* offers an ironic illustration of the representational divergences between gender and war, on the one hand, and gender and the Holocaust, on the other.¹ His nine-and-a-half-hour cinematic oral history of the Holocaust begins as Simon Srebnik, one of the only two survivors of the massive exterminations in the Polish village of Chelmno, reenacts for the camera an event that villagers there still remember to this day: his regular trip down the Narew river on a flat-bottomed rowboat when, at the prodding of his German guards, he sang Polish folk tunes and Prussian military songs in his beautiful tenor voice. In the mouth of the chained thirteen year old Jewish orphan boy, condemned to death, the immense gulf between the experience of Jewish males and the rewards and disappointments of a war-time masculinity emerges with pointed irony: “A mug of red wine, a slice of roast,” he was taught to sing, “That’s what the girls give their soldiers. When the soldiers march through town, the girls open their windows and their doors.” [*Wenn die Soldaten durch die Stadt marschieren, öffnen die Mädchen die Fenster und die Türen.*]²

Shoah’s numerous witnesses attest to the erasure of gender as one of the prime instruments of Nazi dehumanization and extermination. As victims are shaved, stripped down or clad in identical striped uniforms, starved, screamed at, beaten, tormented; as they are reduced by the thousands to bodies (referred to not as “victims” or “corpses” but as *Figuren* and *Schmattes* [“figures,” “junk”]); as they are piled into wagons “like sardines,” laid out in mass graves “like herrings”; as their flesh starts crumbling in the ground where they are dumped; as they fall out of gas vans and gas chambers “like potatoes”; as they become a “load,” converted, within the space of hours, to ashes — *gender, with humanity, gets erased*. “It was not a world,” the Polish courier Jan Karski insists as he describes his Dantesque journey

through the Warsaw ghetto at the end of *Shoah*: “There was not humanity.... Women with their babies, publicly feeding their babies, but they have no ... no breast, just flat.”³

Ironically, however, Claude Lanzmann’s film itself *also* eradicates gender differences among the victims of the Final Solution. The almost obsessive thrust of *Shoah*, its primary goal, is to bring to memory and to record the workings of the Nazi machinery of destruction: to detail its operations and lethal course, from the ghettos, to the transports and trains, to the selection in the extermination camps, to mass murder in gas vans and gas chambers, to the burial and burning of the corpses. The film penetrates both the procedural and psychic dimension of this process: the secrecy that enabled it to work, the collusions of a world which stood by, in silence, and allowed it to happen. Lanzmann’s primary witnesses for this daunting project — the persons he interviews and interrogates most fully — are those who were closest to the process and mechanics of extermination: some survivors of the special work details in the concentration camps, several German perpetrators, and a few Polish bystanders who lived and worked near the killing centers. Among the Jewish victims, those who were at once closest to the death machine and able to survive and to testify were, by selection, men. But *Shoah* elicits other voices as well. Lanzmann interviews some survivors of the Warsaw ghetto, a few Auschwitz survivors from the Jewish community of Corfu, two survivors of the Riga ghetto who appear in the film to sing a ghetto song, a woman who spent the war in hiding in Berlin, and one survivor of the Theresienstadt “family camp” in Auschwitz. Even among *these* witnesses, however, Lanzmann clearly privileges testimonies from men. Although the experience of Jewish women is described in the Jewish men’s and the bystanders’ and perpetrators’ narratives — although they are talked about and represented by others — they themselves appear on screen on only a few, and extremely brief,

occasions. And even when they do appear, even when their voices are heard, the camera seems to shy away from sustained focus on their faces.

Some of the women who are seen and heard in the course of the film act as mediaries and interpreters from Polish, Hebrew, and Yiddish, carrying the words and the information of the narrators to Lanzmann, and the questions from Lanzmann, who is the only interviewer and the central presence in the film. A number of the Polish “bystander” witnesses are women as well, as is one of the German informants. The perpetrators and bystanders, inasmuch as they figure in the film, represent a range of groups, male and female, farmers and tradespeople. But among the Jewish survivors who speak and give their accounts in the film, the erasure of differences and, particularly, the almost complete absence of women is striking.

For Lanzmann, gender is irrelevant to the death machinery on which he focuses with such relentless energy: a machinery which is designed to render subject into object, to degender, to de-class, to dehumanize, to exterminate and to destroy the traces. But in focusing so resolutely on this machinery and privileging the detailed explanation of its operation, Lanzmann backgrounds the *subjective* experience of its victims — the differentiated individual realm within which, according to other survivor accounts, significant gender differences do emerge.⁴ Indeed, women’s Holocaust narratives and testimonies do bring out a gendered experience. In accounts collected by Lewin, Laska, Heinemann, Katz and Ringelheim, women speak of the effects of their ceasing to menstruate and the fear that their fertility would never return; they speak of rape, sexual humiliation, sexual exchange, abuse, enforced abortions and the necessity of killing their own and other women’s babies. They speak of the extermination selection process in which maternity becomes a much greater liability than paternity. They describe most extensively and analyze most deeply the relationships and friendships that

developed among women in concentration camps. Controversially, some even argue that women showed greater survival skills than men.⁵

These, however, are not the accounts we hear in *Shoah*.

