

Les Films du Poisson and Les Films Aleph present



# ALL I HAD WAS NOTHINGNESS

A film by Guillaume Ribot

2025 - FRANCE - FRENCH, ENGLISH, GERMAN, POLISH, HEBREW - 94'



# PRESS CONTACTS & SCREENINGS

**INTERNATIONAL PRESS** Claudia Tomassini + associates

Claudia Tomassini

berlinale@claudiatomassini.com

+49 173 2055 794

Lorenzo Ormando

lorenzo@claudiatomassini.com

+44 749 6738 597

**US PRESS** Cinetic Media

Charlie Olsky

charlie@cineticmedia.com

+1 917 545 7260

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# **SYNOPSIS**

Claude Lanzmann spent 12 years creating *Shoah* (1985), a groundbreaking film that redefined Holocaust representation. 40 years later, filmmaker Guillaume Ribot explores 220 hours of unreleased footage.

Lanzmann's quest to capture the reality of the Holocaust led him to interview victims, witnesses, and perpetrators from all over the world. Overcoming doubt, setbacks, and false leads, he embarked on an unparalleled journey culminating in a landmark masterpiece, now part of UNESCO's Memory of the World Register.

Only using Lanzmann's own words and never-before-seen excerpts, Guillaume Ribot pays homage to one of cinema's masterpieces and to its director's relentless pursuit to tell the untold.

### INTERVIEW WITH GUILLAUME RIBOT

In 2023, Shoah, Claude Lanzmann's investigative film released in 1985, was added to UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. Little is known about the harrowing adventure of shooting the film, spread over five years (from 1976 to 1981). During this time Lanzmann tracked down, much like a detective, the witnesses of this genocide. In a new film, not unlike a road movie, entitled All I Had Was Nothingness, director and photographer Guillaume Ribot recounts the development of the film Shoah. He has based his movie on Claude Lanzmann's memoir, The Patagonian Hare, and drawn on the 220 hours of outtakes from Shoah, kept at the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.

I believe that the desire to make this film was born out of reading Claude Lanzmann's memoir *The Patagonian Hare* (*Le Lièvre de Patagonie, 2009*). What did you discover in this book?

There are four chapters in Lanzmann's memoir that detail, from the inside, the making of Shoah. Reading these pages was a revelation. I came to understand some of Claude Lanzmann's directing approaches. For example, I learned that the sequence with Abraham Bomba where we see him cutting hair in a barbershop, was provoked by Lanzmann (editor's note: this professional hairdresser, deported to the Treblinka extermination camp in occupied Poland, was forced by the SS to cut women's hair before they entered the gas chambers). The viewer who watches Shoah thinks all this is spontaneous (editor's note: in reality, Lanzmann had asked Abraham Bomba, then retired and living in Israel, to reproduce the familiar motions of cutting hair in a salon). Lanzmann helps Bomba release the words through the familiar gestures. He enables the truth to be delivered through staging. Without the action of the scissors Bomba could not return to the essence of what he experienced. I immediately felt a narrative framework in this text, that also revealed the intimacy of a director who had thrown himself with all his might into a long and arduous quest, a director riddled with doubt and full of questions, now facing a monumental task. I didn't know at the time that all the unused rushes of Shoah were kept on the website of the United States Holocaust Museum.

How did you go about sorting and selecting these 220 hours of rushes discarded by Lanzmann for his final cut of *Shoah*, itself lasting nearly 10 hours?

When I discovered these rushes, I came face to face with an incredible material. It felt as if I had unique access to the making of a major film and was able to view what we never see - the accidents, the side issues. I discovered poignant scenes that do not appear in the final cut of *Shoah*, such as when Claude Lanzmann interviews two survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and one of them, Yitzhak Zuckerman, aka Antek, tells him; "Claude, if you could lick my heart, it would poison you." Lanzmann, profoundly affected, rests his head on Antek's solid chest, who welcomes him and kindly soothes him in a very long sequence-shot. It is this particular sequence that made me want to make this film.

