

Claude Lanzmann has described himself as “a geographer, a topographer, a maniac for details, an obsessed investigator haunted by living places.” Lanzmann’s archaeology is one that digs into black holes, obsessively looking for the thing we cannot see. He mines the geographies and topographies of landscapes and faces, lingering on images that draw us closer into a world that we cannot understand. He relentlessly uncovers details that take us far beyond facts and into a radical relationship with truth.

Lanzmann has said that “blindness is the purest way of seeing.” It is a peculiar statement for a filmmaker working in the medium of light. But the implication is that we are left blinded and impaired by catastrophe. Blanchot wrote, “blindness is still vision, vision that is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing.” This is the paradox that drives Lanzmann – all the way back to his dissertation on Leibnitz, the possible and the impossible – the things that cannot coexist together.

Refusing to put history in the past, Lanzmann gives us a history with which we must live. His is a history that exceeds memory as that which is recalled from the past, and situates it as that which is embodied in the present. When he says he is “haunted by living places,” he is grounding his body of work in a world that must live with its worst atrocities and encounter its worst fears.

Putting his own body on the line, Lanzmann has risked his life for 60 years in the pursuit of truth, fighting the Nazis in the French Resistance, illegally crossing into East

Germany to write the first reports for Le Monde on life in the Eastern Bloc (which attracted the attention of his future colleague Jean-Paul Sartre), and throughout his filmmaking career, facing danger, injury, and threats against his life. But even more, Lanzmann has put his very being on the line, struggling to express the inexpressible.

Spending eleven years making the film, SHOAH, he worried that he might not live to see the film finished. He worried that he was losing himself. “It is like a black sun,” he said, “and you always have to struggle against yourself in order to go on.”

Lanzmann’s gift to us is his demand that we be obsessive, too. To watch nine and a half hours of SHOAH, or the singular experience of SOBIBOR, for instance, is to be unforgettably haunted by events that defy history, knowledge, and sensibility. To be obsessed is to be unsettled and unsatisfied with reason and rationale, pushing beyond language into silence, where we encounter the living, breathing silence of a stunned humanity, and where Claude Lanzmann ultimately and obsessively affirms life.

And it is with great pleasure and affection that we honor Claude Lanzmann tonight.