

Irony as Trauma & Trauma as Irony in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*¹

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Abstract

Claude Lanzmann makes use of what this essay posits as metairony which dramatizes the shocks of the acting out of the trauma of the Holocaust. The film director makes the survivors and witnesses and the viewers to become retraumatized and to relive the past. By so doing, the traumatized mind can cope with the trauma because acting out helps the reflective consciousness to prevent itself from being overwhelmed by shock, in Walter Benjamin's assumption, by reproducing shock, that is, by seizing upon each traumatic moment and parrying it—in effect, by responding to violence with violence. Testimonies in *Shoah* break the boundary between the experience of shock and experience as shock.

Keywords: Claude Lanzman, *Shoah*, metairony, acting out, trauma, shock, Walter Benjamin, violence, and testimony

Postmodern memory, as Derrida's *Memoires: For Paul de Man* (1986) shows, turns out to be memory without anteriority or origin. While striving to position mourning within postmodernism, he recognizes de Man's death as the moment for the impossible mourning that can be formulated as something other than a slipping back into modernist yearning. For him, there is no true mourning that can unmistakably transform the trauma of the death of a celebrated friend into a "tomb of or vault of some narcissism" (p. 6). If there can be such a thing as true mourning, then for Derrida it is mourning that must empty the memory out of any narcissistic union with the past: mourning must know its own impossibility. Derrida's formulation of an impossible mourning, which enacts a self-conscious psychoanalysis in the postmodern framework, is not unlike the modernist the incompatibility of consciousness and memory. In modern life consciousness must make itself so impervious to the assault of aversive stimuli or shocks that the majority of memory traces which previously registered as experience in a direct and natural way fail to do so. As a result, modern man's capacity to have experiences in the traditional sense is irrevocably reduced. As Newmark (1995) comments:

Memory, that is, in its very capacity to repeat an event that lies outside or beyond the subject's own control, names the place where the subject of knowledge and experience is always susceptible to being overcome and transformed by the disruptive force of *shock*. Benjamin seems, ultimately, to generalize Freud's hypothesis—produced in response to the traumas of World War I—about the destabilizing and repetitive memory-traces left in the accident victims into a global economy of modern life. (p. 238)

Whereas Derrida concentrates on the void of memory, the modernist focus falls on the direct consciousness of shock as opposed to memory. Ramazani (1996) makes clear the modernist opposition between shock (*erlebnis*) and memory (*erfahrung*): "*Erlebnis*, roughly translatable as 'inauthentic experience,' would seem to designate the inevitably fallen state of modern consciousness: in order to achieve self-protective insensibility, the mind must empty the present of its potentially meaningful connections with an individual and collective history, tradition, or memory (*Erfahrung*)" (p. 205).

Shock as an inauthentic experience relates itself to the concept of irony by de Man (1983) who seems to predicate irony on the resistance to memory—a memory "blind" to its own rhetoricity—as a recovery of the past:

Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic. It can know this in authenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world. It dissolves in the narrowing spiral of a linguistic sign that becomes more and more remote from its meaning, and it can find no escape from this spiral. The temporal void that it reveals is the same void we encountered when we found allegory always implying an unreachable anteriority. (p. 222)

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But de Man, as Pandey (2014) rightly observes, “gives irony precedence over allegory because irony ‘comes closer [than allegory] to the pattern of factual experience and recaptures some of the factitiousness of human existence as a succession of isolated moments lived by divided self. . . .’ Unlike allegory, the difference asserted by irony is more intense and is ‘within the subject itself’” (p. 259). Pandey, further, asserts:

de Man’s analysis of irony is based primarily on Baudelaire’s essay ‘The Essence of Laughter,’ in which the author’s emphasis falls upon the poet-philosopher’s ability to laugh at himself because of an ‘act of self-duplication he terms *dédoulement*’ The ironist is always conscious of the distinction between his empirical self and his separated, observing self. (p. 259)

Like de Man, Newmark takes Baudelairean laughter as “a special theory of irony” (p. 242), which takes on the contours of “permanent parabasis” (p. 242) and “*dédoulement*” (p. 247). Particularly, *dédoulement*—splitting of the self—verges on the shock. In de Man’s view, the shock comes at an unsettling speed and can lead to madness, “dizziness to the point of madness . . . absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself” (pp. 215-16). The intensity of the shock which absolute irony generates may border on the shock of trauma, thereby undermining the stability of meaning itself—what New Critics, according to Bove (1992), understands as producing “only a simulacrum of the universe” (p. 198). The coalescing of the intensities of the two shocks breaks the boundary between the wrecked composure of the ironizing self and the shocked reaction of the receptors, thereby fuzzing the lines between irony and trauma.