Years later, during the writing of the script, I watched the 220 hours of outtakes at home, on my own, according to a derushing protocol. On my editing software timeline, I placed pointers, colour codes, notes, I retained shot hooks, bits of interviews, eliminating what didn't fit with the architecture of my film. I went into these rushes methodically, classifying camera movements, creating a library of keywords. I knew that once I entered the editing room I wouldn't have to sort through this mass of information because I already had my filmic narration in images, a

thread, a visual script. I knew what I wanted: to show the pre-Shoah. I then took my different sequences and made a long rough cut before starting four months of editing alongside editor Svetlana Vaynblat, with whom I had worked with on my last two films. To make Lanzmann's words heard, I selected and organised extracts from *The Patagonian Hare* (editor's note: in the film, the book's extracts, in voice-over are read by Guillaume Ribot). Together we then started to edit them into images shot by Lanzmann and the magic happened: little by little we found ourselves immersed into this project in a very intimate way, alongside a director at work.

# Your film bears witness to Claude Lanzmann's inner doubts during the filming of *Shoah*, his fear that this project would not see the light, would not take shape. Why insist on these concerns?

This idea is summed up in the first words of the film: "I wanted to film, but all I had was nothingness." Claude Lanzmann has said that before working on *Shoah*, he knew very little about the destruction of the Jews in Europe – only a number: 6 million victims. He therefore spent a lot of time researching at the beginning. Even then, once he had acquired the knowledge and understanding, he still wasn't sure how to show onscreen a story for which all traces had been erased. He threw himself headlong into this film with profound belief, yet without knowing exactly what he would do or where it would lead. This is not the Lanzmann we know. In the film I talk about a man who is searching, who experiences successive epiphanies – like when he understands that the subject of *Shoah* will not be survival, but the radicality of death. It is not because you search that you will necessarily find. *Shoah* is, in many ways, the quest of a man, the search and the construction of a film that rests on empty places, on the words of witnesses solely. It is a herculean task.

# The editing and rhythm of the film give the shooting of *Shoah* the appearance of a thriller, a police hunt. When did this dimension appear to you?

I immediately thought of *The Odyssey*, a human, cinematographic adventure. I tried to find the rhythm of this road movie. Like Odysseus, for whom it takes ten years to return from his journey, it will take Lanzmann twelve years to make his film.

It is also an investigation, with victims, witnesses, survivors and killers. When Lanzmann questions the persecutors, when they confess and describe their actions, the truth becomes indisputable. The investigation is triangulated. Lanzmann is a philosopher, an academic, a filmmaker, and also a detective.

# You insist on the mechanism of "deception" that Lanzmann sets up to trap the persecutors: he uses a different name, pretends to be an academic researcher, films them without their knowledge. What interested you in this strategy?

"We had to learn how to deceive the deceivers" says Lanzmann. This sentence is essential: to obtain truth from a culprit, you have to be cunning. Let's not forget that when Lanzmann made *Shoah in* 1976, the Nazi executives risked being condemned by the courts if they confessed. In Germany there were several post-war trials (*editor's note: Nuremberg in 1945, Treblinka in 1964 and 1970*). Nazi officials risked prison and did not want to talk. To bring out the truth, Lanzmann used technology, notably a new miniature video camera available in the 70s and nicknamed "La Paluche," which he hid in a bag.

A scene I love illustrates the intimacy of the police hunt: when Lanzmann takes his shirt off in a hotel room and puts on a holster hiding a HF microphone. It's brilliant, because in *Shoah* you don't know where the sound comes from. I tried to shed light on some grey areas of the investigation, to show hidden cameras, to unfold his process of *mise-en-scene* with some degree of tension. This film is not a "making of," it is at the heart of this work in progress, this race for the truth by the committed man that is Lanzmann.

# In your film you respected the ethical and cinematographic choices made by Lanzmann for *Shoah:* no additional music, no archive footage, no commentary, no fade to black. Why was this essential?

