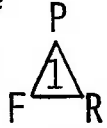




May Day '87: A few hours ago, I finished experiencing Claude Lanzmann's 9½-hour film "Shoah" (Hebrew, *annihilation as devastation, ruin, desolation, waste, pit*, from the verb *to make a din, to crash into ruins*--though the only *din* in "Shoah" is the tonic, unmusical tone uniting the segments, viz the cacophany of the death trains; the emphasis, in words but more in the dominance of silence over sound, is on the soundlessness of death &, in the depths of the human soul, death horror)....A Jew without formal training in religion just phoned to explode his horror & rage & to ask "Should we encourage people to experience the whole 9½ hours of obscenity & horror?" and I vigorously said "Oh yes!" This Thinksheet extends that "Oh yes!"

1. At first glance it would seem to be an obscenity to become philosophical about what CL refuses to call the Holocaust (a Greek word; the film is about the official murder of 6 million JEWS, so the Hebrew word is more appropriate). On second thought, would it not be obscene to neglect to use all ones powers, including the philosophic focusing thereof, in struggling to take in, to take into one's being, this supreme Nazi obscenity? So I do not apologize for this Thinksheet's intent and tone.

2. The event & its re-experiencing in the film & sequel (the viewer's response thereto)--all this is an instance of the triumph of passion over both faith & reason. In this case, the triumph of HORROR. In Roger Rosenblatt's interviews with CL, it's powerfully though indirectly clear that CL wants us to let happen to us what happened to him that resulted in his 11-year anguish, viz this triumph. The film is of course an artistic triumph, but its heart is the representation of CL's heart-experience of the triumph of horror over faith & reason. CL has the courage to LET horror triumph. He refuses to offer either glib or profound "reasons" (reasoning, reason). Equally he refuses Job's wife's advice to "curse God and die": thrice RR nudges him to antitheistic expressions, but he disclaims to do so, instead offering a reverential agnosticism positively stated. Eg, RR: "What did you learn?" CL, after a long pause: "I learned patience." RR: You said your camera spent much time on the natural beauty of the death camps environs as a way of speechlessly speaking of the silence of God; your patience, "Is that the same as God's silence? Is God patient?" CL, after an even longer pause: "I don't know...(another long pause)...I really don't know" (the last words of the last interview). Let that be a lesson to all who earn their living not with a camera but with their mouths (teachers, preachers, counselors, et al). Yes, it takes courage to break silence & witness to one's own convictions; but it takes another, & equally important courage, to keep silence in the presence of what words would only profane.

3. The wider context of the human condition here can be visually represented thus:

passion here I
eg rage, fall-
horror--all, F  R P  R P  F (1) is the situation described above. By
mean any overriding, dominating emotion--
ing in love, fear-anxiety, sorrow, joy,
in the etymological sense, "ecstatic,"

placing us "outside" the two life-orienting modes-moods, viz faith & reason (and thus being dis-orienting). Since we need both to become what we are, viz human beings, we should thank God for both orienting & disorienting experiences. The art of living might be put as the maximizing, in each situation & at each life-stage, of the human potential of orienting/disorienting experiences-&-responses....(2) is the normal set of the human soul-&-society. When pluralism weakens faith, society breaks down into a chaotic competition between passion (which means, for most humans most of the time, doing your thing) & reason (which gets coopted by bureaucrats who program holocausts actual &--nukes!--potential)....(3) is rationalism & its antihuman brood, subordinating feelings (including intuition & imagination) & faith (including respect for mystery).

4. What got me started on sec.3 was sec.xix of Sir Thos. Brown's RELIGIO

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MEDICI (AD/CE 1643): "As Reason is a Rebel unto Faith, so Passion unto Reason: As the Propositions of Faith seem absurd unto Reason, so the Theorems of Reason unto Passion, and both unto Reason." My three diagrams in sec.3 merely develop TB's triangular structure. (For my own thinking, I prefer the tetragonal structure, which adds imagination, the psyche in the narrow sense (including the dream world, the fantasy life, & intuition), to faith-reason-passion.)....CL approves the suicides in the death camps as a form of "resistance"; but hear also sec.xliv of TB: "Where life is more terrible than death, it is then the truest valor to dare to live." And see the bearing of this, sec.iv: "Every man (is) his own greatest enemy, and, as it were, his own Executioner." And, in the same sec., this: "No man can... condemn another, because indeed no man truly knows another. Further, no man can judge another, because no man knows himself."

5. Which brings me to CL's intelligent-generous attitude on who's to blame for the Holocaust. His is a work not of propaganda but of art: he calls us to experience, not to point the finger. The project underneath his art is very Jewish, very Christian, very human: honoring the dead through memorialization. The film is a service of memory, a memorial service; accordingly, its atmosphere is that of worship rather than that of vituperation. The film's title frame has, in addition to "Shoah," this: "I will give them an everlasting name.--Isaiah 56.5." "I," be it noted, is God and also CL: not to put too fine a point on it, "Shoah" is God speaking, a divine word, paradoxically mainly through sight & silence. CL lets the survivors on both sides speak for themselves as fully as he, the interviewer, can help them to do so. Not only does the interviewer not judge (but rather leaves the question to the viewer); he comes down on neither side of "the judgment of God" (ie God as judging Jews &/or Nazis, or any humans judging God). He is, & invites us to be, experiential rather than judgmental within the compass of the film. And he limits his preaching to warning that it's "already too late" when we fail to intervene against the first injustice: the first silence (1933, Hitler's first antijewish action) leads inevitably to the last silence (1945). He wants us "to make again the horrible journey" (as the dead want us to), "to accompany the dead," "to die with them" (and so participate in their "resurrection"). Any blaming-judging would disrupt the purity of this call & the impact of this film. In the original text, the last words are those of a Jewish fighter in Warsaw: "I am the last Jew. The morning will come, & then the Germans." In our world full of threatening horrors, who can not feel the trembling force of those words?

6. But the hermeneutics of suspicion asks us the question of omission: What's being left out of the film, & why? All of Hitler's atrocities are left out (except in part of a passing sentence), because CL has chosen to concentrate on what the Nazis did to the Jews. A legitimate artistic limitation, but he might have done something a bit more to protect himself against the charge of distortion. Eg, in the Chelmo sequence of gas trucks backing up to the front of the Catholic church full of Jews, he might have indicated that the Nazis seized the church for the purpose because it was the small town's largest structure & (though this is not known) possibly also because the action was symbolic of Nazi hatred of both Judaism and Christianity.

7. We have the right & duty to ask, as a dimension of critiquing the film, about its impact, its social sequel. Perhaps it will increase antijudaism: two Jews interviewed bitterly condemn Christianity, & the text leaves this alone. My guess is that it will increase antichristianism, as it had in the Jew who phoned me: "You could spend all your life & not succeed in justifying what your religion did!" There's the problem when passion rebels--revolts against faith & reason: If I call for fairness, I'm condemned as antijewish. I pray that the film's net effect will be positive, but....