This then is the paradox: From the perspective of the oppressor, the victim lacks subjectivity. If the critic scrutinizes that perspective, concentrating the focus on the machine which fulfills and implements the oppressor's deepest desires, he or she also risks an erasure of the subjective. Such an unintentional and ironic replication does emerge in *Shoah* when we interrogate gender as an inherent element of subjectivity. And yet, despite the erasure of women which Lanzmann performs through the focus and method of his inquiry, traces of gender difference are nonetheless reinscribed in his film. Perhaps unwittingly, they sustain and motivate much of the energy driving this monumental oral history. Our endeavor to uncover these traces, to excavate the feminine buried within the layered structure of the film's testimonies — a feminine cast in the archetypal roles of a Persephone, a Eurydice, a Medusa — is what we are calling "gendered translation."

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Jewish women survivors do not themselves advance the central inquiry of *Shoah*; they do not further Lanzmann's investigation into the machine of death with information detailing its operations. They exist in the film for different purposes. The first Jewish woman to be seen on screen is Hannah Zaïdel, the daughter of Motke Zaïdel, survivor of Vilna. She appears as a curious listener obsessed with her father's story: "I never stopped questioning him," she states in the film, "until I got at the scraps of truth he couldn't tell me. It came out haltingly. I had to tear the details out of him, and finally, when Mr. Lanzmann came, I heard the whole story for the second time."⁶ But in the film it is Claude Lanzmann and not Hannah Zaïdel who asks the questions. Indeed, as one of the few screened female listeners who is not also an interpreter, Hannah sits in a faded background, smoking a cigarette, when

her father and his fellow survivors describe being forced to uncover mass graves and dig up bodies, including those of Zaidel's mother and sisters, in order to burn them and eradicate their traces. Paula Biren appears next, a survivor of the Lodz ghetto who responds, briefly, in the negative, to the only question she is asked ("You never returned to Poland since?"). Unlike most of the male witnesses who speak in the film on repeated occasions, Biren and the other Jewish women disappear after only one brief interview.⁷

While a great deal of energy is spent in the film to bring some of the men back to the scenes of extermination — to have them relive, intensely and relentlessly, the experience *in the present* so as to be able to remember and testify about *the past* — only one woman goes through this process. She is Inge Deutschkron, who returns to her native Berlin from Israel, and who declares, "This is no longer home." Her brief narrative, recalls the day Jews were deported from the city while she herself remained behind in hiding, and relates how, throughout the rest of the war, she felt "utterly alone" and "terribly guilty" not to have departed on the transports with the rest. Her position — in hiding and removed from the central destiny of her people, a destiny Lanzmann interrogates through the *Sonderkommando* survivors and other men — emblemizes the position of women in the film as a whole. Unlike most of the male witnesses whose faces fill the screen for long periods of time, Inge Deutschkron is little more than a disembodied voice: her narrative is largely presented in voice-over as scenes of Berlin and departing trains occupy the space of the screen; her face and name appear only at the very end of her brief account.⁸ And unlike most of the other male witnesses, she never returns in the remainder of the film.

At a very important moment in *Shoah*, in the midst of Rudolf Vrba's and Filip Müller's narrative of the failed uprisings in Auschwitz, another Jewish female informant appears briefly. Her role in the film is also symptomatic. Ruth Elias

initiates the narrative about the Theresienstadt “family camp” brought to Auschwitz by the Nazis for propaganda purposes — about the group which became a focus of resistance activities during the months of its cynical “reprieve,” before almost all of its members were sent to the gas chambers. But Elias’s story in the film is limited to the Theresienstadt group’s transport to Auschwitz only, and to her disbelief at the news that she had arrived at an extermination camp. Details about the group’s six-month stay in Auschwitz, about relations among its members, about the possibilities of resistance, about feelings generated by warnings of imminent gassing, about the exterminations themselves: these we receive not from Theresienstadt “family camp” member Elias, who quickly disappears from the film entirely without ever enlightening us about the means of her own escape from death, but from Rudolf Vrba and Filip Müller, who observed the Theresienstadt group as outsiders. This female witness, whose face, like Inge Deutschkron’s, appears on screen only at the very end of her brief voice-over narration, is merely allowed to start the story, which is then taken over by the two men.⁹

