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# On Cazenave's *Archive of the Catastrophe* and McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger's *Construction of Testimony*

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*An Archive of the Catastrophe: The Unused Footage of Claude Lanzmann's Shoah.* By Jennifer Cazenave. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019. 313 pp., ISBN 9781438474779, \$95.00

*The Construction of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah and Its Outtakes.* Edited by Erin McGlothlin, Brad Prager, and Markus Zisselsberger. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2020. 504 pp., ISBN 9780814347331, \$84.99.

Although it may sound like a cliché, it is important to bear in mind that investments, broadly conceived, are often crucial for the long-term well-being of an individual, family, and generations to follow. This also is true for institutions, including universities, museums, research centers, libraries, and archives, which may be endowed with specific resources (in addition to the purely financial) and cultivated by highly specialized, skilled labor. Both books considered here, Jennifer Cazenave's *An Archive of the Catastrophe: The Unused Footage of Claude Lanzmann's Shoah* and the volume coedited by Erin McGlothlin, Brad Prager, and Markus Zisselsberger, *The Construction of Testimony: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah and Its Outtakes*, explore the history of a tremendously wise investment on the part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM): buying the unused footage, running some 220 hours, from the making of Claude

Lanzmann's 9.5-hour movie *Shoah* (1985). That is, the USHMM received all of the *Shoah* film except for what was used in Lanzmann's final cut. We never learn precisely how much it cost, but a princely sum is intimated. (Technically speaking, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem also is a partner, but Yad Vashem plays little role in transforming the collection into a scholarly resource.) An outstanding feature of both books is a forthright affirmation that their respective studies make up the inception of a process of comprehending Lanzmann's *Shoah* archive, rather than a last word.

"In late 1996," writes Lindsay Zarwell and Leslie Swift (in the edited volume), "Michael Berenbaum, then-director of the USHMM Research Institute, and Raye Farr, former director of the USHMM Permanent Exhibition and now-retired director of the USHMM Film Archive, negotiated the acquisition with Lanzmann at the suggestion of [historian] Raul Hilberg" of the outtakes from *Shoah* (34–35). The adaptation of this purchase entailed incredibly complex decoding, restoration, reassemblage, and description creation far beyond the norm, even in the realm of large and complex archival hoards. Both books owe their existence to the consummation of this deal and perseverance on the part of a team of dedicated professionals, which involved considerable time and expense on the part of the USHMM.

Alas, many of us who conduct archival research find that some collections never attain a complete organization in a systematized manner. On one hand, this is immensely frustrating; on the other hand, it means that there are potential, unexpected gems to be recovered.<sup>1</sup> Although such thoughts are not often articulated, scholars are occasionally exasperated when they know that valuable material exists in a collection, but locating what they seek is a Sisyphean task. In the acknowledgments of his monumental study, *The Bombing War: Europe, 1939–1945*, Richard Overy opined, "As ever I am indebted to the assistance given in the many archives I have visited, with the exception of the American National Archive at College Park, Maryland, which astonishingly still remains a researcher's nightmare."<sup>2</sup> Overy's jab at the US National Archives and Records Administration is rather mild compared with Lanzmann's derision of the archive work that by almost any measure served him with the utmost competence, respect, and spirit of compromise.

Claude Lanzmann, who died on July 5, 2018, conceived and crafted a brilliant and important film about the Holocaust, *Shoah*—regarded by many as the greatest film treatment of the destruction of European Jewry—which premiered

in 1986. Lanzmann often said that it wasn't a documentary (although he also contradicted himself), and it defies many conventions of the genre, in part due to his heavy-handedness as a director. Lanzmann was a notoriously obstinate and difficult man. I was personally in his presence for less than an hour, following a London screening of his post-*Shoah* film about Jan Karski, *The Karski Report* (2010). (The Karski outtakes are also a major subject of both books.) In that discussion, Lanzmann berated at least two people who posed questions and made a few remarks about individuals that could be characterized as "insensitive." Notice, I say "man," not "human," because he was a vintage chauvinist. Like all too many artists, he was "prickly, egotistical, and capricious."<sup>3</sup> One of the chief grounds of the consternation of USHMM authorities and those entrusted with preserving and cataloging the outtakes was the fact that Lanzmann resisted relinquishing control of his work. These sorts of highly personal judgments would usually be off-limits in scholarship. But Lanzmann was such an overpowering auteur that it is impossible to explore his work without factoring in his personality, which tended to the extreme. Regina Longo's "Coda" to the edited volume centers on her attempt to convey her concerns about the archive's disposition to Lanzmann himself—that he had "first exploited his subjects and then exploited the custodians of his outtakes. . . I believed I had to somehow persuade Lanzmann that he too was a custodian and not the architect of these histories" (396). Longo was courageous to attempt to tell Lanzmann, ultimately to his face, that he may have created *Shoah* but he did not *own* the Holocaust.

