One of the most notable aspects of Claude Lanzmann’s monumental film *Shoah* (1985), apart from its obsessive visual focus on the present-day sites of Holocaust atrocity, is the extraordinary multivocality that characterizes its soundtrack. Composed chiefly of the filmed interviews Lanzmann conducted with dozens of Holocaust-era witnesses, but also amplified by autobiographical utterances read aloud from letters and diaries, the film presents, over the course of over nine hours, an overwhelming polyphony of voices, each of which, in its own singular way, testifies to the experience of the Holocaust. On the level of cinematic experience, these many witnesses amass in choral accusation as if to give voice to a Polish landscape that itself remains resolutely mute about the murders of millions to which it was witness; as Micha Brumlik observes in his 1986 review in *Der Spiegel*,

> Die Poesie der Landschaft steht in striktem Gegensatz zu den Stimmen, die wir hören, und den Gesichtern, die wir sehen. Laute Stimmen, leise Stimmen, schluchzend, bittere und betont gleichmütige Stimmen. Sie berichten uns, während wir die Landschaft betrachten, was sich in ihr zugetragen hat. Millionenfacher, ausgekühlter, abgefeimter Mord. (192)

However, although the numerous witnesses function collectively to give shape to the events of the Holocaust – in particular, Lanzmann’s stated object of inquiry, the inner workings of the industrialized killing processes in the death camps – they do so from often radically different perspectives, namely those of the Jewish survivors, the non-Jewish German perpetrators and the non-Jewish Polish bystanders, three major groups that experienced the Holocaust in diametrically opposed ways. As Shoshana Felman argues in her powerful article about the role of witnessing in the film, these different subject positions have a cumulative metonymical effect but are in no way synonymous:

> «Because the testimony is unique and irreplaceable, the film is an exploration of the differences between heterogeneous points of view, between testimonial stances which can neither be assimilated into, nor subsumed by, one another» (207). Through these three major perspectives, which Felman identifies as not merely diverse but fundamentally incommensurate (207), *Shoah* attempts to find multiple entry points into an experience in the Holocaust to which no
voice can attest, namely the ordeal of those who died in the gas chambers. In this way, the film functions as what Sue Vice terms «the cinematic triangulation of a vanished people, and their last hours» (*Shoah* 77).

Although Lanzmann is able to achieve this triangular mapping of the Holocaust only by carefully presenting the event through the perspectives of these three major groups of actors, (relying for the greatest and most memorable part on the viewpoints of the survivors, especially those who found themselves in closest proximity to the death of the victims), critical attention has for the most part focused almost exclusively on the testimony of the survivors and the ways in which Lanzmann stages his interviews with them. In particular, the scenes featuring Abraham Bomba, who goes through the motions of giving a haircut in a Tel Aviv barber shop while he relates his experiences cutting the hair of the women about to be gassed in Treblinka, and Simon Srebnik, who stands among the Polish peasants in the village of Chelmno as they spew their anti-Semitic, trite understanding of what happened to their Jewish neighbors in the Holocaust, have been, to my mind, endlessly, almost obsessively analyzed.¹ This is of course understandable, given the stunning performative power of these scenes and their exemplary quality for critics who explore such issues as trauma, survivor testimony, and Lanzmann’s method of «reincarnation,» in which witnesses are induced to reenact performatively past traumas or attitudes during their interviews.² But striking in the critical reception of *Shoah* is the lack of attention given in the film to the testimonies of other survivors (in particular Richard Glazar and Rudolph Vrba), to some of the Polish bystanders, and to the former perpetrators. In particular, the latter group has been noticeably neglected by the scholarship on *Shoah*. Apart from discussions of the ethical issues raised by some of the interviews Lanzmann conducted with the German perpetrators (three of whom, Franz Suchomel, Franz Schalling and Walter Stier, were filmed without their knowledge and with a hidden camera) and brief references to particularly egregious moments in the scenes with Suchomel and Franz Grassler that attest to their «embarrassment, cowardliness or indifference» (Lichtner 169) with regard to their participation in the «Final Solution,» there have been no sustained analyses of the role that former perpetrators play in Lanzmann’s film.³

This curious dearth of critical attention – one might go so far to term it «avoidance» – to an important element of the film can likely be attributed to a number of factors. The majority of the English-language scholarship on *Shoah* has been written by either Anglo-American scholars of the Holocaust or scholars of French literature and film, who concentrate on issues in the film that are of particular interest to them, such as survivor trauma, Lanzmann’s
cinematic methodology and vocabulary, and the film’s place within the French documentary tradition. Moreover, the film’s extraordinarily complex linguistic composition makes it difficult (if not downright impossible) for any one critic to closely analyze all of the testimonies presented in the film. Lanzmann’s witnesses testify to their experiences in a number of languages (Yiddish, English, Polish, German, Hebrew and French), only some of which (English, German and French) are spoken by Lanzmann himself. For the interviews conducted in the languages not known to him, Lanzmann must rely on interpreters, and the cumbersome back-and-forth process of translation is generally included – in unedited form – in the film. Lanzmann’s own narration is conducted in French, as are the Holocaust-era letters that he reads aloud (which themselves have been translated from their original languages into French). Finally, the entire film is then subtitled for the language in which it is screened; in the English version, for example, all but those scenes conducted in English are subtitled. The result is an extremely complicated linguistic structure (survivor, memoirist and literary scholar Ruth Klüger – writing under what was, at the time, her married name, Angress – compares it to «the Babel of tongues that the camps often were» [254]), in which there are sometimes as many as two layers of linguistic translation and mediation. Most scholars who have written about the film in English are adept at perhaps one additional language (usually French) and must rely either on the interpreters in the film or the subtitles (both of which often present faulty, incomplete or otherwise problematic translations) for scenes conducted in other languages. Almost all of the English-language scholarship that addresses the role of the perpetrators in the film refers to the subtitles of interviews (whether in English or in French) rather than to the German in which the interviews were conducted. (A notable exception is an insightful review of the film by Angress, who comments on both the interviewees’ statements and Lanzmann’s agility in German.) Perhaps because most of the critics who have written in English about the film do not seem to be fluent in German, they have not brought the degree of adept analysis employed with the scenes featuring other witnesses to bear on the interviews with the perpetrators. This is of course a problem that extends to analysis of the scenes with other witnesses, particularly the bystanders, who with the exception of Jan Karski, give their testimony in Polish, but also the survivors, who speak a number of languages. With these scenes, as with those featuring the perpetrators, critics who are not facile in these languages must rely on translation and thus are at a disadvantage in their attempts to analyze these testimonies closely.

I suspect, however, that there is more to the critical neglect of the film’s perpetrators than a mere linguistic barrier, for if this were the case, one would
expect to see more close analysis of the perpetrators’ testimonies in the German-language reception and scholarship on Shoah, which, while significantly smaller in size than its English-language counterpart, has also concentrated chiefly on the scenes featuring survivors and has limited its discussion of the role of the perpetrators to Lanzmann’s performance in these scenes and the ethics of his practices. Rather, I believe that other factors are more likely operative. Dominick LaCapra has suggested as much in his assessment of Lanzmann’s methodology of incarnation, which he sees as performatively reenacting trauma in a sort of transferential relationship to the film’s survivor witnesses (and, in an even more intense way, to the absent but continually evoked victims): «The question is whether Lanzmann in his more absolutist gestures tends to confine performativity to acting-out and tends even to give way to a displaced, secular religiosity in which authenticity becomes tantamount to a movement beyond secondary witnessing to a full identification with the victim» («Lanzmann’s Shoah» 245). Lanzmann’s absolutism, which LaCapra defines as «his absolute refusal of the why question and of understanding» («Lanzmann’s Shoah» 245), thus results in obsessive attempts to conjure the extreme experience of those survivors who were firsthand witnesses to mass murder in order to relive it – cinematically at least – with them. LaCapra goes on to connect Lanzmann’s identification with the trauma of the victims and survivors to the film’s stance with regard to the perpetrators, which demonstrates a similarly «absolutist» attitude in its refusal to endorse any sort of understanding of their actions or motives:

Thus one has a crucial constellation that links positive, fully empathetic, transferential identification with the victim; absolute, noncomprehending distance from the perpetrator; a general refusal of the why question; obsessive, imaginary acting-out or reliving of the traumatic past; the equation of the ›real‹ with holes in reality; and a hallucinatory reincarnation of the past in details of the present without appeal to archives. («Lanzmann’s Shoah» 265).

LaCapra implies here that Shoah, in its aesthetic approach and its historical methodology, while opening up avenues to full identification with the victims, erects a sort of barrier to the perpetrators and their experience, even as it includes and to a certain extent even gives prominence to their testimony. By inserting such a barrier that hinders transferential identification, the film is able on the one hand to present the testimony of the perpetrators, which is critical for Lanzmann’s attempt to reconstruct the machinery of death and the last moments of its victims, yet on the other hand it can control the viewers’ connection to these perpetrator witnesses by foreclosing any attempt to understand their motives, memories and mindset – let alone to identify with
them. As Matthew Boswell argues, rather than provoking its viewers to consider the perpetrators and their actions historically and psychologically and thus, theoretically at least, within the dimensions of possible human subjectivity and agency, *Shoah* encourages its audience to relegate them (in particular, the Treblinka camp guard Franz Suchomel) to the realm of utter incomprehensibility:

> For while Lanzmann’s methodology seems flagrantly provocative and impious, there remains a total refusal to see any human continuity between Nazi criminals and our lives in the present. Suchomel is almost a caricature of the villainous Nazi, the black band that streaks over his eyes on the clandestine film marking him out as wholly ‘other,’ with no relationship to ourselves and no insight into his own actions. (157)

With its refusal to psychologize the perpetrators or investigate their actions as stemming from explicable attitudes, ideologies or motivations, *Shoah* presents them as abstract, recondite, one-dimensional and resistant to any sort of identification or understanding. In short, they function in the film as the negative principle in what LaCapra identifies as an absolutist schema of «displaced secular religiosiity» («Lanzmann’s *Shoah*» 236) that figures the Holocaust as an ineffable, sacred, even mythical event and thus removes it to a space outside human history, accountability and agency.