Elias’ role — to set the scene, provide the atmosphere, the affect, and not the facts or the details — allows us to understand one way in which *Shoah* uses women. We can gain additional insight from the last two Jewish women to be seen in the film, who immediately precede its final sequence recalling the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Gertrud Schneider and her mother (who remains nameless in the film) come on screen to sing a ghetto song, “*Asoi muss seyn*” — “Because that’s how it must be.”¹⁰ Their broken voices are first heard in the background as we watch an unidentified barren landscape. Several measures into the song, the two women come into view, but only one, the daughter, carries the song. The mother becomes yet another of the film’s emblems of gender distinction. She cannot sing the entire song; her voice breaks and she starts crying. But in crying and covering her face in lament, fingernails painted red, she acts out its words. This song is the only untranslated text

in the film: its meaning for the non-Yiddish speaking viewer must be translated by the mother's gestures: "The best years, are finished/ And gone — never to be recovered./ It's difficult to repair what has been destroyed./ ...Because that's how it must be/ That's how it must be, that's how it must be."¹¹. Besides expressing passivity and resignation, the film's staging of the "*Asoi muss seyn*" also demonstrates the double speechlessness of women: Gertrud Schneider sings but doesn't speak, and her nameless mother, overcome with the emotional weight of memory and the event captured by the camera, gestures, but neither sings nor speaks. Such iconic moments, in which meaning is conveyed not through words but through images or music, structure the emotional texture of the film. They provide the background weave to the relentless factual fabric of Lanzmann's inquisitive project. And it is women who are most often relegated to that background.

The roles women act out in the film — hiding, passivity, lament, invisibility — are for the most part supported in the men's narratives about women. The image of the mother and child who jump from a train, resulting in the mother being shot in the heart (its still horrified male Polish peasant narrator repeating, "in the heart"), serves to underscore emotionally the callousness of the oppressors and the hopelessness of escape. But other moments of female resistance introduce another element: the association of femininity with danger and death. Rudolf Vrba describes how secrecy became the key to the efficiency of the final solution. Panic, he explains, would have been a "hitch in the machinery," and panic was especially feared from women with small children. The film's male narrators recall how women unleashed several frightening scenes of destruction: how, at a transport stop, for instance, one woman threw her empty cup at a guard who refused to give her water, which led him to shoot senselessly and indiscriminately at the entire wagon. In Filip Müller's account, another woman, warned by a friend in the *Sonderkommandos* that she and her group would be gassed, tried to warn everyone but was not believed. In a

gesture of anguish and desperation, she scratched her whole face and started to scream. She was cruelly tortured and the man who warned her was thrown into the oven alive. The story of her tormented rebellion releases some of the emotional pressure built up in the film in account after account of death and killing. Yet the pathos of Filip Müller's moving narrative is also rendered all the more powerfully poignant by her helplessness, and by the ultimate futility of her action.¹²

The male narratives, moreover, tend to reach a greater emotional power when encounters with women and memories of family and domesticity are evoked. Thus Michael Podchlebnik reports that he had asked to be killed after he unloaded his wife and children from a gas van in Chelmno. And, in what is one of the most frequently discussed scenes in the film, Abraham Bomba describes at length his job as a barber who had to cut the hair of women inside the undressing room of Treblinka's gas chamber: he testifies insistently that he felt nothing in carrying out his task, that in such situations it is impossible to have any feelings at all. But as he begins to tell how a friend of his, also a barber, met his own wife and sister in that room, his narrative breaks down, and he begins to cry and asks to be permitted to stop his account. When he resumes talking, at Lanzmann's insistence, his English turns into phrases mumbled in Yiddish. For Bomba, as for the others, encounters with women threaten whatever precarious emotional distance, whatever control and denial of feelings, they had attempted to establish in order to survive.¹³ Indeed, the interruption within the powerful scene with Bomba demonstrates that the evocation of these encounters on screen endanger even the very continuity of the film's narrative flow.

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In a film set on making distinctions in details (were they Poles or Czechs? were there 40 000 or 400 000? how many glasses of beer? how far? how long? how many minutes did it take? how many hours? how many bodies?), Lanzmann

refuses to recognize or acknowledge differences in role or experience among the Jewish victims, irrespective of whether these relate to gender, age, or to other social demarcations. “*Eine Masse*” (one pile) — the phrase uttered by Richard Glazar in his descriptions of the crowd of naked victims waiting to be gassed, and of the piles of belongings that had to be disposed of, like their owners, with speed and efficiency — describes not only the Jews as they were treated by the Nazis, but, ironically, also the Jews as they are represented in the film. For Lanzmann, distinctions among Jewish victims are ultimately either irrelevant or outright disturbing. When, for example, Polish peasants point to different treatment of Jews on the basis of class by describing how some Central European Jews arrived in passenger instead of freight or cattle trains, Lanzmann insists that such class discriminations were not very frequent. He includes a narrative about Jews who tried to trade diamonds for water to show that, of course, it didn’t matter whether you had diamonds or not: the guards took the diamonds and did not bring water. And when the German SS *Unterscharführer*, Franz Suchomel, describes the experiences of the Treblinka “funnel,” Lanzmann seems uncomfortable with the gender distinctions that emerge. The men were gassed first, Suchomel explains, and the women had to wait, for extended periods of time in the funnel outside the gas chambers. Describing the fear of death and the physical evacuation it often provoked in the victims, Suchomel connects these reactions to those of his own mother on her deathbed. But when he insists that the men were beaten and the women were not, Lanzmann refuses this distinguishing “humanity” on the part of the guards and presses Suchomel to admit that, probably, the women were beaten as well.¹⁴