On the above view, irony would name the cognition of trauma, even though trauma itself, as LaCapra (1997) says in his essay on Lanzmann’s *Shoah*, remains unnamable: “Trauma is the gap—open wound—in the past that resists being entirely filled, healed or harmonized in the present. In a sense it is a nothing that remains unnamable” (p. 244). Metairony names the cognition of trauma, which is shock. Metairony, as Ramazani defines it, is ‘the shock of irony and the sublime—the contradiction, the paradox, the logical or conceptual *violence* that “hurries the mind into fear and the counter violence of transcendence” ’ (p. 222). Metairony, according to Ramazani, informs the poetry of Baudelaire in whom it remains “aporetic, painful, and pained in contradistinction to Flaubert whose ‘epic vision of history [. . .] can transmute [. . .] metairony into higher—or ‘meta’—sublime’ (p. 222).

My essay posits that Claude Lanzmann’s (1985) irony in *Shoah* should be understood as metairony which consistently reveals the shocks of acting out. The film director makes the survivors and witnesses and the viewers to become retraumatized and to relive the past. By so doing, the traumatized mind can cope with the trauma because acting out helps the reflective consciousness to prevent itself from being overwhelmed by shock, in Walter Benjamin’s assumption, by reproducing shock, that is, by seizing upon each traumatic moment and parrying it—in effect, by responding to violence with violence. *Shoah*, as the testimonies of Mordenchai Podchlebnik, Abraham Bomba and Gawkoswki, in particular, bear out, breaks the boundary between the experience *of* shock and experience *as* shock.

The modernist and postmodernist notions of shock as implied in the preceding sentence are linked up with the views of memory respectively in modernism and postmodernism, both of which remain suspicious of the aura: the former valorizes it as a mode of remembrance that resists, as the latter would have phrased it, “the tomb or vault of some narcissism.” But whereas postmodernism arrives at an impossible mourning that resists a narcissistic bonding to the past, modernism strives to find out what makes true experience possible, and it still zeroes in on memory as a viability.

Trauma causes a rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past. The contemporary definitions of trauma, as Sara Horowitz (1997) reviews, point to the inaccessibility of the past:

Recent thinking on posttraumatic stress locates a species of muteness and moment of trauma. Subsequent amnesia and aphasia reflect an already constituted belatedness that distances the victim from the events at hand. Indeed, Cathy Caruth’s work on post-traumatic disorders situates the ‘enigmatic core’ . . . of the traumatic event in that it ‘is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly’ Clinicians and researchers describe the effects of a traumatic stress in a language that connotes absence. Various described as an emotional ‘numbing’ (Lifton), ‘a void, a hole’ (Krystal . . .), ‘a record that is yet to be made’ (Laub), massive psychic trauma has come to be understood as an event which, in essence, to use Dori Laub’s words, ‘precludes its registration’ and prevents the victim from being a witness to himself; by its nature, massive trauma results in cognitive constriction and flattening of affect, limiting what one can notice and feel. Given the multiple bereavements of family, friends, and community and the extremity of Nazi atrocity, Henry Krystal observes, for Holocaust survivors, ‘the nature of what is experienced . . . is so incompatible with the survival of the self that it is destroyed. No trace of a registration of any kind is left in the psyche; instead, a void, a hole is formed.’ (p. 49)