I wanted to be part of Lanzmann's radicalism and purity. To keep his words only. I worked a lot on the articulation of the text but didn't write anything myself. It was a way of getting close to his approach. With him, it is the words of the witnesses and the *mise-en-scene* that bring life to the story, not a voice-over that guides you. In the same way I refused to read again what was written about *Shoah*. I did reread interviews with Lanzmann himself, consulted his personal and professional archives: administrative documents, travel notes, historical memos. All this material you don't see on screen was used to build the character, to give substance to his vision, to avoid theory and create intimacy. This research was very organic because I had access to a part of the mental world of Claude Lanzmann the director.

# Shoah is a film-memorial, with considerable weight and legacy. How do you deal with a masterpiece?

Faced with a film reference, it is tempting to "reproduce" sequences in spite of oneself and let the precious and magnetic words of the witnesses unfold. You have to consciously forget things and tell yourself: *Shoah* is here, *Shoah* exists, but it is something else I am making. It is an overwhelming burden at first. But eventually I felt I was in the right place. I understood my project brought something else – to people who have seen *Shoah*, and to those who haven't. I quickly understood that I had to stop being intimidated by this film (even if I remain so). I could not be in front of *Shoah*, or behind. I wanted to remain faithful to *Shoah*, without ever being servile, and to be a complement. To build, however modestly, a bridge to *Shoah*. The theme of *Shoah* is genocide. The theme of my film is Cinema, *mise-en-scene*, and a man's obsession.

# "There was no reality to film. I had to create it; I had to hallucinate." How does this sentence by Claude Lanzmann, as heard in your film, shed light on the project of *Shoah?*

The erasure of traces is total – the Nazis dynamited homicidal structures; time has passed. Claude Lanzmann really had nothing but nothingness at the time of filming. That's why he used all the tricks of *mise-en-scene* and that's what my film shows as well. In his own words, he wanted to make a "fiction of reality" and refuted the term "documentary"... In *Shoah*, Lanzmann fully owns up to his filmic recreation in order to bring out the truth. Several emblematic scenes were set up by the director, such as the one I already talked about with Abraham Bomba in the hairdressing salon, or the famous scene with the former death train driver, for which Lanzmann rented a locomotive from the Polish railways to put his character back in the situation of the time. We are here witnessing pure cinema, just like in those slow pans of the Polish forest or the long subjective POV in the car, imprinted forever in the memory of the viewers. It is by filming

the truth of the word and of places (one of the working titles of *Shoah* was "Le Lieu et la Parole [The Place and the Word]") that Lanzmann brings out the memory of nothingness.

#### Lanzmann was also an outstanding interviewer...

The witnesses Lanzmann interviewed in the 80s were elderly people. They would die soon. This explains the absolute, urgent need to collect their words. In his application for a grant from the CNC (French National Centre of Cinema) which I read, Lanzmann writes that he has already filmed, explaining: we have to make this film quickly because people are dying or will refuse to talk to me if I come back later. These lengthy interviews also show Lanzmann's deep knowledge of the Holocaust. He knew just as much as his interlocutors, as his personal archives attest. When he questions a Nazi, he knows who his leaders were, his collaborators, the orders carried out... When he questioned a victim, Lanzmann went through a fraternal and painful moment, even if he was sometimes reproached for his insistence with a witness in great emotional distress. But to him, in his quest for the truth, their tears were "as precious as blood, the seal of truth, the very incarnation."

#### The image in *Shoah* is cold, slightly under exposed. In your film it is surprisingly bright.

The colour-grading is warm, saturated with colours, because the rushes are like that. I chose, after reflection, to keep these true colours because my film is not an extension of *Shoah*. It accompanies it. It is not neutral to keep naturally bright colours – a strong sun, bright green grass – for such a film. But these lights and these contrasts do exist in the summer in Ukraine, Poland or Russia. I photographed them so much during my many reports in the East. I wondered a lot about this choice of colour-grading. But I do know now that I made a film about life, even if it is life surrounded by death.