Shoah’s equalization of victims, its reluctance to explore differences among them, extends to the realm of morality as well. Many of Lanzmann’s informants, for example, actually belonged to that area which Primo Levi identified as the moral “grey zone” — a zone inhabited by Jews who ultimately survived because they

participated as Kapos or in the work details of the death machines.¹⁵ Lanzmann does not contemplate the implications of this participation. Nor does he encourage or include stories that would exalt his informants or make them heroic. Thus we never find out how Rudolf Vrba escaped from Auschwitz, merely that he did so. We never hear about Richard Glazar's role in the Treblinka uprising, merely that such an uprising was planned. If important differences emerge among persons whom we get to know within the film, these are due primarily to individual variations in storytelling talent, to differences in insight and analytical skill, to the amount of prodding and manipulation required to jolt memories and elicit recollections.

Lanzmann, in effect, allows differences in testimony to emerge and develop, but downplays differences in experience. The story of the victims, as revealed in *Shoah*, is one story. Might Lanzmann fear that any detailed exploration of distinctions would replay and recall the divide-and-conquer tactic by which Nazis persuaded Jewish councils and individuals to help the work of the death machine? Might any focus on real differences unduly echo the *illusion of difference* encouraged by the Nazis that led some Jews to believe that if *they* collaborated *they* might be saved, that the death of some might save the lives of others?¹⁶ Might distinctions appear trivial within the "giant crime," the unparalleled devastation of the Holocaust?¹⁷ Whatever the explanation, it is clear that Lanzmann's general discomfort and uneasiness concerning discussions of distinctions — his resolute unwillingness to contemplate and explore differences among the victims in *Shoah* — is most vehement when it comes to gender.

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Women's presences do more than to punctuate *Shoah* with emotional power and pathos. At the end of the film, Simha Rottem, one of two Warsaw ghetto survivors interviewed by Lanzmann in Israel, recalls walking through the abandoned ghetto after his emergence from the underground sewers. His lengthy

narrative concludes with his evocation of a disembodied, haunting and dangerous female voice. "I suddenly heard a woman calling from the ruins," he recalls:

It was darkest night, no lights, you saw nothing. All the houses were in ruins, and I heard only one voice. I thought some evil spell had been cast on me, a woman's voice talking from the rubble. I circled the ruins. I didn't look at my watch, but I must have spent half an hour exploring, trying to find the woman whose voice guided me, but unfortunately I didn't find her... Except for that woman's voice and a man I met as I came out of the sewers, I was alone throughout my tour of the ghetto. I didn't meet a living soul. At one point I recall feeling a kind of peace, of serenity. I said to myself: 'I'm the last Jew. I'll wait for morning, and for the Germans.'¹⁸

This image of the "last Jew" spoken by Rottem at the very end of the film, echoes the final words of *Shoah's* first part,¹⁹ uttered by Simon Srebnik:

But I dreamed too that if I survive, I'll be the only one left in the world, not another soul. Just me. One. Only me left in the world if I get out of here.²⁰

The mysterious female voice heard by Simha Rottem (which in Hebrew he describes as emanating from a "fata morgana"), and the feelings of abandonment which Rottem shares with Srebnik, summarize *Shoah's* representations of femininity — the danger of women, their helplessness and passivity, their emotional power, and their disembodied haunting presence. But the conclusions Rottem and Srebnik draw from their own sense of desertion allow us to see yet another dimension of femininity in the film: its connection to death without hope of rebirth, to destruction without a parallel generativity. Rottem like Srebnik is the "last Jew alive." His failure to locate and to identify the distant female voice — a woman in need of help, or an evil spell luring him toward destruction — echoes the finality of the final solution, a process of extermination designed to erase all trace of Jewish existence, past, present, and future. As *Shoah's* witnesses make devastatingly clear, in the

Holocaust mothers cannot protect or nourish their children, they cannot keep them alive, and they cannot produce more. Within this context of hopelessness, Rottem and Srebnik see themselves each as the last Jew, forever cut off from his future, the terminus of Judaism. And Lanzmann places both their voices at climactic moments in the film — at the very end of each of its two parts — reinforcing, with devastating and conclusive effect, the impact of total death built up during *Shoah*'s nine-and-a half hours.