If the past is beyond reach, the question that arises is why then the Shoah (holocaust) becomes so important. The Shoah derives its importance from its status as trauma: as a trauma it demands an allowance for the incomprehensibility of what transpired at Auschwitz. So the narrativizing of a traumatic event like the Shoah poses a special problem: how to render the “unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, 1991, p. 447) into narrative language in a way that integrates the past to the present. The need for integration stems from the claims that the traumatic past can still have on a person in the present: uncontrolled hallucination, flashback, dream sequences and retraumatizing breakdown triggered by incidents that directly or more or less obliquely recall the past. The memory lapses of trauma are conjoined with the tendency compulsively to repeat, get filled up by the flashback, reenactment or acting out the traumatic scenes of the past. What is suppressed in a lapse of memory remains latent and surfaces belatedly in direct or disguised forms. In the case of the Shoah, the psychological fact gives rise to the problem of representing the past of the Jewish community in a way that gets carried over into the present. Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* turns out to be an attempt at addressing this problem of the Jewish memory, its transmission, and what he calls its incarnation. As Colombat (1993) remarks, ‘Lanzmann’s ultimate goal is not to communicate a certain knowledge nor to be accurate but rather to create a powerful impact on the audience. Lanzmann himself often indicated that his goal was not to “communicate” information but rather to “transmit” an experience and a violent emotion’ (p. 302). The film manages to unlock the horrors of the holocaust by allowing the ironic subject(s) to know its own “inauthentic experience” in the metairony of every new effect of shock it produces, in the arbitrary and shifting ground of narrativity itself. The (visual) textualizing, which is fraught with muteness and a regular dosage of repetition, seems to have the formless referent (it seeks to represent) as if in uncontrollable heterogeneity. Thus Lanzmann succeeds in not only making the silences of history reappear uncannily but also in making these silences speak loudly. If the film has any narrative, it “is . . . essentially a narrative of silence, the story of the filmmaker’s *listening*, the narrator is the teller of the film only in so far as he is the bearer of the film’s silence” (Felman, 1991, p. 52). The silence interwoven in the visual texture of the film creates an overriding effect of the emptiness visited and of the impossibility of narrativizing the holocaust while inviting the viewers to (re)capture vicariously in their mind the gruesome images it so sedulously shuns.

Shoah must foreground the silence also “in order to open a clearing in which the past can become the present” (Roth, 1995, p. 220). In forcing vicarious visualization helped by what Olin (1997) calls “the géographe” (p. 1) of the film, Lanzmann compels the witness to relive the trauma. The point is not so much as to learn the facts directly from the mouths of the survivor as to present the past itself as an object of reconstruction on the basis of traces of traces. The deconstructive strategy allows Lanzmann not only to make the witnesses act out the traumatic past with all its violence in their mind but it also helps him to break down the cognitive and emotional barriers that keep the past safely in the past for viewers. Lanzmann structures *Shoah* in a way that a viewer becomes not so much a listener to a story but a witness to the act of reliving the past. The film thus breaks the boundary between the past and the present; the past is made inseparable from the present.

The deconstructive strategy of Lanzmann in *Shoah* problematizes the film’s genre: whether to take it as history or a work of art. Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1992) describes it as an “absolute proof that the historian is also an artist” (p. 111); Shoshana Felman interprets it as “a film about *the relation between art and witnessing*” (p. 40). In the seminar at Yale University, Lanzmann (1991) himself objects strenuously to references to *Shoah* as an “aesthetic” project and also describes its mode of witnessing as not at all representational” but shaped by cinematic technique, juxtapositions and staged scenes (pp. 82-89). *Shoah* turns out to have something of a mixed genre: Lanzmann aims not at producing a historical documentary but at creating a work of art that would transmit the trauma of the victims. Commenting on the genre of the film, Andre Colombat observes, “*Shoah* would be a certain kind of fiction that would ‘incarnate’ the truth better than any historical work because it forces the witnesses not only to testify but to ‘reenact’ scenes of their past in order to ‘relive’ and ‘transmit’ their experiences” (p. 312). Clearly, Lanzmann’s emphasis falls more upon the acting out of the traumatic past rather than on working through it. Acting out is a psychological ploy whereby a traumatized person is forced to be possessed by the past and made to repeat it compulsively as if it were fully present. Working through, on the other hand, in Saul Friedlander’s (1993) definition, “means first being aware of” the intrusive emotion that continually penetrates the *reizschutz* (protective shield) and “the numbness that protects it,” and “allowing for a measure of balance between” the intrusive emotion and “the protective numbing” “whenever possible” (p. 130). If working through had been Lanzmann’s primary aim, he would have meted out a more thorough treatment to the memory of the past instead of insisting on discovering the past in and through the present alone—through testimonies or acts of witnessing. That Lanzmann focuses on the acting out becomes obvious also from his blindness to the question: why were the Jews killed? The blindness is linked up with the metairony of the visual text: of enhancing the shock effect. Lanzmann in a way admits that his basic film-making technique in *Shoah* is ironic because he says that “blindness [to the *why* question] should be understood here as the purest mode of looking, the only way not to turn away from a reality that is literally blinding: clairvoyance itself” (qtd. in LaCapra, 1997, p. 237). The purest mode of looking of which Lanzmann speaks is nothing but the actual acting out, which creates an overwhelming shock effect both on the witnesses and the viewers.