# How does Lanzmann's work on the archaeology of memory resonate with your own work as a photographer and reporter?

Lanzmann said he was a topographical filmmaker: he understood that he had to experience the place. I have been working on the Holocaust since 1998 – not as a subject for a film but as question of life – (as a director/Le Cahier de Susi in 2014; Treblinka, Je suis le Dernier Juif in 2016; Vie et Destin du Livre Noir, la destruction des Juifs d'URSS in 2020, editor's note). I have safeguards in the films I make because I'm dealing with sensitive material. I can't be an artist. As a photographer I spent several years in the field in Ukraine and Belarus, in villages, farms (he has photographed more than 800 witnesses to the mass shootings of Jews carried out by the Einsatzgruppen during WW2, editor's note). Like Lanzmann, I knocked on doors a thousand times to collect testimonies, took photographs of those who lived through the war. My journey has led me to capture eyes that have seen horror. The "eyes that saw" (Lanzmann's words, editor's note), I saw them too. This is what makes me close to Claude Lanzmann's approach.

Interview conducted in French by Léa André-Sarreau, TROISCOULEURS.

# **GUILLAUME RIBOT**



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54 years old, director-screenwriter-photographer. After studying photography and art history, Guillaume Ribot devoted himself to press photography. For over 25 years, he has devoted most of his work to memory.

His work as a reporter and on the Holocaust has been published in the national and international press (Time magazine, Paris-Match, Marianne, Le Monde, The New York Times...). At the same time, Guillaume Ribot has developed a body of work as an author, which has given rise to numerous exhibitions and books, including: Les fusillades massives des Juifs en Ukraine, 1941-1944. La shoah par balles, Memorial of the Shoah, War Museum of Brussels, Jewish Heritage Museum-New York...

Since 2014, he has devoted himself exclusively to his work as a director and screenwriter, with a strong penchant for history and archival images.

#### **GUILLAUME RIBOT'S FILMOGRAPHY**

#### 2025 ALL I HAD WAS NOTHINGNESS, 94'

• Berlinale Special, Berlin International Film Festival

#### 2023 UKRAINE 1933: SEEDS OF HUNGER (Moissons Sanglantes), 67'

• Grand Prix for Best French Documentary, FIPADOC

#### 2019 THE BLACK BOOK (Vie et destin du livre noir), 92'

• Lauriers de l'Audiovisuel Winner

2016 TREBLINKA, 52'

2014 LE CAHIER DE SUSI, 52'

#### OTHER SELECTED WORKS

2008 CAMPS IN FRANCE: HISTORY OF A DEPORTATION (Camps en France : histoire d'une deportation). Book published by FMD

2007 THE MASS SHOOTINGS OF JEWS IN UKRAINE 1941-1944: THE HOLOCAUST BY BULLETS (Les fusillades massives des Juifs en Ukraine, 1941-1944: La Shoah par balles). Book and exhibition, Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris.

2005 EVERY SPRING THE TREES BLOOM IN AUSCHWITZ (Chaque printemps les arbres fleurissent à Auschwitz). Book published by Ville de Grenoble.

# **ESTELLE FIALON (PRODUCER)**

A graduate of Sciences Po in Paris, Estelle Fialon is associate producer at Les Films du Poisson, a Paris-based production company. Her experience in discovering talent and initiating and driving large-scale international co-productions has earned her recognition in France and abroad for her strong commitment to quality.