It would appear, then, that despite its effort to scrutinize the workings and details surrounding the Nazi machinery of death and extermination, this film cannot fathom the particular conjunction between femininity and the absence of generativity. Its inability to do so is underscored in two significant scenes of male suicide which dominate the second part of *Shoah*. The first, the untimely suicide of Freddy Hirsch, considered by many as “the moral leader” of the Theresienstadt family camp in Auschwitz, is recalled with great sympathy by Rudolf Vrba. When it became certain that his group would be gassed the next morning, Hirsch was asked by the underground resisters to lead them in an uprising . “If we make the uprising,” Hirsch inquired, “what is going to happen to the children? Who is going to take care of them?” Vrba, his contact, responded that the children would probably die in any case, “that there is no way out for them.” This direct and undoubtedly truthful assessment proved to be paralyzing for Hirsch. According to Vrba: “he [Hirsch] explains to me that he understands the situation, that it is extremely difficult for him to make any decisions because of the children, and that he cannot see how he can just leave those children to their fate. He was sort of their father. I mean he was only thirty at the time, but the relationship between him and those children was very strong.” An hour after proposing the uprising to Hirsch, Vrba found him dying of an overdose of barbiturates. The uprising, consequently, never took place.²¹

Hirsch's suicide, a direct result of his perceived failed paternity, is echoed at the end of the film by an uncannily similar description of what caused the suicide of Adam Czerniakow, the leader of the Warsaw ghetto Jewish council. In the film, Raul Hilberg summarizes relevant passages from the final pages of the diary Czerniakow left behind. According to Hilberg, Czerniakow "is terribly worried that the orphans will be deported [from the Warsaw ghetto], and repeatedly brings up the orphans... Now if he cannot be the caretaker of the orphans, then he has lost his war, he has lost his struggle. *Why the orphans?* They are the most helpless element in the community. They are the little children, its future, who have lost their parents. ...If he cannot take care of the children, what else can he do?" Hilberg, in apparent identification with Czerniakow's assessment, adds: "Some people report that he wrote a note after he closed the book on the diary in which he said: 'They want me to kill the children with my own hands.'" ²²

The suicides of Hirsch and Czerniakow, placed as prominently in the film as they are, and echoing each other in the similarity of their presumed motivations, can be useful in explaining the film's relation to the category of gender. Hirsch and Czerniakow take the masculine role of responsible paternity extremely seriously. Both see in the children the possibility of a future, and cut off from that future, impeded from exercising their own power to insure continuity into that future, they cannot go on.²³ Hirsch and Czerniakow act out the masculine response to the realization that there is no future left, a realization repeated in the film's last words by Simha Rottem. They can neither face nor suppress that insight, and are unable to remain with the children to offer them adult support and solace in their final moments.²⁴ In privileging these incidents and their masculine perspectives, the film itself resonates their evasion.²⁵ In contrast, *Shoah's* much briefer recollections of female suicide — of women who slash their own wrists and those of their children, of women who poison themselves and their daughters and sons — offer a poignant

alternative response. Although we learn neither the name nor story of these women, their suicide/killings reveal equally despondent but less self-centered motivations than those of Hirsch and Czerniakow. For these women, death is an act of final resistance: escape for themselves and their offspring from prolonged suffering at the hands of their oppressors. It is a chosen end that reveals the women's more local and modest confrontation with death as opposed to the global ambition and ultimate denial of Hirsch and Czerniakow.

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In his analysis of different cultures' responses to death, the anthropologist Maurice Bloch demonstrates a deep connection between death and femininity, a connection which, he argues, is cross-culturally present. But, most cultures, Bloch explains, go further. Women not only manage rituals connected with death, thereby representing death, but they also occupy the space of regeneration, rebirth, and continuity, signifying the conquest of death.²⁶ In Greek and Roman mythology, certainly, Persephone, the goddess of the underworld, is also a symbol of spring, renewal and generativity — represented both as the daughter of Demeter, goddess of the grain, and the mother of Demophon. In the exploration of the genocidal machinery of destruction which is the subject of *Shoah*, that second position, the feminine connection to generativity, is eradicated, which seems to make the first, connection to destruction, doubly terrifying. Within the context of this film, women come to represent death without regeneration. Could it, therefore, be that women figure the Nazi destruction of the Jews so unbearably, that they must virtually be excised from representation altogether?

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"Is it possible to literally *speak from inside the Holocaust* — to bear witness from the very *burning* of the witness?" Shoshana Felman asks in her essay "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*." Exploring the act of testifying about the the

event-without-a-witness, Felman elaborates: "In what ways, by what creative means (and at what price) would it become possible *for us* to witness the event-without-a-witness? A question which translates into the following terms of the film: Is it possible to witness *Shoah* (the Holocaust and/or the film) from inside?"²⁷ .

