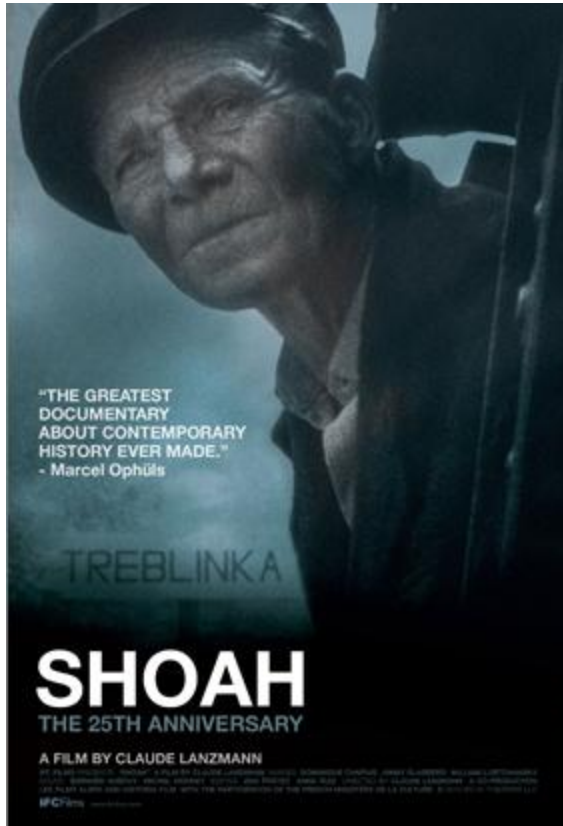


“I will give them an everlasting name”



by [Matthew Groves](#)

Documentary filmmaking is still highly regarded and engaged within pockets of contemporary culture as an essential form of cinema, yet in most of the mainstream culture these films are still fighting for proper due and consideration. I have to admit that I myself, as both editor and writer have not done enough to push both current and classic films in the form. 2011 is a brand spanking New Year, and now is as good a time as ever to begin to strongly engage and champion the best and tear down the worst of the form. To start out this New Year, I can't think of a better film to start the more targeted excursion into the documentary world than the epic, landmark documentary on the Holocaust, *Shoah*.

Shoah, a documentary eleven years in the making, tackles the grand and tragic subject of the Holocaust in a 9 hour long form approach. Director Claude Lanzmann takes the approach of not trying to answer or tackle the big questions that arise from this evil period in world history, but looks at the minutia, the victims, perpetrators, residents of nearby villages, and other witnesses to help answer how, why, and what happened.

One of the more impressive things about the film is how Lanzmann never relies on conventionally lazy elements of many documentaries today; things that included stock archival footage from the period and dry talking heads interviews. While there are numerous interviews, Lanzmann has an especially great knack at perpetually asking questions and keeping the interviews on track. He is very good at building a rapport with those interviewees so well that he can draw out a level of honesty and information that few documentary filmmakers can accomplish. He presents himself as a non-threatening observer, always knowing the right points to keep on. With Lanzmann's approach, sometimes the interviewee might say something unexpected, damning to the themselves, and/or making the viewer reevaluate what the interviewee was saying all along.

As stated above, Lanzmann uses no stock footage, rather, he decides to photograph the areas of the camps and the surrounding towns, mostly around Treblinka and Auschwitz. This gives the viewer a visually stirring, haunting picture, sometimes running simultaneously during an interview. Far too often in present day documentaries you will see an interview in a room with solely one person giving information. While that is fine and it can work in certain contexts (even in *Shoah* some of those types of interviews are present), Lanzmann makes sure that this is not the bulk of the film; he shows the places in question that are being spoken about so that the viewer has something visually to connect to. He also is unafraid to use silence in order for words or visuals to seep into your consciousness; it's an unabashedly quiet film at many moments. Both this and the interview style from a documentary standpoint are a stroke of genius and a high watermark that any student of documentary filmmaking could learn a lot from.



Another excellent aspect is the scope of the film, and how much ground is covered. While this aspect seems obvious with a format of 2 parts and a few intermissions over a 9 hour period, it is amazing how much Lanzmann is able to pack into the film. His goal seems to consist of wanting to cover the question "what is the Holocaust?" as best as he can in this one film. Many previous documentaries and narrative films have covered many aspects of that period, and there is still no way it can all be covered in this film. However, Lanzmann attempts and strongly succeeds breathtakingly. In the first larger portion he deals with and details the camp at Treblinka and the personal as well as the mechanical aspects of how the camp operated. Transporting people is one of the most prominent aspects of this first part of the film where he gains much knowledge from the witnesses, train operators, former Nazi soldiers, and camp survivors, giving us a picture of the conditions and how that was accomplished. Next, Lanzmann tackles the industry of death and how that worked in both Treblinka and Auschwitz.