A Best Documentary Academy Award nominee for *The Gatekeepers*, released in the U.S. by Sony Pictures Classics, she is also the producer of *Jane Campion, Cinema Woman* by Julie Bertuccelli (2022 Cannes Classics), *Particles* by Blaise Harrison (2019 Cannes Directors' Fortnight), *The Settlers* by Shimon Dotan (Sundance, New York, IDFA), *Eat That Question (Frank Zappa in His Own Words)* by Thorsten Schutte (Sundance, San Sebastian), and Lionel Baier's *Vanity* (Cannes ACID 2015). After producing *Ukraine 1933: Seeds of Hunger* and *The Black Book*, the Berlinale Special selected film *All I Had Was Nothingness* marks the 3<sup>rd</sup> feature film collaboration with Guillaume Ribot.

#### LES FILMS DU POISSON

Founded in 1995, Les Films du Poisson brings together Yaël Fogiel, Laetitia Gonzalez, Estelle Fialon and Inès Daïen Dasi around a demanding editorial line, guided by curiosity, passion, a taste for discovery, and a love of authors. Les Films du Poisson has produced over a hundred feature films, documentaries, and short films for cinema and television to date—films distributed worldwide and regularly awarded: five César Awards, and several prizes at Cannes, including Best Director, a critics' award, and a Caméra d'Or, as well as selections in the most prestigious festivals—Cannes, Berlin, Venice, Sundance, Toronto... and an Academy Award nomination. The company's recent filmography includes *Queens of Drama* by Alexis Langlois (2024 Cannes Critics' Week), *Little Girl Blue* by Mona Achache (2023 Cannes International Film Festival Special Screening), *Orlando: My Political Biography* by Paul B. Preciado (winner of 4 awards at the 2023 Berlin International Film Festival). Producer of Guillaume Ribot's *All I Had Was Nothingness* (Berlinale Special), Les Films du Poisson is also the co-producer of *The Safe House* by Lionel Baier, selected in Competition at the 2025 Berlin International Film Festival.

# **DOMINIQUE LANZMANN (PRODUCER)**

Dominique Lanzmann, M.D., PhD, practicing in hospital and nutrition researcher. She is the author of numerous scientific articles, and a book published in France by Odile Jacob, *Longevity Diet*. Since the death of her husband Claude Lanzmann and their son Felix in 2018 and 2017, she has been the universal legatee and holder of the moral rights to Claude Lanzmann's work. She manages Les Films Aleph, a film company set up by Claude Lanzmann in 1973 to produce *Shoah*. Together with Estelle Fialon (Les Films du Poisson), she has produced Guillaume Ribot's *All I Had Was Nothingness* (Berlinale Special).

She presides over the Association Claude et Felix Lanzmann, A.C.F.L., which inscribed *Shoah* on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register and continues to ensure the continuity of Claude Lanzmann's cinematographic, literary and journalistic work.

# **SVETLANA VAYNBLAT (EDITOR)**

Born in Saint Petersburg, Svetlana Vaynblat studied classical music in New York, before starting in cinema as the film editor of *Her Name is Sabine (Elle s'appelle Sabine)* by Sandrine Bonnaire (FIPRESCI Prize at the Cannes Film Festival 2007 and a César nomination for Best Documentary Film). This was followed by a series of films for cinema and television, including *Maddened by His Absence (J'enrage de son absence)*, selected at Cannes Critics' Week in 2012, and *Faithfull (Marianne Faithfull : Fleur d'âme)* by Sandrine Bonnaire, which received the FIPA d'Or for Best Musical Film in 2018.

Svetlana's recent filmography includes *Jane Campion, Cinema Woman* by Julie Bertuccelli (2022 Cannes Classics), produced by Estelle Fialon, as well as two films by Guillaume Ribot, *Ukraine 1933: Seeds of Hunger* and *The Black Book*, and *Before It's Too Late* by Mathieu Amalric (2024 FIDMarseille). *All I Had Was Nothingness* is her 3rd feature film collaboration with Guillaume Ribot.

# THE RESTORATION OF THE *SHOAH* OUTTAKES

The images used in *All I Had Was Nothingness* are excerpts from the original outtakes for *Shoah*, shot by Claude Lanzmann and preserved by the United States Holocaust Museum (USHMM). The selected footage was scanned in 4K from the original 16mm interpositive prints by the Colorlab laboratory in Washington, DC. They were restored and color graded at the Traffic studio in Paris by David Haddad, under the supervision of Guillaume Ribot.