As Felman insists, *Shoah* is a film about the act of witnessing and about the process of survival. Since *Shoah* uses no documentary footage from the period, the Jewish witnesses we see on screen are all holocaust survivors, and since Lanzmann interrogates primarily those who have been in the deepest pits of the death machine, who have been furthest within the crypts of extermination, they are survivors who have literally been *inside* Hades. Not only have they been inside the camps and the ghettos, inside the gas chambers and the crematoriums, but some have also been left for dead, shot by bullets that failed to reach their vital organs. Against all odds, and certainly against the Nazi design for the final solution, they have literally come out again to testify. Thus Filip Müller, the *Sonderkommando* crematorium worker who wanted to die was sent out of the gas chamber by the women of his village so that he might bear witness. In the words of Richard Glazar, "it was normal that for everyone behind whom the gate of Treblinka closed, there was death, had to be death, for no one was supposed to be left to bear witness. I already knew that, three hours after arriving at Treblinka"²⁸ This paradox, presented by Felman as the paradox of "witnessing about the event without witness," emerges in this film as a process marked by gender distinction.

Only men are in the position of descending into this underworld, the place which the modern imagination has most closely associated with a vision of Hades, and of coming out again to testify. And the power of their testimonies is heightened by the women they meet and are forced to leave behind. In this sense they are like Orpheus, the witness: the one who has come out of Hades alive, and whose song is made hauntingly beautiful by an encounter no other living human has been able to

experience and to speak about. Like Orpheus, *Shoah's* Jewish male witnesses have all survived intimate confrontations with death. If we read *Shoah* as an Orphic text in the terms of Klaus Theweleit's *Buch der Könige*, we can further illuminate the gendering of testimony and of survival which motivates the distinctive creative energies driving this monumental cinematic document.²⁹

The essential elements of Theweleit's elaborate model of "Orphic creation" are acted out within *Shoah*: Orpheus's descent and reemergence from Hades after his encounter with Eurydice, the dead woman who herself cannot come out and speak, the power and beauty of his song, and the interdiction against looking at the dead woman's face. In Theweleit's terms, Orphic creation — the birth of human art forms, social institutions, and technological inventions — results from descent *and emergence*, a possibility denied to Eurydice. It is thus an artificial "birth" produced by men: by male couples able to bypass the generativity of women. In this process, women play the role of "media," of intermediaries — voices and translators — not of primary creators or witnesses. This type of masculine collaboration and historical creation, dependent on the intermediary role of women, is reflected in *Shoah*, where the masculine anxiety about the curtailment of female reproduction, about the cessation of Jewish transmission through the female line, gives rise to an alternate form of reproduction: to creation in which Lanzmann and Raul Hilberg, Lanzmann and each of his articulate male witnesses, together, "give birth" to the story that was never supposed to have come to light, never to have been heard. We see the pleasure of this collaborative relationship in the scene where Lanzmann and Hilberg together reconstruct, by means of Nazi train schedules and records, "Fahrplanordnung 587," the route of a particular transport train from its origin to Auschwitz.³⁰ We see it also in the obvious rapport and apparent common cause — in the pleasurable ease of exchange characterizing the conversations between Lanzmann and Richard Glazar, Filip Müller, and Rudolf Vrba. In a modern manifestation of Orphic creation,

together with these “Orphic” male survivors of the journey to Hell, Lanzmann circumvents women and mothers, and initiates a new form of transmission for modern Jewish history.

As in Theweleit’s Orphic model, *Shoah*’s women, whose faces can virtually not be seen, become the midwives of male creation, the mediators who deliver the stories’ words from one male to another. Indeed, the film relies on a process of “gendered translation” to make its inquiry comprehensible. As memory enters speech in the witnessess, female translators are the midwives of a multilingual process of signification, repeating, through mimicry, the act of remembering itself. Listening to questions and answers, they carry words back and forth, transform and reformulate them, often significantly, and render them understandable and acceptable. Through their tedious and repetitive work they become essential supplements to the film’s project of exploration. Not only do they act out its search for an intelligible language with which to convey the unspeakable, but they are the shadowy intermediary voices between language and silence, between what is articulated and what must remain unspeakable.

Shoah’s primary interlocutors, then, are truly Orphic voices, literally talking heads, whose song is as transgressive, as endangering, as the song of the poet whose body was torn asunder by angry Maenads. All have literally *survived* — lived *too* long, lived *beyond* the limits of their lives. Ultimately, of course, it is the film itself that *is* Orpheus, and we as viewers are implicated in its creative agenda, also cast as witnesses in an endless chain of bearing witness, also impeded, if not forbidden, to *look* at the faces of dead women.