LaCapra goes on to show how Lanzmann’s absolutist method is reproduced by critical analyses of the film, most notably that of Shoshana Felman, which, as he argues, «might almost be seen as the authorized reading of *Shoah*» («Lanzmann’s *Shoah*» 245). According to LaCapra, Felman’s analysis mirrors Lanzmann’s method in its performative acting-out (he compares the extreme length of her essay and its obsessive, «interminable repetition compulsion» [«Lanzmann’s *Shoah*» 249] with that of the film) and its extreme identification with the victims: «Felman’s approach to *Shoah* is one of celebratory participation based on empathy or positive transference undisturbed by critical judgment» («Lanzmann’s *Shoah*» 246). Although LaCapra does not identify in Felman the flip side of the positive transference he finds in the film itself, namely an absolutist refusal to enter into the testimony of the perpetrators in the same manner in which viewers are encouraged to do with that of the survivors (he calls this «the film’s compulsive power over the empathetic viewer» [«Lanzmann’s *Shoah*» 250]), I do believe that such a negative transference is operable in at least some of the critical reception of Lanzmann’s film that addresses (however briefly) the depiction of the perpetrators. In general, much of the scholarship follows Lanzmann’s own approach to the perpetrators, stressing their opaqueness and their resistance to conventional structures of comprehensibility and representa-
tion, particularly with regard to Suchomel, whom critics have described as «normal yet inhuman» (Saxton 55), «alien» (Felman 274), and «clinical[ly] detach[ed]» and «emotionless» (Jacobowitz 14), but also in reference to Stier, a former bureaucrat for the Deutsche Reichsbahn, whom David Denby calls «ineffable» (76). When the attitudes of the perpetrators represented in the film are considered in the scholarly literature, their characterization often seems to reflect critics’ ideas about what the former perpetrators are feeling, beliefs that rely less on the perpetrators’ statements or even their own behavior during the interviews and more on what the critics project onto these interviews. Several critics maintain that the former perpetrators feel nostalgic about their roles in the «Final Solution»; according to Timothy Garton Ash, «the executioners bask in the happy memories of Heimat» (145; referencing here Edgar Reitz’s 1984 film Heimat, which offered a depiction of everyday German life in the Third Reich but referred to the Holocaust only obliquely). Yet such assertions are called into question by the perpetrators’ testimony and their manner during the interviews, which range from obstinate muteness about the past in the case of Josef Oberhauser to the nervous and defensive behavior of Franz Grassler, who in the first segment shown of Lanzmann’s interview with him attributes his difficulty recalling his wartime service to the unhappy nature of the memories: «Eindeutig, daß der Mensch schlechte Zeiten – Gott sei Dank! – leichter vergißt als schöne Erinnerungen. Die sind verdrängt, net» (DVD disc 4, chapter 8; German text of the film 246). (Arguments about the perpetrators’ ostensibly happy relationship to their Holocaust past are made particularly with regard to Suchomel, who of all the perpetrators interviewed in the film seems the most comfortable about talking about his experiences at Treblinka; Giacomo Lichtner asserts that Suchomel «obviously enjoys the memory of those days» [169]; while Keith Moser writes that «The former officer’s enthusiasm as he is reliving his past «glory» disturbs both Lanzmann and the viewer» [76]). Yet, as I shall argue later in this essay, Suchomel’s openness about his role in the death camp and his willingness to speak to Lanzmann about the minute details of the processes of murder reflect not happy, nostalgic memories of the past but rather a self-important understanding of his didactic role with regard to Lanzmann.) Critics’ projections about the perpetrators’ attitudes during their interviews are undoubtedly fueled by the myriad strategies of evasion, compensation, justification, circumlocution, attenuation, generalization, compartmentalization and trivialization employed by these witnesses and the rare (or – more prevalently – wholly absent) moments of open acknowledgement of their role in the Holocaust, which may appear initially to reflect «minds at peace» (Angress 258) or at least a sense of detached indifference to shocking details.
that emerge in their testimonies. Such strategies, however, are rather indicative of intricate psychological processes on the part of the perpetrators that complicate such simplistic characterizations. The critical tendency to down-play the more complex elements of Shoah’s representation of the perpetrators and to project a monolithic interpretation of their relationship to their past is evidence, to my mind, of the same sort of absolutist attitude that LaCapra identifies in Shoah itself, namely the relegation of the perpetrators to the ahistorical, almost mythical realm of incomprehensible evil that bars identification with and indeed even discourages any sustained look – and with the word «look» I mean here to evoke attendant visual and cinematic associations – at the perpetrators themselves. This categorical refusal to regard (in both senses of viewing and understanding) is made possible, as Shoshana Felman argues in her analysis of the performative role of seeing in the film’s presentation of witnessing, by the visual barriers erected in the secretly filmed encounters with the perpetrators: «In the blurry images of faces taken by a secret camera that has to shoot through a variety of walls and screens, the film makes us see concretely, by the compromise it unavoidably inflicts upon our act of seeing, (which, of necessity, becomes materially an act of seeing through), how the Holocaust was a historical assault on seeing and how, even today, the perpetrators are still by and large invisible» (209). The tendency of some critics of Shoah to associate the perpetrators with an abstract notion of evil and their refusal to regard them with the same sort of attentive meditation they afford the survivor witnesses are reflected, for example, in Margaret Olin’s reaction to the ways in which the film stages Lanzmann’s encounter with Suchomel:

When we reach the secret interview in Germany with the former camp guard Franz Suchomel, it is as though we have traversed several outer circles of Hell and have reached the center. Indeed, in discussing the film, Lanzmann has used the term circles of Hell to describe the movement of his narration. We cannot even look at Suchomel directly: like the sight of a solar eclipse, the sight of him necessitates precautions. We see him on a video monitor via the technical virtuosity of two cameramen in a van parked outside an apartment building. (3)

Olin’s comparison of Suchomel with a solar eclipse that one may behold only indirectly – that is, through the mediation of some sort of filter, in this case the filter provided by the shot of Suchomel being filmed secretly shown to the viewer on the van’s monitor, which receives the transmitted video footage – is an example, in my opinion, of the critical inability or unwillingness to see the perpetrators, a refusal to regard that the film itself encourages with its staging of them. Such critical disregard often translates as a lack of attention to the particulars of the perpetrators, which can be seen as a further manifestation of
the tendency to look away. Daniel Listoe’s article, for example, twice mentions the film’s scenes with Franz Grassler – and twice misspells Grassler’s name, with two different spellings («Grasier» [56]; «Glasser» [64]). Lanzmann himself displays a similar tendency toward revealing error in his discussion of the perpetrators in the seminar he held on Shoah at Yale University, in which he describes his encounter with «the man of the German railroads,» clearly a reference to the former Reichsbahn official Walter Stier, whom he then goes on to identify as «Suchomel» («Seminar with Claude Lanzmann» 96). Such a conflation is at odds with Lanzmann’s otherwise insistent requirement for exacting historical detail: «I prefer that we avoid, if possible, generalities. Because I have spent my whole life fighting generalities and I think that Shoah is a fight against generalities» («Seminar with Claude Lanzmann» 82).

The scholarship on Shoah has thus not adequately considered the representation of the perpetrators in the film, looking away when they appear on the screen or viewing them from behind the comfortable filter of an absolutist methodology that constructs them as one-dimensional or abstract figures. Critics, who, as Kathryn Robson argues, have accepted «Lanzmann’s own descriptions of his film unquestioningly, taking Lanzmann himself to be in a privileged position as witness to the Holocaust» (167), have assumed Lanzmann’s aesthetic and ethical approach as well, which holds that there is «an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding» the Holocaust and that the only possible attitude is to assume the condition of «blindness,» to put on «blinders» in order to be able to behold an event that «is literally blinding» («Hier ist kein Warum» 51). In their willed blindness to the depiction of the perpetrators in Shoah, however, critics have conformed to a stance that is characteristic of literary and cultural scholarship on the Holocaust in general (although not, it must be stressed, of historical scholarship, which has been criticized for focusing too much on the perspective of the perpetrators). As I have previously argued, despite the fact that there are a great number of literary and filmic representations of Nazi perpetrators in various national literatures and cinemas, there has been astonishingly little scholarship that addresses how these representations function or how they contribute to a larger cultural understanding of the complex role that perpetrators play both historically and culturally («Theorizing the Perpetrator» 212–14). Critics’ blindness to the perpetrators in Shoah thus reflects a greater blind spot in cultural analyses of the Holocaust and has important ethical implications. For one thing, since perpetrators play such a prominent role in the film, it is, in my opinion, grossly negligent to ignore, downplay or make blanket assumptions about their presence. Moreover, as LaCapra points out, given that processes of
identification or transference are an inevitable outcome of viewing or interpreting the film, it is important to be aware of how they function differently with regard to the perpetrators than they do with regard to the survivor-witnesses:

With respect to perpetrators, one may justifiably resist empathy in the sense of feeling or understanding that may serve to validate or excuse certain acts. In fact one may feel antipathy or hatred. But one may nonetheless argue that one should recognize and imaginatively apprehend that certain forms of behavior (that of the Einsatzgruppen or of camp guards, for example) may be possible for oneself in certain circumstances, however much the events in question beggar the imagination. One may even suggest that recognition is necessary for being better able to resist even reduced analogues of such behavior as they present themselves as possibilities in one’s own life. («Holocaust Testimonies» 220–21)

LaCapra reminds us here that a refusal to regard the perpetrators in *Shoah* may reflect our condemnation of their crimes and our solidarity with their victims. At the same time, however, such unwillingness to «imaginatively apprehend» the perpetrators’ experience can also imply that the perpetrators were not human agents who found themselves in very human – albeit extreme – situations in which they were forced to make ethical decisions, but rather mythically evil figures who were fated to fulfill their demonic destiny. By aligning ourselves so closely with the victims, we are thus able to distance ourselves from the human qualities we share with the perpetrators. For this reason, as I have argued, «it is important to remember that, save for a few exceptions, such as Ruth Klüger or Elie Wiesel, we as critics belong to neither the world of perpetrators nor that of the victims and survivors. By ignoring the perspectives of the one group, we imply that we somehow belong to the other, and this kind of identification with the victims is, at its extreme, as dangerous to our inquiry as identification with the perpetrators might be» («Theorizing the Perpetrator» 214). It is thus time for the critical discourse on *Shoah* to take off the blinkers that Lanzmann has imposed on it and to begin to consider the perpetrators represented in the film in a sustained way. After all, as LaCapra reminds us, «One need not always agree with Lanzmann’s interpretations concerning the nature of his film, and one may even see his own role in it as at times exceeding his self-understanding» («Lanzmann’s *Shoah*» 233). My intent with this essay is to follow LaCapra’s lead and «disengage the film from [Lanzmann’s] view of it» («Lanzmann’s *Shoah*» 233) in order to begin to reframe the discussion of the ways in which the perpetrators figure in *Shoah*, a project that in my opinion is long overdue. My goal is not to provide an exhaustive or authoritative reading of the scenes that feature interviews with perpetrators; for one thing, the sheer mass of
material to be interpreted in the film on the one hand and the parameters of the scholarly article on the other prohibit such an extensive undertaking. My aim is rather to draw critical attention to these scenes so that we may begin to closely look at – and perhaps even more important, listen to – the complex interactions staged in them. In this way, I hope to thus provoke a new round of discussion on Shoah that demonstrates the richness of its inquiry.