## CLAUDE LANZMANN'S SHOAH

The film *Shoah* was exceptional both in its scope and historical accuracy. It was the first on-the-ground investigation, using personal accounts, recounting the Nazi genocide of the Jews.

When the film was released in 1985, the persecution and extermination of European Jews during the Second World War had only just started becoming a collective reality. Since the postwar period, the work of remembrance had been partially neglected. It really begun with the publication of The Destruction of the European Jews, in which the American historian Paul Hilberg, dissects the mechanisms of Nazi ideology, and the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961. The impact of *Shoah* was explosive. Claude Lanzmann managed to establish the horror of the genocide. He didn't just tell the story, he brought it back to life, he portrayed it with a brutal sense of immediacy. So much so that the title of his film (which in Hebrew means "storm, disaster") was instantly adopted in many countries. It named an event that, until then, had been devoid of semantic reality, and was therefore in danger of being forgotten. In many ways, *Shoah* is a monumental film. Crucial because it confronts and exposes the mass murders that its perpetrators tried in vain to erase.

#### **KEY DATES**

Berlin.

1973	Claude Lanzmann began historical research as part of the investigative work that led to <i>Shoah</i> .
1976	Claude Lanzmann started shooting images used for <i>Shoah</i> . A shoot lasting 5 years, ending in 1981.
1980	Claude Lanzmann started editing his film, completing it in 1985.
1985	Shoah was released in cinemas, in France, on April 30, 1985.
1986	Shoah was screened at the Berlinale. It won the FIPRESCI Prize out of the festival, as well as the OCIC Award – Honorable Mention and the Caligari Film Award.
	Lanzmann's film has also won the BAFTA for Best Documentary and the Flaherty Documentary Award in the UK. Other awards include an Honorary César in France, and the Best Documentary award at the Rotterdam International Film Festival.
2012	Shoah was digitally restored by Why Not Productions, with the support of La Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah and the Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée, as well as the participation of IFC Films and The Criterion Collection.
2023	The film <i>Shoah</i> and the Audio Archive Witnesses to the History of Shoah (200 hours) are inscribed in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register since 2023, by A.C.F.L. Association Claude and Felix Lanzmann and Jewish Museum of

# **CREDITS**

NARRATION BASED ON "Le Lièvre de Patagonie" (The Patagonian Hare) by

Claude Lanzmann

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IMAGES Created by Claude Lanzmann when he was making

"Shoah"

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DIRECTOR Guillaume Ribot

PRODUCERS Estelle Fialon

Dominique Lanzmann

EDITOR Svetlana Vaynblat

NARRATOR'S VOICE Guillaume Ribot

MIXING Vincent Arnardi

SOUND EDITING Jean-Pierre Halbwachs

ADDITIONAL SOUND EDITING Valérie Arlaud

RESTORATION & COLOR GRADING David Haddad

GRAPHIC DESIGN Arnaud Jarsaillon

PRODUCTION MANAGEMENT Anne Le Grevès

POST-PRODUCTION CONSULTANT Solène Belleux

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS Yaël Fogiel

Laetitia Gonzalez

Johan Broutin

PRODUCED BY Les Films du Poisson

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# **INTERNATIONAL SALES**



# Fionnuala Jamison, Managing Director

shanna.segond@mk2.com

#### Emmanuel Pisarra, Head of Acquisitions

emmanuel.pisarra@mk2.com

Quentin Bohanna, Sales

quentin.bohanna@mk2.com

Elise Cochin, Sales

elise.cochin@mk2.com

Anne-Laure Barbarit, Festival Manager

anne-laure.barbarit@mk2.com

Alya Belgaroui, Head of Marketing

Alya.belgaroui@mk2.com

Visit our website

www.mk2films.com

intlsales@mk2.com