In fact, the determination and consistency with which women’s faces are avoided in the film evoke the Medusa, another female underworld figure, more threatening than Eurydice. If gazing at Eurydice will definitively kill *her*, gazing at Medusa will kill the one who looks. Medusa is the absolute other, the figure for the

encounter with total death. According to Jean-Pierre Vernant's study, *La Mort dans les yeux*, she combines "faciality" with monstrosity: what threatens to kill, what turns to stone, is the act of *looking* at her face.³¹ Thus, in the *Odyssey*, Medusa's face is the guardian of the realm of death, whose radical otherness she maintains against all the living. She is also a figure associated with war and, in that context, she signifies the absence of generativity. Medusa only gives birth (unnaturally, from the neck) at the moment when she is decapitated by Perseus. To look at Medusa is to enter a world where all boundaries are erased: to look is also to be looked at; her eyes are mirrors in which her monstrosity is reflected back to the viewer. She calls into question the very act of looking: to look is to be possessed, to lose oneself, to find oneself pulled into the absolute alterity of death. In that sense, Medusa is the figure most endangering for cinema, especially for the cinematic evocation and representation of death. If women's faces are indeed associated not only with Eurydice but also with Medusa, their absence from the screen of *Shoah* undergirds the film's mythic structure.

And yet Inge Deutschkron, Ruth Elias, Gertrud Schneider, her mother, do offer their own examples of survival, curtailed as they are by Lanzmann's mythic vision. Together with the translators, they disrupt the film's relentless pursuit with traces of alternate stories. Their presence, minimal as it is, serves as a reminder of the *price* this film pays for its remarkable ability to make possible the testimony from the *inside*. And the *inside* here is not only the underworld of the death machinery, it is also the hell created by the encounter between past and present, an encounter which makes the past present with unexpected and unbearable force. What would it have meant to include women in that encounter, to confront masculine and feminine modes of survival and remembrance? *Shoah* does not permit us to answer this question.³²

Lanzmann insists that his film is not a documentary but a performance. He hires the trains, asks the engineer to drive them, takes Srebnik back to Chelmno, places Bomba in the barber shop. Like an analyst, he brings each of them to the point of re-experiencing their most profound encounter with the Nazi death machinery. Women are left out of these remarkable performances. While Lanzmann's film — in bearing witness to the event-without-a-witness and erasing the distance between past and present — has the mythic and artistic force of Orphic creation, it also reveals the politics of this mythology by replicating the sacrifice of Eurydice and the slaying of Medusa.

Marianne Hirsch & Leo Spitzer
D a r t m o u t h

C o l l e g e

¹ All references are to *Shoah* (1985) written and directed by Claude Lanzmann, distributed by New Yorker Films and to *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, the complete text of the film by Claude Lanzmann, preface by Simone de Beauvoir (New York, Pantheon, 1985). The authors wish to thank the participants of the Humanities Institute on "Gender and War: Roles and Representations" at Dartmouth College as well as the members of the Dartmouth Faculty Seminar on "Domination, Subordination and Consciousness" for insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper. We are also grateful to Jane Caplan, Michael Ermarth, Claudia Koonz, Miranda Pollard, Paula Schwartz, Linda Williams and Marilyn Young for their suggestions.

² *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, p. 6.

³ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 172-174.

⁴ Among the many accounts, see for example: Rudolf Vrba and Alan Bestic, *44070: The Conspiracy of the Twentieth Century*; Ruth Schwertfeger, *Women of Theresienstadt, Voices From a Concentration Camp* (Oxford, 1989); Rhoda G. Lewin, ed., *Witnesses to the Holocaust* (Boston, 1990); Vera Laska, ed., *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: the Voices of Eyewitnesses* (Westport, Conn., 1983); Marlene E. Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny, Women Writers and the Holocaust* (New York, 1986); Fania Fénelon (with Marcelle Routier), *Playing for Time* (New York, 1977); Julie Heifetz, *Too Young to Remember* (Detroit, 1989).

⁵ See Esther Katz and Joan Miriam Ringelheim, eds., *Proceedings of the Conference, Women Surviving: The Holocaust* (New York: Institute for Research in History, 1983); Joan Miriam Ringelheim, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust," *Simon Wiesenthal Annual* 1 (1984), pp. 69-87 and "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," *Signs: Journal of Women in*

Culture and Society 10, 4 (Summer 1985), pp. 741-761. Also see Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women," in Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York, 1984), pp. 297-333; Ruth Schwertfeger, *Women of Theresienstadt, Voices From a Concentration Camp* (Oxford, 1989); Rhoda G. Lewin, ed., *Witnesses to the Holocaust* (Boston, 1990); Vera Laska, ed., *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: the Voices of Eyewitnesses* (Westport, Conn., 1983).

⁶ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, p. 8.

⁷ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, p. 16.