While I agree with LaCapra’s and Boswell’s assertions that Lanzmann, with his interview strategy, editing and structure of the mise-en-scène, constructs a representation of the perpetrators that bars or is at least resistant to attempts to understand their psychology, motivations and self-understanding, I argue here that Shoah offers a much more complex picture of the perpetrators than Lanzmann perhaps envisioned or that is maintained by his absolutist methodology. In other words, as I will demonstrate in brief readings of scenes with Grassler, Stier and Suchomel, the film presents moments that are to a certain extent at odds with its general «schematic» (Todorov 274) attitude with regard to perpetrators, a phenomenon that represents, as I see it, a breakdown of Lanzmann’s absolutist stance on the level of filmic practice. As I will demonstrate, the barrier or filter I posited earlier is maintained throughout these interviews, but at moments it proves itself to be somewhat porous, allowing for a more differentiated depiction of the perpetrators than claimed by most of the scholarship. However, as I will also argue, Lanzmann’s absolutist filter is punctured not so much visually, with the film’s mise-en-scène (which is perhaps why critics have remained blind to it), but rather on its linguistic level with the verbal exchanges between Lanzmann and his interviewees. These exchanges betray above all the perpetrators’ fraught or at least ambivalent relationship to their past and the difficulties they experience trying to integrate a narrative of their own participation in violence into their memory and life story. Moreover, the deep subject of Shoah is the problem of knowledge on many levels – the knowledge the victims purportedly had (or didn’t have) about the death that awaited them, the shocking realization on the part of the survivors of what was happening around them then (an awareness the Treblinka survivor Richard Glazar terms «eine fürchterliche Erkenntnis» [DVD disc 3, chapter 14; German text of the film 203]) and the traumatic knowledge they carry now, and the perpetrators’ construction of an elaborate system of deception that prevented their victims from knowing until it was too late. As I will demonstrate, the scenes with Grassler, Suchomel and Stier also grapple with the problem of knowledge, revealing a complex dynamic that revolves around the refusal to know, the displacement of what one knows but will not acknowledge, and the issue of authoritative knowledge.
Before I begin to look at the film’s scenes with the three former perpetrators, I’d like to briefly discuss the crucial role played by Claude Lanzmann himself in *Shoah*. As LaCapra implies, the interviews included in the film, whether with survivor, perpetrator or bystander, are in some ways as much about Lanzmann and his own transferential relationship to the interviewees as they are about the various «characters» (Lanzmann’s own word for the people who testify in the film [Chevie and Le Roux 44]) and their experience of the Holocaust. After all, as Kathryn Robson reminds us, «The interviewees’ testimonies are clearly and explicitly filtered through Lanzmann’s own viewpoint and agenda» (167). Lanzmann thus situates himself as one of the characters in his own film, and accordingly he quite consciously stages his performance in each interview. This strategy of performative production is, as Sue Vice claims (*Shoah* 66), particularly operative in the interviews with the former perpetrators; Lanzmann even goes so far as to create an alternate persona in his encounter with Walter Stier, presenting himself to the former Reichsbahn official as the French historian «Dr. Sorel.» Moreover, in the interviews with all five perpetrators in the film, Lanzmann is immediate as an active interlocutor (or even as an «interrogator,» as has been asserted by Listoe [56], LaCapra [«Lanzmann’s *Shoah*» 265], Boswell [156], and Joshua Hirsch [78]); in the scenes with Suchomel, Stier, Schalling and Oberhauser, the first three of which were filmed secretly with a camera operated remotely, he appears on-screen as part of the *mise-en-scène*. (Grassler is the only one of the five who agreed to speak about his experiences in the «Final Solution» on camera. As with the interviews with many of the survivors, the camera remains trained on Grassler’s face during the entire interview; we experience Lanzmann only aurally through his voice off-screen.) Because Lanzmann is materially present and active – whether just vocally or bodily as well – in all of the scenes with the former perpetrators, he plays a particularly interpositional role that, in contrast to some of the scenes with the survivors in which Lanzmann rarely intervenes (I’m thinking here of Filip Müller’s long monologues, for example), most forcefully makes clear his emphatically non-objective role in the film.

One of the most noticeable aspects of Lanzmann’s method of interviewing the former perpetrators is his tenacious, often aggressive behavior, which has been commented on by a number of critics; according to Lichtner, «There is more than a small element of violence in Lanzmann’s insistent, forceful, provocative, prodding. His approach is violent not just towards the witness but the audience as well, which would surely like to rebel against his intransigence» (167). But perhaps even more striking is the performance he creates with his linguistic strategies. This is first and foremost evident in the
ways in which Lanzmann employs German, the language spoken in all of the interviews with the former perpetrators. Although Lanzmann is not a native speaker of German, he is able to utilize the language to his advantage in his encounters with the perpetrators by self-consciously manipulating his linguistic otherness, which is quite evident to viewers fluent in German. Lanzmann’s speech in German is marked by a pronounced French accent and contains numerous errors in syntax, word order, and stress patterns, all of which contribute to his appearance in the interviews as an outsider to the German language and thus to German perspectives on the war and the Holocaust. Gabriela Stoicea claims that Lanzmann has «obvious difficulties in speaking German» (45), but I argue that this is precisely the effect that Lanzmann attempts to produce in his interviews and one that allows him, paradoxically, a certain degree of leverage in his interactions with his German counterparts. Lanzmann’s experience with the German language is perhaps more extensive than his performance in the film would indicate; he spent the years from 1947 to 1950 in Germany, first as a philosophy student at the Universität Tübingen, then as a lecturer of philosophy and literature at the Freie Universität Berlin. His language skills in German were thus not only well developed by the time he began to interview the German witnesses in the late 1970s, they were also honed in such a way that granted Lanzmann a certain facility in the expression and comprehension of sophisticated, abstract ideas. His faulty employment of German in the film is thus likely attributable to factors other than lack of fluency. Ruth Angress writes that «Lanzmann speaks German fluently and with complete disregard to the finer as well as the coarser points of grammar, as if the language merited only contempt» (255). While Angress’s suspicion about Lanzmann’s contempt for the language of the perpetrators is undoubtedly an operative factor in his linguistic performance in the film, I believe that a more likely explanation is that he self-consciously stages his language ability in a posture of naïveté and feigned ignorance. With his imperfect language skills, he is able to construct a relationship of power in the interviews that disguises or redirects the impact of his often transgressive questions and allows his interlocutors to feel superior in both their intelligence and their sophisticated ability to express themselves. By provoking these heightened feelings of superiority on the part of his interviewees, he is able to draw particular attitudes out of them that would perhaps otherwise be unavailable. As Felman asserts with regard to his method of interviewing,

Lanzmann’s tour de force as an interviewer is to elicit from the witness […] a testimony which is inadvertently no longer in the control or the possession of its speaker. As a solicitor and an assembler of testimonies, in his function as a questioner
but mainly, in his function as a listener (as the bearer of a narrative of listening), Lanzmann’s performance is to elicit testimony which exceeds the testifier’s own awareness, to bring forth a complexity of truth which, paradoxically, is not available as such to the very speaker who pronounces it. As a listener, Lanzmann endows the interlocutor with speech. It is in this way that he helps both the survivors and the perpetrators to overcome their (very different kind of) silence. (263)

Felman’s claim is made with regard to Lanzmann’s role as a listening witness to the interviewees’ testimony, but I believe that one could make the same case for his role as a speaker in the film as well, particularly in the interviews with the German perpetrators. His staged speech deficiencies are vital not only for his performance in the role of the ignorant Frenchman who comes to the interviewees seeking to learn about the war, but also for the perpetrators’ assumption of the role of knowledgeable educator who transmits an authoritative narrative about the wartime years (a posture adopted in particular, as I shall argue, by Suchomel). Lanzmann makes exactly this point in a recent interview with the German journalist Max Dax:

Um einen Nazi reden zu lassen, stottern Sie besser, so kann er Ihnen mit den gesuchten Worten aushelfen und Ihnen diese bei der Gelegenheit gleich auch noch ausführlich erklären. Wenn Sie so wollen, war dies eine Methode, die ich angewandt habe. Mit einem perfekten Deutsch hätte ich nie Aussagen jener Qualität von den Tätern bekommen, wie wir sie in Shoah zu sehen und zu hören bekommen. (285)

Through his feigned incompetence in German, Lanzmann is thus able to interrupt the perpetrators’ carefully rehearsed narratives and induce them to reveal, through their gestures of explanation and education, information about their past and present attitudes that was not intended for disclosure.10

Lanzmann further employs the linguistic strategy of repetition to great performative effect in his interviews with former perpetrators, in particular with Suchomel. In these scenes, in addition to posing questions, he responds to the witnesses’ statements by repeating words they have just uttered, which gives a sort of echo effect (albeit in a pronounced French accent) to the perpetrators’ testimony. These repetitions are not merely reactions to the witnesses’ words; according to Felman, they serve a particular purpose in the interviews: «The function of the echo – in the very resonance of its amplification – is itself inquisitive, and not simply repetitive» (221). Lanzmann’s repetition of his interlocutors’ words is thus intended to elicit more information from the interviewees and in this way forms part of the dialogical interchange between interviewer and interviewee. However, these repetitions, which are phrased as questions, also punctuate particularly important phrases in the witnesses’ testimonies; by this method, Lanzmann highlights discursively the language the perpetrators use to describe their experience. In
the interview with Suchomel, for example, Lanzmann queries about the conditions at Treblinka when Suchomel arrived:

Lanzmann: Und wie war Treblinka? Wie war Treblinka in dieser Zeit?
Suchomel: Ja. Treblinka war damals im Hochbetrieb.
Lanzmann: Hochbetrieb?
Suchomel: Hochbetrieb. (DVD disc 1, chapter 55; German text of the film 78, altered to reflect Lanzmann’s actual syntax)

In a scene that follows, a similar exchange occurs, when Suchomel gives Lanzmann his definition of Treblinka:

Suchomel: Treblinka war ein zwar primitives, aber gut funktionierendes Fließband des Todes.
Lanzmann: Fließband?
Suchomel: . . . des Todes. Verstehen Sie?
Lanzmann: Ja, ja. Aber primitiv.
Suchomel: Primitiv. Zwar primitiv, aber gut funktionierendes Fließband des Todes. (DVD disc 2, chapter 1; German text of the film 91)

In both these examples, Lanzmann picks up on Suchomel’s use of the language of industrial production to describe the process of murder in Treblinka. His echo of particular words in Suchomel’s testimony emphasizes the ways in which Suchomel frames his narrative with this vocabulary, revealing the extent to which he has distanced himself from his participation in mass murder by reducing it to the impersonal character of the factory assembly line. Lanzmann employs this strategy throughout the interviews to identify moments in which the former perpetrators employ particular National Socialist euphemisms, often unconsciously or without irony. By echoing this terminology in particular, he highlights for his audience the ways in which this language continues to structure the perpetrators’ ideological framework and their narratives about the past.

I’d like to begin my analysis of the scenes with three of the perpetrators in Shoah by listening to the one scene from Lanzmann’s covertly filmed interview with the former railway bureaucrat Walter Stier, which is placed in the second half of the film (DVD disc 3, chapter 10). Stier, whom Lanzmann calls «one of the most despicable Nazis to appear in Shoah» (The Patagonian Hare 457), gives perhaps what is historically speaking the most useless testimony in the film, for he can (or will) tell us almost nothing about the genocide of the Jews that occurred in the death camps near Krakow and Warsaw, the cities where he was posted during the war—or at least not once he realizes the nature of Lanzmann’s interest in his wartime activities. At the beginning of the interview, when Lanzmann asks him seemingly innocuous questions about how excursion trains are ordered and paid for (then and now),
Stier is forthcoming about the organization of «Sonderzüge.» Although Stier at first does not seem to grasp the aim of Lanzmann’s query, we as viewers, after having watched long sequences of moving trains and heard testimonies from multiple perspectives about the horrific train journeys that brought the victims to the death camps, suspect the ultimate target of Lanzmann’s interest, which is not the wartime administration of holiday excursions for Germans but that of the trains that deported Europe’s Jews. However, once Stier catches on to the true object of the questions («Ich weiß schon, worauf Sie hinauswollen» [German text of the film 188]), his expert knowledge about the various ways in which the Reichsbahn organized group excursions is suddenly replaced with an insistence on a lack of knowledge («Das haben wir ja nicht gewußt» [German text of the film 188]). Stier claims not to have known about the people whom the many special trains contained («Als wir schon selber auf der Flucht waren von Warschau, da haben wir gehört, daß das Juden gewesen sein sollen, oder Verbrecher und dergleichen» [German text of the film 188]) or what happened in the places – Treblinka, Belzec, Auschwitz – to which he directed the trains. His interview presents a model case of evasion in the film; only Oberhauser, who refuses categorically to answer Lanzmann’s questions, claiming «Ich möchte nicht. Ich hab meinen Grund» (DVD disc 2, chapter 2; German text of the film 92), surpasses Stier’s prevarication, which takes a variety of forms. Stier claims that, because he never saw a train («Ich konnte vor lauter Arbeit von meinem Schreibtisch gar nicht fort» [German text of the film 186]), he only learned about the nature of the innumerable «special excursions» toward the end of the war, when he himself was «auf der Flucht» and could thus, in his mind at least, be regarded as one of the war’s many undifferentiated victims. Moreover, his profession to have first learned about the nature of the camps in late 1944, when the Aktion Reinhard program in which as many as two million European Jews had been exterminated at Treblinka, Sobibor, Chelmno and Belzec had long since been suspended, is significant; he effectively testifies here that his knowledge of the crime was obtained only well after it had been committed, not during the time in which his actions as a bureaucrat contributed to it, which would make him at worst an accessory after that fact. Even so, however, the knowledge that Stier admits to have had in late 1944 is at best partial; he claims he heard only that «Jews or criminals and the like» were sent to concentration camps, «und wer nicht ganz gesund sei, der würde das wahrscheinlich nicht überleben» (German text of the film 191), implying that the Jewish victims had, like «Verbrecher und dergleichen,» done something to deserve their internment and that those not ill or weak could expect to survive. Maintaining throughout the interview his total ignorance during the entire period of the Aktion Reinhard operation (an
absence of awareness that, also throughout, he asserts in the first-person plural, displacing not only his lack of knowledge but also any culpability he feels Lanzmann is insinuating onto a collective «wir» that is never fully defined), Stier claims that he and his colleagues had absolutely no idea—«keine Spur»—what was happening with the trainloads of people delivered daily to locations only a short distance away. Stier’s phrase «keine Spur,» which he employs twice (German text of the film 191, 192), resonates with the viewer, for Lanzmann devotes the first hour of Shoah to documenting, through the testimonies of various Sonderkommando workers and Polish witnesses, how the Nazis attempted to erase the physical traces of the nature and scope of the industrial murder of millions in the death camps of Aktion Reinhard, for example by planting trees, as Jan Piwonski tells us, «to camouflage all the traces» of murder at Sobibor (DVD disc 1, chapter 9; English text of the film 6). Stier’s use of the words «keine Spur» reveals the extent to which, in his own act of linguistic camouflage, he actively covers over the traces of his awareness of the raison d’être of his incessant work («Wir haben doch Tag und Nacht gearbeitet» [German text of the film 186]) in occupied Poland. As the historian Raul Hilberg argues in the next scene, when he examines with Lanzmann a train order much like one that Stier would have prepared, such linguistic concealment allowed the perpetrators to deny to themselves and to the world the nature of the crimes they committed in plain sight and was essential to their ability to function during the Holocaust: «And the key to the entire operation from the psychological standpoint was never to utter the words that would be appropriate to the action being taken. Say nothing; do these things; do not describe them» (DVD disc 3, chapter 11; English text of the film 129). As with the measures to erase the physical traces of mass murder painstakingly undertaken by the Nazis, Stier’s method of linguistic erasure allows him to claim an innocence that denotes both a supposed absence of knowledge and the total emancipation from culpability that accompanies such ignorance.

However, in a film devoted to carefully and methodically uncovering the traces of evidence of the crime, especially those buried in the bureaucratic euphemisms of the Third Reich, it is not surprising that Lanzmann is able to reveal similar traces not only of Stier’s role in the Final Solution, but also, perhaps more importantly, of Stier’s tacit or even unconscious acknowledgement of that role, which Stier strives so diligently to keep from sight. As Lanzmann intensifies the interview with a string of questions that tenaciously revolve around the question of what Stier did or didn’t know («Haben Sie gewußt,» «Wußten Sie,» «Sie haben gar nicht gewußt?» [German text of the film 189]), Stier responds with a shocked «Ach, um Gottes willen, nein!» [German text of the film 189], a phrase he repeats later in the interview
Lanzmann: Sie waren ein Schreibtisch...

Stier: Ich war ein Schreibtisch...

Lanzmann: Mann...


Lanzmann: Ja. Natürlich. (German text of the film 190, revised to reflect the actual dialogue in the film)

Although this exchange is short, it represents a profoundly revealing moment in the interview. The English subtitle of this part of the dialogue has Stier claiming that he «was strictly a bureaucrat» (English text of the film 126), but this translation misses the historical import and rich irony of Lanzmann’s suggestion and Stier’s response. Lanzmann, who spent years reading about and researching the Holocaust before he began filming, is well aware of the idea of the «Schreibtischtäter,» the desk murderer (or, more precisely, desk perpetrator), a concept that in the late1960s became part of the lexicon of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, referring to those who administratively organized the massive bureaucratic undertaking of the extermination of the European Jews rather than physically committing acts of murder themselves. Lanzmann subtly but provocatively inserts the first part of the word in his dialogue, pausing at the end to evoke but not pronounce the second part of the compound noun, i.e. «Täter.» In this way, he encourages his audience to silently complete the word for him. Stier affirmatively repeats Lanzmann’s statement in the first person, pausing as well to find an appropriate end to the compound noun. These two iterations of the word «Schreibtisch» in quick succession (which follow Stier’s two mentions of his desk previously in the interview) make clear the nature of Stier’s role in the events about which Lanzmann is asking, but whereas for Lanzmann the word refers to the issue of Stier’s organizational culpability in the Holocaust, in which he participated remotely in murder but was able to keep his hands (and obviously his conscience as well) clean, for Stier the word signifies his lack of knowledge about the destination of the trains and therefore his innocence; he claims he was too busy to look up from his desk to see what was going on around him. Yet, within the space of this exchange, the word «Täter» hangs virtually in the
air between the two men, unspoken but nevertheless powerfully present. Lanzmann brings apparent closure to the exchange by finishing the compound noun with «Mann,» a word that Stier immediately repeats and then reemphasizes with a modifier: «Reiner Schreibtischmann.» One might perhaps object that Lanzmann is too quick here to solve the subtle ambiguity of the situation by providing an innocuous ending to the word, thereby letting Stier off the hook, but I argue that Lanzmann has pushed the association as far as he can without actually coming out and saying the word «Schreibtischtäter,» which might be counterproductive for his interview and even potentially place him in a dangerous situation. (And indeed, as Lanzmann describes in his memoir *The Patagonian Hare*, he encountered several frightening moments in his secret filming of perpetrators; at one point, he was discovered and severely beaten by an interviewee’s grown sons [457–64].) Moreover, Lanzmann’s suggestion of the word «Mann» to complete the compound does not ultimately provide resolution to the ambiguity evoked previously, for, unlike «Schreibtischtäter,» «Schreibtischmann» is a provisional compound invented by Lanzmann on the spot and not an actual concept in the German language. In the context of the interview, then, «Schreibtischmann» thus carries the trace, the «Spur,» of its silent but subtly invoked counterpart, «Schreibtischtäter.» Stier, in an attempt to find a way out of Lanzmann’s insinuations about his knowledge at the time and thus his culpability, reinscribes himself, on the level of language and for the listener, in them. Lanzmann’s achievement in this scene, as with other interviews in which he provokes his witnesses to reenact the past performatively, lies in trapping Stier into a tacit acknowledgement of his actual role in the Holocaust, one that he outwardly denies.