As initially observed by Leo Spitzer and Marianne Hirsch, and explored more fully by Jennifer Cazenave, Debarati Sanyal, and Leah Wolfson, Lanzmann strongly preferred male performer-witnesses to the Holocaust experience. Lanzmann's "editorial choice" to bypass the testimony of Ruth Elias about her pregnancy, for example, is deeply disturbing (Cazenave 144–145). Hirsch and Spitzer famously commented on the overweening maleness of *Shoah* without benefit of the outtakes, which only strengthens their argument. Unsurprisingly, a lot of what ended up on the cutting room floor consisted of hours of interviews, including some striking musical performances, with women. (*Shoah*'s opening scene is famous for featuring Holocaust survivor Simon Srebnik singing a song he had been forced to sing, as a child, by his Nazi captors.) Lanzmann did not care much for non-Jewish Poles. As Dorota Glowacka writes, he "repeatedly stated that his intention in the film was to create a chorus of voices," yet "his interviewing style, his discomfort with Polish witnesses, and his contempt for

the Polish language act to suppress the plurality of voices in Polish, the plurality that he himself had summoned into existence” (in McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger 163). We learn from Noah Shenker that Lanzmann situated historian Raul Hilberg in a “chain of identification” between himself and the chairman of the Warsaw ghetto Judenrat (Jewish council), Adam Czerniaków. Lanzmann disdained historian Yehuda Bauer, who was interviewed and does not appear (McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger 134). This is likely partly due to Lanzmann’s minimization of the “rescue” story addressed by Bauer.

It can be safely assumed that readers of *Jewish Film & New Media* have seen *Shoah*, a significant portion “teach” it, and many might regard themselves as an expert in some dimension of Lanzmann’s magnum opus. Even the commentary surrounding *Shoah* is well known, serving a function similar to the *Gemara* around the portion of *Mishna* on a page of Talmud. Numerous scholars are conversant with the ur-text of *Shoah* and the constellation of discourse surrounding it, including work by Dominick LaCapra, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, Sue Vice, and Stuart Liebman; the work of Raul Hilberg; and major commentary on Hilberg, such as that of Doris Bergen and Christopher Browning. Cazenave and the others refer frequently to Lanzmann’s autobiography, *The Patagonian Hare*.<sup>4</sup> Now, however, the earlier generations of commentary have been complicated, complemented, and recontextualized though the existence of the outtakes, as well as the mushrooming body of scholarship on them, particularly as selections from the outtakes have been spun off into new films. Using these books, along with the increasingly sophisticated website of the USHMM (though the “collections search” function) to view the outtakes, will no doubt make for memorable classes in Jewish studies, Holocaust studies, and film studies.

There is a great deal of overlap in these books, in part because Cazenave contributed a chapter to the McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger collection, and she compiled, with Lindsay Zarwell, its “Appendix 1: The Claude Lanzmann *Shoah* Collection: A Guide to the Outtakes.” In addition to the shared text and data in these two books, there is a fair amount of repetition in the edited book. Despite the similarities, I strongly encourage colleagues to have their libraries purchase both books. Cazenave’s work (a revised dissertation) will be particularly helpful for not only the investigation of the outtakes vis-à-vis the final version of *Shoah* but also as an example of how to juxtapose film (“archive” and final cut), film criticism, and related literature. As one might expect, some

chapters of *The Construction of Testimony* stand further removed from Cazenave's monograph, especially Dorota Glowack's incisive "'Traduttore traditore': Claude Lanzmann's Polish Translations."

The thrust of Cazenave's study, which is admittedly largely reflected in the collected volume, is that the outtakes were excised because Lanzmann eventually decided on a tighter focus than the comprehensive overview he originally planned. He chose to concentrate on the process of destruction, mainly as enacted through highly theatrical "testimonial performances" (Cazenave 12). *Shoah* closes with some attention to Jewish resistance and the dilemma of the Judenräte, or "Jewish councils" established in ghettos by the Nazis. Lanzmann interviewed a few historians, but only one, Raul Hilberg, appears in this role in *Shoah*. Lanzmann decided to almost completely abandon the subjects of "Jewish daily life in Nazi Germany" (Cazenave 155) and "rescue." What Cazenave finds is that in addition to the tightening of scope, there were distinct patterns in what Lanzmann cast aside. He toned down or threw off what Cazenave calls "the impossible" for a plodding but more empirical step-by-step narrative strategy. His choices did not always assure that *Shoah*, despite being a superlative film, was as great as its potential. His privileging of men especially renders the film less historically authoritative and powerful than it might have been.