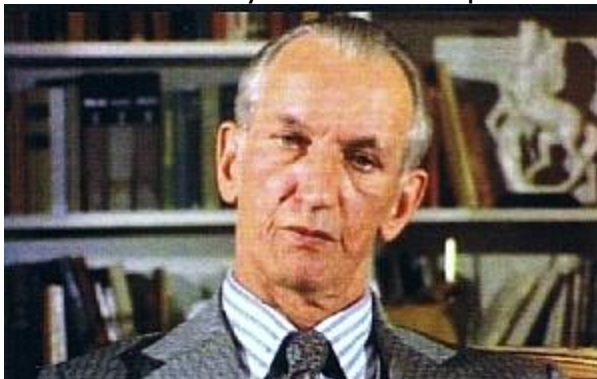


Then he starts to alternate this with interviews with many of the townspeople or other witnesses who are old enough to have lived through this time. This is one of the most fascinating and sadly too neglected socio-historical aspects of the Holocaust. How in good conscience could these individuals go on with their lives during all of this? How much did they know? Why did they do nothing to stop it? Answers are not pretty, but ones we should engage with. A mixture of racial/ethnic prejudice, backwards version of

Catholicism, and a basic lack of care for the Jews in Poland seem to be the strongest and most damning reasons. While these parts bring up issues of anti-Semitism and their connection to religion and culture that are without a doubt controversial, it does not mean we should shy away from or be able to discuss these true underpinnings that were not a primary cause of the Holocaust, but certainly a strong secondary cause. But this from a historical standpoint should not be surprise, from what historian, Raul Hilberg, one of the best interviewees in the film, states clearly. The propaganda, the prejudice, everything involved with making a society immune or even supportive of such a mass genocide in context of the Holocaust was not new. The Nazis took these things from religious texts and racist stories and legends passed down about the Jews; the only thing the Nazis invented was the means at which the industry of death was carried out and the very idea of extermination as an option to deal with "the problem of the Jews."

From here Lanzmann goes back to the industry and how things are manufactured and dealt with specifically in the camps, pushing even further with survivors and former Nazis alike to get an accurate picture of how this happened, step by step. This is an exceptionally disturbing portion of the film because it deals with the horrors that we have all heard happened in the camps. What underpins this horror is the fact that all these survivors (or most the survivors) to a certain extent were required to some part in the killing or disposal of their friends, family, and members of their ethnicity and religion, a fact I knew was true, but did not visualize it fully until seeing this film.

Finally, Lanzmann ends the film focusing on the resistance movements amongst the Jews, and the Warsaw Ghetto specifically. A good deal is dealt specifically with the Warsaw Uprising in the Ghetto, where Jews stood up to the Nazis and fought back, yet tragically to no avail. The ghetto itself is also described in great detail as a hellhole and a truly deplorable place. Truly, it's a representation of how brutal the Nazis could be even before they decided to ship Jews to the camps for extermination. This is



highlighted by a stirring interview of a man who was hired as a courier to report back to the outside world of the awful plight of the Jews in the ghetto. This interview was so powerful and informative that it sparked an entirely separate documentary.

So now 25 years after its formal release in 1985, what can we say about *Shoah* now?

For starters, from a technical and cinematic point, this is landmark documentary that has to be seen to be experienced. It demands from a filmic point of view to be studied by any who have an interest or want to make documentary cinema, especially for it's long form nature (a type of documentary that is

becoming all too rare nowadays). From a social and historical standpoint this film, released only four decades after the end of WWII, seems to be one of the first and strongest examples of wrestling what, why, and how the Holocaust happened and for my money this is truly THE Holocaust film. Yes, we have all seen the narrative films about the subject, we know and have read the history, but truly I think this film helped me understand fully on a grand scale what the Holocaust really was. Plus, the film does not deliver just an emotional punch, but an intellectual and poetic touch that is an all the more surprising and rewarding viewing experience. No writing or review can do such a powerful and informative document true justice, it simple needs to be seen.

Why this hasn't been shown on television and been available in every educational



institution in America and a part of the said curriculum of those institutions is baffling to me. Also, sadly the film's DVD has been out of print for some time, but hopefully with this new release from IFC Films it will guarantee a large re-release and new edition of DVD. As a final note, I know the task may be daunting, but I can't think of a more essential documentary that needs to be seen not just by history buffs, but also for everyone. If you can find a copy of this on DVD or VHS anywhere, watch it in parts or as a whole as soon as you can.

Video Source:

[youtube.com/watch?v=wV6mJ6T1oU0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV6mJ6T1oU0)

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