Lanzmann’s interview with Franz Grassler, Deputy to the Nazi Commissioner of the Warsaw Ghetto during the period prior to and during the mass deportations to Treblinka, is, to my mind, the most compelling of all of Lanzmann’s encounters with the perpetrators and one that features prominently in the final hours of *Shoah*. Given that Lanzmann excluded interviews with several additional perpetrators from the final cut of the film, it is surprising that he spends so much time focusing on Grassler. Yet, this one interview is singular in many ways; for one, Grassler, unlike the other perpetrators in the film, agreed to allow the interview to be filmed; the context of his statements is thus very different from that of Suchomel, who believed he was being audiotaped rather than filmed, Stier and Schalling, who were filmed without their knowledge, and Oberhauser, who knew he was being filmed but refused to engage in a proper interview. Moreover, despite his obvious discomfort with many of Lanzmann’s questions and insinuations, Grassler
appears to be at least partially willing to discuss his experience overseeing and administering the Warsaw Ghetto. While his own narrative about the period is largely at odds with the picture that Lanzmann draws for him, his denial is not total, as is Stier’s; nor is he mutely hostile to Lanzmann’s questioning, like Oberhauser. Rather, in these scenes Grassler attempts (and by all appearances his endeavor is largely sincere) to grapple with the historical facts that Lanzmann presents to him in light of his own memory of the events and to integrate these two disparate ways of understanding the past into his own self-image. As I will argue in my reading of particular moments in the interview, the interaction between Lanzmann and Grassler is extraordinarily intricate and multilayered, demonstrating a complex and ambivalent struggle between competing narratives that will not—and to all intents and purposes cannot—be resolved.

Grassler’s interview is divided into five scenes that alternate with scenes featuring Lanzmann’s interview with Raul Hilberg, who reads from and discusses the diary of Adam Czerniakow, the head of the Warsaw Judenrat, who committed suicide the day after the deportations of the Warsaw Jews to Treblinka (known as Grossaktion Warschau) commenced. (Significantly, apart from Lanzmann himself, Hilberg is the only «character» in Shoah who cannot be classified as a survivor, a perpetrator, or a bystander.) Such alternation creates on the cinematic level a conversation between Hilberg and Grassler (even though the two never engage directly with each other), with Hilberg filling in the profound gaps left open by Grassler’s testimony. It also makes possible, to a certain extent, a dialogue between Grassler and Czerniakow, who is channeled by Hilberg; according to Daniel Listoe, «when Czerniakow ‹speaks,› his voice is Hilberg’s» (64). As with the scene with Stier, Lanzmann focuses in this interview on the issue of knowledge; as Sue Vice argues, the juxtaposition of Hilberg’s testimony with that of Grassler creates tension with regard to the issue of «acknowledging versus disavowing what one knows» (Shoah 72). However, as Grassler’s statement about repressing «schlechte Zeiten» quoted earlier shows, Grassler is much more aware than Stier of the difficulty and reliability of memory and thus does not pursue the strategy of near-total disavowal that characterizes Stier’s interview. As demonstrated by the following exchange, Grassler is much more cognizant of the fact that what he may have once known and acknowledged may be something he has since forgotten (i.e. repressed):

Lanzmann: Ja, aber wissen Sie, wie viele Leute sind gestorben jeden Monat im Warschauer Getto in ‘41?

Grassler: Das weiß ich nicht, nein, jedenfalls weiß ich’s heut nicht, ob ich’s damals gewußt hab…
In contrast to Stier’s absolute repudiation of knowledge («Ach, um Gottes willen, nein!»), Grassler’s response to Lanzmann’s question in this scene exhibits a large degree of ambivalence; Grassler both denies and affirms, admits to both knowing and not knowing. Such ambivalence is the hallmark of Grassler’s testimony, which is characterized by nervousness, hesitation (as made evident by his abundant use of such modal particles as «net,» «ja,» «eben,» and «sicher» and such phrases as «sagen wir mal»), confusion, backtracking, contradiction, retraction, affirmative refutation, disaffirmative agreement and defensiveness. In other words, unlike Stier, who consciously at least admits to no doubt regarding the state of his knowledge at the time, and also unlike Suchomel, who, as we shall see, is confident in his pedagogical mission, Grassler appears in his testimony to be a man in perpetual psychic discord.

Although Grassler’s testimony contains much more open acknowledgement about the events of the Holocaust than does Stier’s, Grassler also demonstrates the disavowal of knowledge. But whereas Stier displaces his knowledge temporally, arguing that he only learned about the nature of the camps and the deportation trains when they had effectively ceased to operate, Grassler displaces the knowledge of the larger policy of the Final Solution from the perpetrators onto the victims themselves. In a stunning sequence, after a scene in which Hilberg speculates with Lanzmann about what Czerniakow knew about the deportations from Warsaw and why he committed suicide, Lanzmann asks Grassler about this particular moment in the history of the ghetto:

Lanzmann: Aber Sie haben gewußt, weil es gibt ganz genaue Statistik.
Grassler: Wahrscheinlich hab ich’s gewußt. (DVD disc 4, chapter 12; German text of the film 255, revised to reflect the actual dialogue in the film)
This exchange is significant for a number of reasons. Grassler asserts the theory that Czerniakow committed suicide because he presciently recognized that the Nazis’ demands that 6,000 ghetto inhabitants be rounded up daily for deportation meant the deportees’ certain death. However, this interpretation is not in and of itself extraordinary; Hilberg argues essentially the same thing in the previous scene: «He knows, he knows. I think he knew or he sensed or he believed the end was coming» (172). In fact, by placing the scene with Hilberg’s speculations about the suicide right before the exchange with Grassler, Lanzmann provides the authoritative argument of the historian to buttress Grassler’s interpretation, thus emphasizing its historical plausibility. What is significant here is that Grassler links the knowledge that both he and Hilberg attribute to Czerniakow to Grassler’s own lack of knowledge at the time. Grassler inverts here the historical power relationship between the Nazi perpetrators and the Jewish victims, essentially arguing that the Nazi administrators of the Warsaw Ghetto were innocent of the terrible knowledge of the Final Solution (and therefore innocent of the intentions and actions leading up to it as well), whereas the inhabitants of the ghetto were aware of their fate all along (and can therefore be blamed for it). Lanzmann, in a characteristic moment of understated irony, responds to Grassler’s incredible gesture of displacement by protesting, «Das ist schwer zu akzeptieren,» whereupon Grassler answers, «Doch, doch,» adding emphasis to his profession of full conviction («Da bin ich überzeugt»). However, Grassler’s claims of certitude about his ignorance, though asserted emphatically, are less than fully confident, as evidenced by the grammar of hesitation and defensiveness in which they are expressed; they reveal a man who seems as bent on convincing himself as he is on persuading Lanzmann. The interview thus pits Grassler’s narrative of self-persuasion («Da bin ich überzeugt») against Lanzmann’s historical skepticism («Das ist schwer zu akzeptieren»), resulting in, as I will demonstrate, Grassler’s agitated attempt to harmonize his memories of the role he played in the Warsaw ghetto with the historical fact of the Final Solution.

In a lengthy, circular discussion of the purpose of the Warsaw Ghetto and the policies of the Nazi ghetto administration that is spread out over several scenes, Grassler maintains that the ultimate goal of the Nazi administration was to keep the Jewish ghetto inhabitants alive and healthy in order to prevent the spread of disease outside the ghetto and to provide workers for the German war effort. He freely agrees, however, that the widespread hunger and overcrowding in the ghetto made such a goal impossible: «Ja, aber...
wirklich erhalten hätte man es nur können mit wesentlich höheren Lebensmittelrationen, net, und nicht in dieser Zusammendrängung, ne» (DVD disc 4, chapter 12, German text of the film 256). Lanzmann, on the other hand, pushes Grassler to admit that the German policy was directed toward the extermination of the ghetto:

Lanzmann: Sie sagen, daß man wollte das Getto erhalten.
Grassler: Sagen wir mal, es war Aufgabe des Kommissars, das Getto nicht zu vernichten, sondern das Getto am Leben zu erhalten. Es war ja nun auch…
Lanzmann: Ja, aber was heißt «Leben» mit solche…
Grassler: Das war ja das Problem.
Lanzmann: Ja.
Grassler: Das war ja das Problem, net. Die…Es sollte ja auch doch gearbeitet werden, es wurde ja gearbeitet.
Lanzmann: Aber die Leute sind gestorben auf die Straßen, es gab Leichen überall.
Grassler: Eben, eben.
Lanzmann: Ja.
Grassler: Ne? Das war das Paradox ja an der ganzen Geschichte. Ne?
Lanzmann: Ja. Glauben Sie, es war ein Paradox?
Grassler: Ja, entschieden. Hm?
Lanzmann: Aber warum? Können Sie das erklären?
Grassler: Nein.
Lanzmann: Warum nicht?
Grassler: Ja, was soll ich da erklären? (DVD disc 4, chapter 12; German text of the film 256, revised to reflect the actual dialogue in the film)