As much as the lion's share of criticism of Lanzmann is justified in both books, it is possible to have a more generous view, especially regarding his decision to omit the portions dealing with refugees and rescue. Each lose sight of the greater context of the war for the Allies and the relationship between the conduct of the war and decisions emanating from Washington and London, along with the far-flung theaters of battle. Cazenave lavishes excessive praise on Zionist leader Nahum Goldmann (Cazenave 181), and is overly impressed with Peter Bergson (Hillel Kook), who came on the scene quite late and with little understanding of how the levers of power operated (Cazenave 213–216). There had been formidable protests in the United States against Hitler and Nazi antisemitism as early as 1933 and again in 1938.

By the time Jan Karski made it to Washington, masses of Poland's Jews had already been exterminated in purpose-built camps, and the Einsatzgruppen were in the throes of killing of Jews by gunfire, which consumed over a million lives.<sup>5</sup> Karski himself was haunted by the suicide of Szmuel Ziegelbaum, who immolated himself in London. He was all too aware that there was no good answer. Ziegelbaum's "plan" was a line that the Allies would not cross—killing

innocent German civilians—and was unlikely to have made a difference. Lanzmann might have surmised that the controversy over the Hungarian “Kastner train” could have consumed the entire film (Cazenave 167–174).

Even very late into the war and its aftermath, the United States and Britain were wary of being seen as having waged war on behalf of the Jews. Both books could be more adept at setting their discrete topics in the context of the complex world war. Karski’s main concern, after all, was that Poland be saved as a nation. Both books underestimate that for Lanzmann, it was terribly problematic that Karski specified that he had been in Belzec, an Operation Reinhard extermination camp, when he was describing Izbica, a transit camp, which was nevertheless a horrifically brutal place (in McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger 409, 412, 414; Cazenave 196).

In a similar vein, both books more or less reflect the view that Lanzmann first adopted and then abandoned: an all-too-simplified picture of Roosevelt and the question of “rescue.” Looking at how he was perceived during wartime and even the lead-up to war, President Roosevelt was much more Jewish-friendly than antisemitic. His wife’s activism was seen as consistent with his inclinations. The charge of his antisemitism would have made no sense during his lifetime. He did, however, act cautiously on the immigration of Jews from Central Europe before 1939. FDR’s detractors included seething antisemites, such as the Catholic radio preacher Father Coughlin, Gerald L. K. Smith, and Theodore Bilbo.<sup>6</sup> Celebrity-heroes Henry Ford and Charles Lindbergh also carried the flag of white supremacy and isolationism. Most Americans had more contempt than concern for Europe’s tribulations after World War I and little awareness of the precarious situation of Jews. The fate of Jewish refugees was not anywhere near the top of administration priorities. Historians Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman have recently argued that despite staunch opposition, “FDR’s second-term [1937–1941] policies likely helped save the lives of well over 100,000 Jews.”<sup>7</sup> From a slightly different angle, Peter Hayes asserts that “America performed terribly in the face of the crisis of European Jewry, except in comparison to every other country.”<sup>8</sup> The recent work of Tracy Campbell reminds us of the fragility of the United States’ consensus, even in the wake of Pearl Harbor.<sup>9</sup>

In my opinion, leaving an extended interview with Franz Grassler in *Shoah*’s final cut was one of Lanzmann’s better decisions, as opposed to including the interview with SS guard Pery (also Perry) Broad (see Cazenave, 29, 32–39). I

believe that the final hour (or so) of *Shoah* is the film at its height, and the juxtaposition of Grassler with Hilberg's testimony and that of Yitzhak Zuckerman ("Antek") is particularly effective. Grassler, who was a young lawyer and administrator in the Warsaw ghetto, agreed to be filmed on camera, as opposed to other former Nazis Lanzmann confronted. While the technology Lanzmann and his crew deployed, including a secret camera (Paluche) and recording equipment, is fascinating and important (Cazenave, 29–43; McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger 69–70, 245–246), Lanzmann did not have a particularly thoughtful approach to perpetrator testimony. It will be to the huge benefit of scholars that late filmmaker Luke Holland was engaged in such an enterprise, interviewing hundreds of Nazi perpetrators and non-Jewish bystanders to the Holocaust for his "Final Account" project.<sup>10</sup>

Cazenave's book is excellent, and McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger should be commended for developing a penetrating, comprehensive survey. Cazenave is strongest on film theory and the literature relevant to *Shoah* and its outtakes. Both works, however, outside of drawing on Hilberg's scholarship, could be better contextualized, toward the aim of integrating the segments on which they focus amid the evolving historical Holocaust scholarship. The kind of discussion launched by Tim Snyder's *Bloodlands*, followed by his *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning*, finds little resonance here. There is limited acknowledgment of the importance of Soviet actions as "enabling" the Holocaust in Lithuania and influencing attitudes of Poles. Snyder informs us, for instance, that some Poles who put their lives at risk to save Jews harbored traditional antisemitic beliefs themselves.<sup>11</sup> Lanzmann allowed for complexity in looking at the Judenräte, but much of his work had a rather Manichean cast.