Irony informs even the opening shot of the film, wherein Lanzmann begins with an evocation of pastoral beauty to move into the heart of evil. Instead of the archival footage, what the viewers see is Simon Srebnik, sitting in a barge, singing a

Polish folk tune about “a little white house,” and appearing progressively between the tree trunks—acting out his boyish activities before the holocaust. The sequence photographs the trees that the Nazis planted in order to conceal all the evidences of the macabre murder of the Jews. Felman (1991) recreates the scene briefly but graphically and meaningfully thus:

. . . Srebnik’s face in a close-up—the face that carries both the lightness, the enticing sweetness of the song and the weight, the outrage and cruelty, of history—twists the silence of its pain into a smile and gazes vacantly, incredibly, incredulously through survival, death, and time, through piles of vanished burned bodies into trees, the brown earth, and the perspective of the blue horizon:

Yes, this is the place. . . . No one ever left here again. . . . (p. 72)

What is most noticeable in Srebnik’s expression is that he gives vent to his feeling in the present while referring to the past. The “expression indicates clearly the importance in the film of conjugating the testimonies with images of what remains, in the present, of the places where they occurred” (Colombat, 1993, p. 316). Srebnik’s statement refers to the bodies in the forest of Sobibor. In between the trees of the forest, gruesome images of the past become present and alive as Srebnik testifies while reenacting partially a scene of his own experience. Lanzmann thus leaves no one in doubt right at the beginning of the film that his technique is ironic: he requires the viewers to see the beautiful pastoral landscapes not at face value or simply as nostalgia but as bitterly ironic commentary on the gory past they are meant to hide. The configuration of such scenes in the film “has a cumulative effect. Indeed, we almost watch the survivors and witnesses transform one gentle pastoral scene after another into the landscape of Hell. The very soil seems to be implicated in mass murder” (Olin, 1997, p. 3). The archival footage that Lanzmann omits makes its presence felt with a much greater impact through the depiction of a trace like the verdant Sobibor.

After Srebnik’s reenactment, the film shows the testimony of Mordenchai Podchlebnik, who initially refuses to testify. His testimony, in a way, dramatizes what can be put ironically as the shock of laughter (smile in the present scene). Laughter, an alternative to muteness, wordlessly expresses man’s shock at his fallen condition. Sometimes, as in the case of an extreme trauma, laughter may also be the verbal equivalent of madness and it may conceal a fierce truth about human cruelty and suffering. Podchlebnik, who prefers to remain mute about his past, smiles all the time—an activity that appears as abnormal to Lanzmann. When Lanzmann queries about this, the answer he gets is: “What do you want to do him, cry? Sometimes you smile, sometimes you cry. And if you’re alive, it’s better to smile” (p. 7). The reply shows that Podchlebnik’s smile aims at hiding the violent memories he still suffers from. After a few minutes, however, when Lanzmann tricks him into testifying by asking him a precise historical question, he bursts into tears while answering as an historical witness. He tells how one day he had to transport the dead-bodies of his wife and children in a gas van to a ditch. The testimony of Podchlebnik demonstrates that smile/laughter may ironically refer to a shocking experience. Textual trauma, like Podchlebnik’s smile, “is all the more redoubtable to the extent that it, unlike many of the more clinical examples, eventually manages to conceal the fault of cognition inscribed within it behind a pretense of understanding, while remaining otherwise incapable of containing its effects” (Newmark, 1995, p. 253).