This scene is exemplary for Grassler’s engagement with the provocative questions Lanzmann poses to him. On the one hand, he doesn’t contest Lanzmann’s characterization of the ghetto; he even appears to agree with Lanzmann’s assessment of the mortality rate («Eben, eben»). On the other hand, he doggedly insists that «das Bestreben der Dienstelle»11 (DVD disc 4, chapter 10, German text of the film 251) was to maintain the ghetto rather than destroy it. He thus agrees with Lanzmann even as he disputes him and then terms this inconsistency «das Paradox ja an der ganzen Geschichte,» which he not only cannot explain but also believes he shouldn’t have to, since the situation on the street in Warsaw in some inexplicable manner did not match the purported Nazi policy. But, in fact, what Grassler sees as an enigmatic paradox refers less to the historical events as they played out in Warsaw and more to his own cognitive dissonance about his role in the extermination of the Warsaw Jews, in which he attempts to reconcile what he acknowledges from a contemporary perspective to be historical fact (i.e. the mass extermination of Warsaw Jewry) with what he maintains to have believed and
under which assumption he felt he was operating at the time. What Grassler knows rationally to have been true calls into question his belief in his mostly benign role in the Warsaw Ghetto (where he claims to have endeavored to keep the inhabitants alive rather than to orchestrate their death) and thus his positive self-image. He attempts to reduce the dissonance between these irreconcilable positions through a circular logic that holds that the Nazi ghetto administration did its best to save the ghetto even as unnamed outside forces attempted to destroy it. In this way, Grassler engages in a complex dance of acknowledgement and denial that is designed to somehow harmonize two mutually exclusive explanations, resulting in statements of pure cognitive dissonance such as the following:

Während damals eben, soweit ich noch weiß, eben unsere Aufgabe war, für das Getto zu sorgen, wobei natürlich dies nicht möglich war, zu verhindern, daß bei diesen ungenügenden Rationen und bei diesen… bei diesen Massen eben doch eben große Todesfälle… viel zu viele Todesfälle gab, ne. (DVD disc 4, chapter 12, German text of the film 257)

Grassler’s words here indicate a mind at odds with itself, one mired in self-conflict. On the one hand, he is realistic enough to know that he cannot deny the overwhelming historical evidence about the Holocaust gathered in the preceding decades (unlike Stier, who has no qualms about presenting revisionist theories as plausible accounts: «Ich mein, das ist ja heute noch, wird da ja noch dagegen gekämpft und gesagt, hier, das ist doch unmöglich, so viel Juden kann’s gar nicht gegeben haben! Ob’s wahr ist, weiß ich nicht. Das wird denn erzählt» [DVD disc 3, chapter 10, German text of the film 192]). Moreover, Grassler’s statement also reveals that he recognized at the time that the severe conditions in the ghetto could not allow for the continued survival of the population and the maintenance of a work force. On the other hand, he cleaves tenaciously to what Sue Vice has termed «his ideological delusions» (Shoah 68), false beliefs that I argue are not just ideological but also – when one looks closely at his word choice, his prevarications and his telling slips – psychological in nature. His linguistic performance thus betrays symptoms of both conscious and unconscious disavowal. Unlike Stier, who seems to suffer no conscious uncertainty about his personal role in the Holocaust, even though Lanzmann makes clear that his work at the Reichsbahn was critical for the functioning of the deportation-extermination machine, Grassler appears to be genuinely concerned about the larger consequences of his actions in the ghetto administration. Lanzmann’s interview, which foregrounds Grassler’s psychological exertions to reconcile his view of himself with his role in the Warsaw ghetto, thus presents a man who is desperate to shape historical truth so that it can accommodate his own delusions. In the last scene of the
interview, in an expression of frustration at his inability to convince Lanzmann, but also in order to stave off any further penetration by Lanzmann of the logic of his deluded narrative, Grassler finally announces a stalemate:

Grassler:  Herr Lanzmann, wir drehen uns im Kreise, ne. Wir kommen zu . . . wir kommen zu keinen neuen Ergebnissen.

Lanzmann:  Nein, nein, ich glaube, es ist unmöglich, zu neuen Ergebnissen zu . . . zu kommen.

Grassler:  Ja. Ja. Ja. Und . . . was ich heute weiß, das habe ich ja damals nicht gewußt, ne. (DVD disc 4, chapter 16, German text of the film 266)

Grassler claims that the two men are caught in a circular discourse in which there is no exit and therefore no possibility of coming to new conclusions or of resolving the disparities between two diametrically opposed narrative frames. He then underscores this assertion by once again retracing the circle of the question of his knowledge, as if to discursively substantiate the impasse. However, as I have argued, the disjunction demonstrated by this interview pertains not only to the radical difference between Grassler and Lanzmann (and thus to Lanzmann’s absolutist distinction between the perspective of the perpetrators and that of the victims), but also to the inner discord, or cognitive dissonance, that resides in Grassler’s self-understanding itself. Grassler’s account of his role in the Holocaust is thus characterized by an inner paradox that he attempts to resolve in his testimony; in the end, however, he is unable to break out of the circular discourse in which he is trapped.

The most acute illustration of the psychic dilemma that characterizes Grassler’s situation can be found in the first scene of the interview, when Lanzmann confronts Grassler with Czerniakow’s diary:


Grassler:  Ja, ja, ne . . .

Lanzmann:  «. . . und später mit Auerswald, Schlosser.»

Grassler:  Schlosser war . . .


Grassler:  Daß der Name erwähnt wird, ja?

Lanzmann:  Ja. (DVD disc 4, chapter 8, German text of the film 246–47, revised to reflect the actual dialogue in the film)
Grassler responds to Lanzmann’s mention of the diary with interest, and when Lanzmann mentions a particular date, Grassler picks up a notepad and begins to write on it, behaving almost as if he were learning about events that happened to someone else rather than being reminded of his own experience. His odd remark upon hearing that date – «Das ist das erste Mal, daß ich ein Datum selber wieder erfahre» – indicates a disconnect from his own experience, as if he were unable to own it as a memory and must, like a dutiful student with pen in hand, be reeducated about it. Klaus Theweleit argues that, by staging himself as an unschooled student of the events which Lanzmann queries, Grassler puts Lanzmann in the position of witness to his own ignorance of the deportations to Treblinka:

While I agree with Theweleit that Grassler’s naïve posture allows him to pursue a particular strategy of innocence that he maintains throughout the interview, I think something more unconscious and fundamental is going on with his gesture of taking notes about what he learns from Lanzmann about his own past. In my opinion, Grassler demonstrates a remoteness from his own experience, an acute gap between his actions in the past and his identity in the present that, as we have seen, manifests itself psychologically as disavowal or cognitive dissonance. Grassler must take notes on his time in the ghetto because this experience has not effectively or consonantly been integrated into his life narrative, a psychic condition further exemplified by his reaction to Lanzmann’s comment, «Das ist das erste Mal, daß Sie…» Rather than responding with «daß ich erwähnt werde,» or «daß mein Name erwähnt wird,» Grassler speaks of «der Name,» indicating the profound self-alienation that characterizes his relationship to his past.

I’d like to end my analysis by considering Lanzmann’s interview with Suchomel, which, of all the scenes with perpetrators in Shoah, has attracted the most critical attention. Critics have commented chiefly on a few admittedly remarkable moments in the five scenes that feature Suchomel, such as the scene that shows Lanzmann promising Suchomel, who is unaware that he is being filmed, that he won’t reveal his name (a pact that not only Lanzmann breaks with his paratextual identification of Suchomel with subtitles at the beginning of each scene, but one that is also broken by Suchomel himself, who mentions his own name in the interview [DVD disc 1, chapter 55, German text]
of the film 79)], and the dramatic moment in which Lanzmann convinces Suchomel to twice perform the song the Nazi guards at Treblinka forced the Sonderkommando workers to sing. As I argued earlier, critics have tended to view Suchomel, more than any other perpetrator interviewed in the film, as the ideal «other» onto which they can project their discomfort about the testimony of the former Nazis; as Boswell argues, «In Franz Suchomel, Lanzmann finds the kind of criminal who is worthy of the pursuit» (157). To my mind, however, stunningly absent in critics’ assessment of Suchomel is any sort of consideration of his astonishing frankness about his experience as a guard at Treblinka, the most notorious of the Aktion Reinhard death camps. Given the muteness of Oberhauser, the stubborn insistence on ignorance of Stier, and the convoluted logic and tortured self-alienation of Grassler, Suchomel’s candidness about the genocidal operations at Treblinka – from the perspective of the perpetrators, at least – is unparalleled. Suchomel’s testimony is not only valuable for the insight it provides into how the perpetrators remember and report their experience over thirty years later, it is also of significant historical use, especially given the relative scarcity of eyewitness testimony about Treblinka. The vivid image Suchomel draws for us of the daily operations at Treblinka is one that no other witness in the film – perpetrator or survivor – can (or will) provide; according to Lanzmann, «I was horrified by what I had learned, and yet I knew that this was extraordinary testimony since no one had ever described in such a detailed manner – urged on by my precise questions, which sounded purely technical and devoid of all moral implications – the killing process of Treblinka extermination camp» (The Patagonian Hare 454). Moreover, Suchomel’s eagerness to supply answers to Lanzmann’s queries, rather than avoid them, is quite remarkable. The forthright and compliant character of Suchomel’s interview, however disturbing it may be, is anomalous not only in the context of Shoah itself, but also in that of perpetrator testimony in general; the unrivaled quality of these scenes thus cannot be overemphasized. For this reason, my focus here thus differs from that of many of the scholars who have written about this scene; rather than concentrating on the admittedly shocking details that Suchomel so easily offers as evidence of Suchomel’s radical otherness, I choose to pose the question differently: given the prevarications of most of the perpetrators Lanzmann encounters, why does Suchomel so openly and seemingly without hesitation or reserve tell us so much about Treblinka, including so much about his own role there?