⁸ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 50-51. For Deutschkron's memoir of her survival in Berlin during the war see Inge Deutschkron, *Ich trug den gelben Stern* (Munich, 1985). It is interesting to compare Lanzmann's evocation of disembodied female voices with Kaja Silverman's analysis of embodied female voices in classic Hollywood cinema in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, 1988). Dissociating body from voice in Hollywood film increases authority: it is a tactic generally reserved for men, a tactic that masks the precariousness of male subjectivity. Folding the voice inside the image, as is done for women, diminishes authority; women, Silverman suggests, need to be freed from their claustral confinement in their bodies. Lanzmann's approach is the opposite: the male voices are both embodied and authoritative while the female voices carry little substantive information.

⁹ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 154-166. For Vrba's more detailed account of the first Theresienstadt group in Auschwitz, see Rudolf Vrba and Alan Bestic, *44070*, pp. 180-196.

¹⁰ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 194-195.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 195.

¹² *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 29, 123, 30, 126.

¹³ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 11, 116-117.

¹⁴ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 35-36, 40, 111. It is interesting to compare this sequence of the film with Saul Friedländer's account of a conversation with Lanzmann as the film was being shot: "'Tell me, sir,' Claude asks the officer from Treblinka, 'which burn faster, men's bodies or women's?' and the SS officer calmly begins to expiate." See *When Memory Comes*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York, 1979), pp. 116-118. Does Friedländer misremember the conversation, or did this question of Lanzmann's remain on the cutting room floor?

¹⁵ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1989).

¹⁶ See Zygmund Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge, 1989), esp. chapter 5, "Soliciting the Co-operation of Victims."

¹⁷ See Terence des Pres, *The Survivor* (Oxford, 1976).

¹⁸ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 199-200.

¹⁹ When projected in theaters, the film is normally shown in two parts, each with an intermission.

²⁰ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, p. 103.

²¹ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 161-162. For a fuller account of the resistance within Auschwitz and of Freddy Hirsch's suicide, see Rudolf Vrba and Alan Bestic, *44070*, pp. 167-196.

²² *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 188-190.

²³ Inadvertantly, Simon Srebnik echoes their realization when he subtly changes the refrain of the military song he had been taught by the Nazi soldiers. Instead

of singing “Ei warum, Ei darum/ Ei bloss wegen dem/ Tschindarassabumdarassa -sa” (“Oh why, oh because/ Only because of the/ Tschindarassabumdarassa -sa”), he sings “Warum-darum/Warum-darum/Wegen der Kinderrasse, Kinderhasser, Bum” (“Why-because, why-because/ Because of the race of children, the child-haters, Bum”). With his flat “warum-darum,” Srebnik echoes the tone and message of the “*asoï muss seyn*,” and with his shift from the sounds that mimic the sexual encounter between the girls and the soldiers to his interpretation of those sounds — the intercourse between the “child-haters” whose procreation eradicates the “race of children” — Srebnik, himself a child, underscores the feelings of being the last Jew alive. See Anne-Lise Stern, “Ei Warum, Ei Darum: O Pourquoi,” in *Shoah, le film: Des psychanalystes parlent*, ed. E. Didier, A.-M. Houdebine, J.-J. Moscovitz (Paris, 1990).

²⁴ For a contrasting male response see Betty Jean Lifton, *The King of Children: A Biography of Janucz Korczak* (New York, 1988).

²⁵ Saul Friedländer mentions another account filmed by Lanzmann but curiously not included in the film, the story of the 200 children of Bialystok who were deported to Theresienstadt, kept there for two months, used in negotiations which fell through and eventually killed. See *When Memory Comes*, p. 117.

²⁶ Maurice Bloch, “Introduction,” in Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry eds, *Death and the Regeneration of Life* (New York, 1982).

²⁷ Shoshana Felman, “The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*.” in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: 1991), p. 227. See also Felman’s “A l’age du témoignage: *Shoah* de Claude Lanzmann,” *Au Sujet de Shoah*, Michel Deguy, ed. (Paris, 1989), p. 81.

²⁸ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, p. 50.

²⁹ Klaus Theweleit, *Buch der Könige: Orpheus und Euridike* (Frankfurt, 1988). For an English translation and condensation of his argument, see "The Politics of Orpheus Between Women, Hades, Political Power and the Media: Some Thoughts on the Configuration of the European Artist, Starting with the Figure of Gottfried Benn, Or: What Happened to Eurydice?" *New German Critique* 36 (Fall 1985), 133-156.

³⁰ *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, pp. 138-145. Lanzmann has credited Hillberg's massive study *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York, 1961) with inspiring his own project. On male collaboration, see also Wayne Koestenbaum, *Double Talk* (New York, 1989). See Klaus Theweleit's essay in this volume for further suggestions about the attractions of masculine collaboration and the concomitant exclusion of women.

³¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *La Mort dans les yeux: Figures de l'Autre en Grèce ancienne*, (Paris, 1985).

³² See Klaus Theweleit's essay in this volume for a suggestive discussion of gendered models of memory.