Finally, there is one omission in these books that I find puzzling, especially because each mention Lanzmann's interview with Abba Kovner, one of the young leaders of the resistance in the Vilna ghetto. Kovner became a renowned Hebrew poet and outspoken Israeli intellectual.<sup>12</sup> Cazenave and the contributors to the collected volume either do not know or do not apparently think that the film *Partisans of Vilna*, directed by Josh Waletzky, is important. It appeared in 1986 and was rereleased in 2005. In certain respects, *Partisans of Vilna* is comparable to and vastly superior to *Shoah*. The killing grounds of thousands of Jews, Ponar, is not well treated in *Shoah*, as opposed to *Partisans of Vilna* (McGlothlin, Prager, and Zisselsberger 68–6, 446; Cazenave 83–84). For both



books, this choice is a lost opportunity to inform readers about a lesser-known film, which is nonetheless a vast storehouse of visual material for Holocaust studies. Moreover, on the subject of film technique, Waletzky as an interviewer is almost totally unheard and invisible—giving the surviving partisans pride of place.<sup>13</sup> Waletzky also was more judicious to women, who feature prominently in *Partisans of Vilna*. Certainly, there's too much out there to know all of the related films and books, but perhaps *Partisans of Vilna* has been unfairly buried because of the timing of its premiere, so close to that of *Shoah*. In retrospect, Lanzmann wanted *Shoah* to be seen as the thinking man's alternative to Steven Spielberg's superficial *Schindler's List* (1993).

If ever there was a diamond in the rough, it was Lanzmann's obsession with the Holocaust. Lanzmann was a great man, but he was not a consistently good man. He was both a giant and narrow-minded. That said, the world is a much richer and more interesting place due to his energy, vision, and even his ruthlessness. The investment in *Shoah* outtakes made by the USHMM, as brilliantly revealed by these foundational books, should continue to inspire work for a broad range of scholars of film, the Holocaust, Jewish studies, and Jewish and European history, as well as those concerned with the professional practices of archiving and preservation.

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## Notes

1. See "First Lines of Oldest Epic Poem Found," *Independent* (London), November 16, 1998, <http://independent.co.uk/news/first-lines-of-oldest-epic-poem-found-1185270.html>. Theodore (Tuvia) Kwasman discovered the opening two lines of the Epic of Gilgamesh, upon which the Old Testament flood myth is probably based, in a storage unit at the British Museum.
2. Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe, 1939–1945* (London: Penguin, 2013), 1976. While Overy surely had good grounds for this view, I found the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park to be extremely useful for recent research on American filmmaking during World War II.
3. I appropriate this description of David Mazower of his much-admired and beloved great-grandfather, writer Scholem Asch; see David Mazower, "Tug-of-War: Scholem Asch and His Translators," *PakniTreger*, 65 (Summer 2012), <https://www>

- .yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/pakn-treger/tug-war-sholem-asch-and-his-translators.
4. Claude Lanzmann, *The Patagonian Hare*, trans. Frank Wynne (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).
  5. See Lewi Stone, “Quantifying the Holocaust: Hyperintense Kill Rates during the Nazi Genocide,” *Science Advances* 5, no. 1 (2019), DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aau7292. Stone’s stark analysis would be even stronger by integrating the analysis of Timothy Snyder concerning the “efficiency” of the Einsatzgruppen shootings; see Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (London: Vintage, 2011).
  6. Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York: Norton, 2017), 261. I am grateful to Frank Dabba Smith for these formulations.
  7. Hayes, *Why?*, 267; Richard Breitman and Allan J. Lichtman, *FDR and the Jews* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 317.
  8. Hayes, *Why?*, 267.
  9. Tracy Campbell, *The Year of Peril: America in 1942* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).
  10. See USC Shoah Foundation, “USC Shoah Foundation Mourns the Passing of Filmmaker and Friend Luke Holland,” June 12, 2020, <https://sf.usc.edu/news/2020/06/27901-usc-shoah-foundation-mourns-passing-filmmaker-and-friend-luke-holland>.
  11. Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (London: Bodley Head, 2015), 298–318; see also Anna Podolska, “Poland’s Antisemitic Rescuers: A Consideration of Apparent Contradictions,” MA thesis, University College London, 2013.
  12. Abba Kovner appears throughout Cazenave’s *An Archive of the Catastrophe*, and only occasionally in *The Construction of Testimony*, which has limited references to Lithuania overall.
  13. See Michael Berkowitz, “The Holocaust on Film—*Shoah*” [review of Sue Vice, *Shoah* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)], in *Viewfinder: Moving Image and Sound, Knowledge and Access: Journal of the British Universities Film & Video Council* (April 2012), <http://bufvc.ac.uk/articles/the-holocaust-on-film-shoah>.