Lanzmann gives us insight into this matter in his memoir, The Patagonian Hare, in which he traces the history of his connection with Suchomel, with whom he had long corresponded and whom he had visited several times prior
to the day of filming, which was conducted at a hotel in Austria in 1976. In order to engage Suchomel for the interview, Lanzmann, who has described his strategies of procuring the perpetrators’ testimonies as clever, deceptive, and the result of a «self-imposed iron discipline» (454), originally contacted Suchomel with the pretense that he required assistance that only Suchomel could give:

I arrived one morning with Corinna [Lanzmann’s German assistant], unannounced as was by now my rule. I told him I had read the evidence he had given at the Treblinka trial and what he had said to Gitta Sereny. I had not come, I added, out of psychological interest, nor was I a judge, a prosecutor or a Nazi-hunter; he had nothing to fear from me. But, I told him, I believed that we desperately needed his help – without explaining precisely what I meant by «we.» «We don’t know,» I continued, «how to raise our children. The young generation of Jews do not understand how this immeasurable catastrophe could have happened, how six million of our people could have allowed themselves to be massacred without response. Did they really die like sheep in a slaughterhouse?» This way, I was putting Suchomel in the position of teacher and myself in the position of student, impressing on him the historic role that would be his were he to explain the various stages of the process of mass extermination in Treblinka. (445)

Lanzmann thus pitched his proposal to Suchomel with a particular strategy, one that placed Suchomel in the role of expert who has important knowledge to convey. Rather than treating him as a criminal who would be asked to justify himself and his past actions, Lanzmann chose an approach that appealed to Suchomel’s self-importance and didactic nature. This strategy (along with Lanzmann’s offer of payment, which, as Lanzmann mentions several times, was very important to Suchomel), like Lanzmann’s manipulation of his command of German, creates a particular power structure in the interview in which Suchomel appears to be a patient pedant who condescendingly explains to a disingenuously credulous Lanzmann how millions of Jews were killed in Treblinka. As with other staged scenes later shot for the film, such as the interview with Bomba in the rented barber shop, Lanzmann prepared carefully for Suchomel’s interview in order to maximize its performative potential, even going so far as to procure props – a map of Treblinka that he arranged to have enlarged and mounted and a fishing rod that he split in half «to create a baguette de magister – a schoolmaster’s pointer» (453) – that would achieve the performative effects Lanzmann was hoping to create. The result of Lanzmann’s casting of Suchomel in the role of teacher and his construction of the mise-en-scène, which bears a strong resemblance to a classroom, is an interview in which Suchomel negotiates the issue of knowledge in a vastly different way than do Grassler and Stier. Whereas the latter men endeavor to either justify their lack of knowledge of the Final
Solution, harmonize their actions in the past with their contemporary knowledge, or displace their knowledge, Suchomel appears in these scenes to embrace his knowledge and to mete it out magnanimously for the benefit of posterity, an attitude that Lanzmann consciously creates and supports.\(^{13}\)

Suchomel’s eager assumption of the didactic role is evident throughout the interview. He patiently explains to Lanzmann various concepts and terminology, he describes the layout and organization of the camp (often denoting particular locations on the map with his pointer), he corrects Lanzmann’s mistaken facts and impressions, and he, like any proper scholar, proposes a theoretical framework for considering the past. The scene in which he relates to Lanzmann his definition of Treblinka is exemplary in this regard:

Suchomel: Ja, Auschwitz war eine Fabrik.

Lanzmann: Und Treblinka, das war ein…?

Suchomel: Ich sag Ihnen meine Definition. Merken Sie sich das. Treblinka war ein zwar primitives, aber gut funktionierendes Fließband des Todes.

Lanzmann: Fließband?

Suchomel: … des Todes. Verstehen Sie? (DVD disc 2, chapter 1; German text of the film 91)

Suchomel pronounces grandiloquently his characterization of the camp, which he clearly has thought about and composed beforehand, pausing dramatically so that Lanzmann can absorb a statement that Suchomel evidently believes is profound. His pedantic gestures – «Merken Sie sich das» and «Verstehen Sie?» – not only underscore his self-production here as an expert who is in control of knowledge and couches it in the antiseptic language of euphemism, they also performatively indicate his assumption of the role Lanzmann has given him, that of the superior teacher who condescendingly explains to and then tests his student.

Although Suchomel appears to be in control in these scenes as Lanzmann’s teacher and mentor, it is ultimately of course Lanzmann who manipulates the interaction between them, since he not only is more aware of the conditions of the interview (i.e. that it is being filmed clandestinely), but he also created the teacher-student scenario in the first place. It is thus not surprising that Suchomel’s self-production as a teacher breaks down at particular moments, revealing the underlying power dynamic of the interview. This is evident above all in the notorious scene in which Suchomel, prodded by Lanzmann, twice sings the Treblinkalied, which opens the «Second Era» of the film (DVD disc 3, chapter 1). After the first iteration of the song, Lanzmann encourages Suchomel to sing it again, but Suchomel appears to realize the absurd indecency of the performance, protesting to Lanzmann, «Nehmen Sie mir’s nicht übel. Weil… Sie wollen Geschichte haben, und ich sag Ihnen Ge-
schichte» (German text of the film 149). At this moment, Suchomel seems to grasp the ambivalence of his role as educator; he acts here as the self-important expert who relays knowledge to Lanzmann, and by extension, to posterity, but the content of his knowledge inevitably indicts him. He thus can only weakly assert that he’s giving Lanzmann history in an attempt to justify his performance. After Lanzmann encourages him to sing the song again, arguing «Das ist sehr wichtig» (German text of the film 150), Suchomel finishes the song by asking, «Sind Sie zufrieden?» (German text of the film 150). This aggressive, almost accusatory appeal to Lanzmann demonstrates his awareness of the fact that Lanzmann has «made him sing,» both literally and figuratively; it also shows that his performance of the song exceeds his own authority over it, revealing (as do the many scholarly analyses of the scene) much more than Suchomel can control or be aware of. However, he follows this accusing question by once again referring to his status as expert: «Das ist ein Original. Das kann kein Jude heute mehr!» (German text of the film 150). With his perversely proud proclamation of the ultimate authority on the song, since those who were forced to sing it are no longer alive, Suchomel reasserts his role as educator and congratulates himself for his knowledge.

By accepting the pedagogical role in which Lanzmann casts him, Suchomel is thus able to transmit his considerable knowledge about how the Jews were exterminated at Treblinka, an operation to which, as his testimony reveals, he contributed actively. By virtue of his self-important, didactic mission, Suchomel’s knowledge thus functions also as an acknowledgement of his crimes on a purely factual level, even though any ethical or moral acknowledgment (let alone regret or sorrow) on his part is shockingly missing. In a sense, Suchomel operates in these scenes as an almost machine-like conduit of information – «Ich sag Ihnen Geschichte» – that does not seem affected by the information it produces; he merely passes it on as a lesson in history without appearing to process it himself. By producing himself as an expert, Suchomel, like Grassler and Stier, also engages in the process of displacement; in this case, however, unlike with the other two perpetrators, it is not the knowledge itself that is displaced. Rather, Suchomel displaces his sense of culpability and moral awareness onto his extensive knowledge of the organization and operation of the Holocaust, where it is safely kept at arm’s length.

The verbal exchanges between Lanzmann and Suchomel, Stier and Grassler in Shoah thus all revolve in intricate ways around the question of knowledge of the immense genocidal undertaking to which all three men contributed. In each case, Lanzmann, through his adept performance as an interviewer and his ingenious facility in German, is able to push past the defensive postures and
canned protestations of innocence on the part of the former perpetrators to mediate a complex image of how these men have integrated and learned to narrate their participation in the Holocaust. Although, in his absolutist conception of the film, Lanzmann claims to be utterly uninterested in the perpetrators’ subjective understanding of their experience, he creates, through his masterful exchanges with these men, nuanced portraits of their psychology that are revealing of their very humanness, rather than flat or grotesque caricatures that emphasize their intrinsic otherness, and he even offers a broad panoply of psychologies, from disavowal to didacticism, to explain their past and present behavior. Even though there are similarities between how each man interacts with Lanzmann, the processes of denial, disavowal and displacement of knowledge function uniquely in each case, emphasizing the individual character of these men and making it impossible to advance any single overarching explanation about how the film represents the figure of the perpetrator. The interview with Walter Stier presents the most airtight case of the denial of knowledge; however, as we have seen, Stier’s adamant refusal to admit his knowledge at the time is challenged on an unconscious linguistic level by his own statements. Franz Grassler, on the other hand, both admits to knowing and refuses to know, a dissonance that he tries to solve by displacing his knowledge so that he can integrate his experience into a positive self-image. For his part, Franz Suchomel, who is the most forthcoming of all about his role in the Holocaust, is able to integrate his experience by reframing his narrative of perpetration according to pedagogical goals; he believes he is teaching us important lessons about history and thus does not feel the need, as do the other two, to justify himself and his wartime actions. It is perhaps unsurprising that, in these three cases at least, each man’s willingness to acknowledge his perpetration in the crimes of the Holocaust increases with his proximity to and involvement in them: Stier is thus able to effect an almost total denial because he never saw a train, while Grassler, who tells us «Nein, also, ich bin nicht ins Getto gegangen, nachdem ich’s mal kennengelernt hatte. Und, wenn ich nicht mußte, also, ich war in der ganzen Zeit wohl nur ein paar mal dort, net, also» (DVD disc 4, chapter 10; German text of the film 251), can insist on a certain distance from the arenas in which the actual killing took place. Suchomel, on the other hand, was in the thick of the actual physical implementation of the Final Solution, so his testimony is less riddled with claims that he didn’t know or can no longer remember. At the same time, however, what is surprising about the film’s focus on what the men did or didn’t know is that, as a collective complex of concerns, the issue of knowledge in Shoah also functions as a sort of displacement, for it obscures, to a certain extent, the problem of perpetration
in general in its quest for the truth of what the men knew rather than what they did. In a sense, the perpetrators in Shoah are thus presented as Wisser (or Nicht-Wisser) rather than Täter. In any case, these particular verbal exchanges between Lanzmann and the perpetrator witnesses demonstrate an astonishing diversity among the former Nazis with regard to their relationship to their roles in the Holocaust and their psychic investment in their past. One of Lanzmann’s most important achievements in Shoah is to have made, despite his best intentions, such a differentiated view of the perpetrators possible.

Notes

1 Critics who analyze the scenes with Simon Srebnik include Denby, Friedman, Moser, Plank, Robson, Theveleit, Weissman and Williams. Those who discuss the scenes with Abraham Bomba include Angress, Cantor, Elsner, Furman, Hirsch, Jochimsen and Listoe. Critics who address in detail scenes featuring both survivors include Avisar, LaCapra («Lanzmann’s Shoah»), Lichtner, Olin, Reichel, Saxton, Thiele and Vice (Shoah).

2 Lanzmann himself uses the word «incarnation» to refer to his method of prodding his witnesses to re-experience the past in the present (The Patagonian Hare 435). Sue Vice investigates in depth Lanzmann’s strategy of performative reenactment (which she refers to as «reincarnation» [45]) in her volume on Shoah.