It is not just the surviving Jews whom Lanzmann shows as reliving the past. He also depicts some Poles like Jan Karski and Henrik Gwakowski as testifying. Gwakowski “is, for . . . Lanzmann an exceptionally positive figure among the Polish peasants interviewed” (LaCapra, 1997, p. 257). He is depicted as driving a locomotive to Treblinka and making a throat-cutting gesture at the Jews. The other Polish peasants take the gesture as a warning to the Jews while Lanzmann sees it being fraught with sadism:

When I came back to the film I saw the locomotive, I told him: ‘You are going to get in it and we will film an arrival in Treblinka.’ I told him nothing more. We arrive at the station, he is here, bending over, and, by himself, he does incredible gesture across his throat looking at the imaginary wagons (behind the locomotive course, there was no wagon). In comparison to his image, historical footage becomes insufferable. This image itself became the truth. Further on, when I filmed the farmers, they all started doing the same gesture that they pretend is a warning, but it is a sadistic gesture. (qtd. in Colombat, 1993, p. 335)

Lanzmann’s empathetic response to the seemingly lethal gesture of Gwakowski is colored by the train driver’s being possessed of a true open wound that refuses to heal. The irony of the diabolical gesture is not lost on discerning viewers, who notice the discrepancy in Gwakowski’s sigh for the dead Jews. Clearly, reliving the past freshens the wound of the witness and shocks him.

Lanzmann transmits the shocks of the acting out most tellingly through a staged interview with Abraham Bomba in a rented salon. Bomba, a Jewish survivor who cut women’s hair before their entry into the gas chamber at Treblinka appears evasive and indifferent at the outset. As Lanzmann admits, he was not satisfied with filming of the sequence because he noted that Bomba “only transmits a certain knowledge” (Colombat, 1993, p. 337). He then asks Bomba to act out the actual cutting of the victims’ hair before their entry into the gas chamber. Bomba is immediately retraumatized; he cannot go on; he breaks down. Bomba’s breakdown turns out to be a *tour de force* in the use of metairony: the shock emanating from the acting out does not merely work toward the witness but also redounds to the filmmaker and even to the viewers. At this point, the

boundary between the experience *of* shock and experience *as* shock is broken. *Shoah* exemplifies, in a classic way, de Manian concept of irony as *dédoublement* and permanent parabasis. As LaCapra rightly comments, “Any boundary between art and life collapses at the point trauma is relived, for when the survivor-victim breaks down, the frame distinguishing art and life also breaks down and reality erupts on stage or film” (p. 266). In the testimony of Bomba, Lanzmann reaches the limit of the unspeakable. It is only through such sequences that the viewers can have a vicarious visualization of the holocaust and can feel its presence in their soul. By inducing the witnesses to transcend the limits of what their self allows for, the filmmaker brings about a disruption in their testimony—a rupture that makes a hole into the heart of the viewers. The use of metairony allows Lanzmann to transmit most poignantly the trauma of the Shoah that no history can communicate. The trauma that the film *Shoah* transmits onto its viewers remains open-ended since Lanzmann concentrates on acting out rather than working through.

Summing up, Lanzmann’s approach in *Shoah* approximates deconstruction notably in its resistance to closure and its use of metairony to name the cognition of trauma. “Each individual testimony remains a story unresolved” (Friedlander, 1993, p. 121). There is no single moment in any of the testimonies after which the viewer can feel a resolution of the trauma: feel to have worked through it. The film has to say little about working through and seems to absolutize acting out. By leaving out the archival footage, which would have merely communicated knowledge, in favor of a metaironic representation, Lanzmann succeeds in foregrounding shock as the cognition of the trauma of the witnesses, the filmmaker, and the viewers themselves. The viewers, in particular, think they are vicariously witnessing the Shoah with all its unspeakable horrors. *Shoah* shows that testimony is a means of transmission that keeps the events of the holocaust before people’s eyes. Testimonial witnessing as depicted in the film provides an insight into lived experience and its transmission in verbal and visual density may be equated with the holocaust itself. Finally, *Shoah* removes the barrier of the distance between the past and the present and it relives the history of trauma in the present.

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