3 With the term «perpetrators» I refer to the five male interviewees in the film who either were former death camp guards who had direct experience with the machinery of genocide (Franz Suchomel, Franz Schalling, and Josef Oberhauser, who were guards at Treblinka, Chelmno and Belzec, respectively) or who held positions of some authority in the German implementation of the «Final Solution» (Franz Grassler, who was part of the German administration of the Warsaw ghetto, and Walter Stier, a bureaucrat for the Deutsche Reichsbahn in Nazi-occupied Poland). Footage of interviews between Lanzmann and at least six additional perpetrators that was excluded in the final cut of the film has been deposited in the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. As this essay was in press, Sue Vice’s article «Claude Lanzmann’s Einsatzgruppen Interviews,» part of a special issue of Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History that focuses on the representation of Holocaust perpetrators in literature and film, appeared. Vice provides a perceptive analysis of those interviews that were left out of Lanzmann’s film, but she does not discuss the scenes with the perpetrators that were included in Shoah.

4 In general, German-language scholarship on Holocaust representation has been far less interested in Shoah than English-language Holocaust Studies. It is my impression, and Martina Thiele confirms this suspicion in her chapter on Shoah in Publizistische Kontroversen über den Holocaust im Film, that, because Lanzmann’s film had minimal exposure when it was screened in Germany in 1986 (first in February at the Berlinale, then a few weeks later in four parts on the regional public networks [Drittes Programm], where it reached «ein ganz kleines Publikum» [Thiele 400], an even smaller portion of which saw the film in its entirety), its impact on cultural memory of the Holocaust in
Germany and thus on German scholarship has been limited. Apart from some perceptive initial reviews in the mass media and Getrud Koch’s and Klaus Theweleit’s excellent analyses of the film, there is little scholarship in German that focuses extensively on Shoah. Theweleit’s astute impressionistic essay on the memory of violence in Shoah (which, although it includes an excellent discussion of how Lanzmann’s film demonstrates the «totale «weiß nix»» [102] among contemporary Germans with regard to the Holocaust, only cursorily looks at the film’s scenes with the former perpetrators), attributes the film’s limited appeal in Germany to precisely its depiction of the perpetrators: «Die Deutschen bei Ophuls und Lanzmann in ihrer maskenhaften Leblosigkeit, in ihrer primitiven Absolutunschuld, sind klar unterschie- den von allen anderen Menschen. Das ist so; man braucht nur hinzusehen. Wahr- scheinlich ergeben sich daraus die deutschen Zuschauerzahlen von Shoah und Hotel Terminus. «Wer will denn sowas seben?…»Man kennt doch die Geschichte mit den Juden.» Ja, aber die mit den Deutschen vielleicht nicht… will man nicht kennen» (104).

Lanzmann has stated that he not only was uninterested in the psychology of the perpetrators and how they have come to understand their actions, but that he also adamantly rejected a perspective that considered such factors. Delineating his method from that of Gitta Sereny in her work on Treblinka commandant Franz Stangl, he writes: «Her approach seemed to me purely psychological: she wanted to think about evil, to understand how a husband and father can calmly take part in mass murder, the central subject of many later literary-historical works. From the beginning of my own research, by contrast, I was so astonished that I braced myself with all my might against the refusal to understand» (The Patagonian Hare 420). According to Jay Cantor, Lanzmann’s adamant disavowal of psychological insight into the perpetrators’ motives and self-understanding is tantamount to the sort of instrumentalization of humans that characterized the Nazi genocide: «Lanzmann, stunned, refuses to enter the Nazis’ psychology, to grant them inwardness. But this is, of course, the terrifying double bind that Hitlerism, perhaps all racism, confronts us with. He will not be like the Nazis; they must be utterly alien to him; they cannot even be imagined, granted insides; they are not human. But the Nazis knew better than us that technique of making their opponents not human! And so the machine has made him into a machine; he has become like them, for not to grant others inwardness means not to have it oneself. His outrage, his obsessive defense («I decided to have only technical conversations»), meant to ensure that he remain uncontaminated, instead brings about the very thing he seemingly wants to avoid» (34).

For a discussion of the tendency to sacralize the Holocaust in critical discourse, please see my article «Narrative Transgression in Edgar Hilsenrath’s Der Nazi und der Friseur and the Rhetoric of the Sacred in Holocaust Discourse.»

The one astonishing exception to this almost universal reading of the perpetrators in Lanzmann’s film can be found in Ernst Nolte’s infamous essay «Die Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will,» a provocative and historically specious article in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung that in 1986 ignited the Historikerstreit about Germany’s relationship to the Holocaust past. As with major events and details of the Holocaust, which Nolte interprets in a highly unorthodox (or plainly false) way, he asserts (but, as with the other arguments in the essay, provides no evidence for) a reading of the perpetrators in the film that both shifts their culpability and recasts them as victims: «Um die gleiche Zeit läuft im Fernsehen der bewegende Dokumentarfilm Shoah eines jüdischen Regisseurs, der es in einigen Passagen wahrscheinlich macht, daß auch die SS-Mann-
schaften der Todeslager auf ihre Art Opfer sein mochten und daß es andererseits unter
den polnischen Opfern des Nationalsozialismus virulenten Antisemitsmus gab.»

8 In a recent article in *German Studies Review*, Timothy L. Schroer stresses the com-
plexity of the psychological states of Holocaust perpetrators. Reminding us that «ample
evidence exists that killing defenseless victims indeed produced a psychological strain on
the killers» (42), he goes on to investigate the apparent «emotional coldness» (35) that
characterized so many autobiographical accounts by perpetrators, which he attributes
to a social ethos of self-control that emerged in the generation of German men who came
of age during the Weimar Republic. He then concludes by emphasizing the importance
of an approach to the subject that avoids an absolutist understanding of perpetrators: «A
historically grounded approach to the perpetrators should eschew theories that posit an
unchanging ‹human nature›, whether that nature is conceived of as inherently violent or
sympathetic. Instead, we should approach the perpetrators as people whose actions,
thoughts, and emotions were subject to the play of contingent influences» (49).

9 Throughout the film, witnesses attest to the problem of knowledge and/or the lack
thereof from various perspectives. In general, while the survivors speak of the victims’
lack of foreknowledge about the death camps (Ruth Elias: «I didn’t know about
Auschwitz anything» [DVD disc 4, chapter 1; English text of the film 142]; Filip Müller
[about the Polish Jews]: «Wahrscheinlich ahnten sie auch, daß da etwa nicht stimmt, aber
niemand von denen könnte im kleinsten sich vorstellen» [DVD disc 3, chapter 6;
German text of the film 173, altered to reflect Müller’s actual syntax]), the bystanders
and perpetrators claim that the Jewish victims were aware of the fate that awaited them (a
Polish man in Grabow: «The Jews knew it too» [DVD disc 2, chapter 13; English text of
the film 75]; Frau Michelson: «Die merkten ja doch, was los war» [DVD disc 2, chapter
24; German text of the film 131]) and at the same time emphasize their own lack of
knowledge (Schalling: «Die sogenannte Endlösung, die war uns ja natürlich nicht
bekannt, net» [DVD disc 4, chapter 12; German text of the film 254]). This displacement
of knowledge from the perpetrators to the victims figures prominently, as we will see, in
Grassler’s testimony in particular.

10 Lanzmann claims that his strategy of linguistic incompetence had a lasting effect on his
command of German: «Bevor ich *Shoah* gedreht habe, sprach ich ein wesentlich
besseres Deutsch als danach. Ich habe gewissermaßen mutwillig während der dreizehn
Jahre, in denen ich an *Shoah* arbeite, mein Deutsch verlernt. Das war gut für den Film»
(«Claude Lanzmann im Gespräch mit Max Dax» 284).

11 Grassler rarely uses the first person – either plural, like Stier, or singular – to refer to the
Nazi administration for which he worked, preferring to speak about the wishes of the
«Dienstelle» or the «Kommissar.»

12 Critics who have discussed the ethics of the furtive filming of the interview include
Felman, Furman, Ophüls, Spitzer and Vice (*Shoah*). Those who have analyzed
Suchomel’s performance of the *Treblinkalied* include Angress, Boswell, Brumlik,
Felman, Howland, Lichtner, Moser, Spitzer, Talbot and Vice (*Shoah*).

13 Moreover, as several commentators have pointed out, Suchomel appears relaxed and
responsive in the scenes that feature him, unlike, for example, Grassler, who seems
nervous and defensive in his interview. Suchomel’s ease is undoubtedly the result of
Lanzmann’s promise to him that Suchomel would have nothing to fear from the
interview, but can likely also be attributed, as Theweleit argues, to the fact that Suchomel
had already been sentenced to six years prison time (four years of which he served) in the
so-called Treblinka Trials of 1964–1965 and thus did not need to worry that his
testimony to Lanzmann would criminally implicate him (122). In this way, Suchomel is able to assert at the beginning of the interview, «Ja, ich bin sehr zufrieden mit dem heutigen Tag» (DVD disc 1, chapter 55, German text of the film 77).

Of course, at the time in which Suchomel sang the Treblinkalied there were at least two former «Arbeitsjuden» who were alive and potentially also knew the song: Richard Glazar and Abraham Bomba, but Lanzmann does not ask them to perform it (at least not in the scenes that were included in the film).

Works Cited

Angress, Ruth K. «Lanzmann’s Shoah and its Audience.» 
*Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 3 (1986): 249–60.

Ash, Timothy Garton. «The Life of Death: Shoah – A Film by Claude Lanzmann.» 


Brinkley, Robert and Steven Youra. «Tracing Shoah.» 

Brumlik, Micha. «Der zähe Schaum der Verdrängung.» 

Cantor, Jay. «Death and the Image.» 

Chevrie, Marc and Herv Le Roux. «Site and Speech: An Interview with Claude Lanzmann about Shoah.» 


Denby, David. «Out of Darkness.» 

Elsner, Anna Magdalena. «L’obsénité absolue du projet de comprendre: The Communicability of Traumatic Knowledge in Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah.» 

Felman, Shoshana. «The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah.» 

Friedman, Elisabeth R. «The Anti-Archive? Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah and the Dilemmas of Holocaust Representation.» 
Listening to the Perpetrators


McGlothlin, Erin. «Theorizing the Perpetrator in Bernhard Schlink’s The Reader and Martin Amis’s Time’s Arrow.» After Representation?: The Holocaust, Literature,


Nolte, Ernst. «Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will. Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht gehalten werden konnte.» Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 6 June 1986.


