

Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* Historians Reassess a Classic Documentary

by Stuart Liebman

The origins of one of the most famous short films ever made lie in the vivid installations of an exhibition held at the Musée Pédagogique in Paris between the late autumn of 1954 and January 1955. The pictures and wall texts commemorated the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps during the last months of World War II. Henri Michel, a distinguished historian who headed the quasi-official French Committee for the History of the Second World War, was one of the curators. He was ably seconded by a young French-Jewish *résistante* named Olga Wormser, who had evaded deportation and subsequently devoted herself for the next decade to tracking the fates of French political and "racial" prisoners sent to Nazi camps in Germany, Austria, and Poland. Heartened by the French public's overwhelmingly positive response to their initiative, the two sought an ally who could amplify their educational efforts by making a documentary film about the topic. Enter the larger-than-life figure of Anatole Dauman, a twenty-nine-year-old, Warsaw-born, assimilated Jew and decorated hero of the French Resistance, who had embarked on a career as a film producer. Four years before, he had cofounded Argos Films, and the small company could already boast of a number of successful, if at times highly controversial, short films.

To create the kind of work Michel and Wormser wanted in the mid-1950s was a very unusual idea, something that had, in fact, rarely been attempted since the years immediately following the war's end. For perhaps obvious reasons, however, Dauman and his other Jewish partners quickly signed on to the project, undaunted by the commercial risks such a grim subject might pose. Barely six months later, thanks in part to the much needed assistance of the Polish communist government, *Nuit et brouillard*, known in English as *Night and Fog*, was ready to be screened. To the countless millions all over the world who have seen it over the last half century, it has become a touchstone of morally and politically engaged filmmaking. Those who care about films also know it to be a superb exemplar of cinematic art. If its brevity and documentary status have rarely propelled it onto

most film critics' "ten best" lists, *Night and Fog* is, and has remained, one of the signal artistic achievements of French—and world—post-World War II cinema.

Its primary author was the brilliant young documentarian Alain Resnais who already had to his credit several films about artists and art works, at least one of which—*Les Statues meurent aussi* (*Statues Also Die*), made for Argos Films in 1953—had earned the ire of French authorities for its passionate, often biting unmasking of French colonialism. Resnais, however, was only the first

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and Hanns Eisler, the German-Jewish composer of the communist German Democratic Republic's national anthem, was responsible for the groundbreaking musical score. Together they worked almost without friction to produce a meditation on the memory of violence and human degradation,

paradoxically rendered in an exquisitely innovative, reflexive film form.

This masterwork has now finally received a comprehensive critical study fully up to the measure of *Night and Fog's* importance. I do not hesitate to call French historian Sylvie Lindeperg's marvelously detailed study, "*Nuit et brouillard*": *Un film dans l'histoire*, a major work of contemporary film historical scholarship. Nowadays, it too often seems as if academic critical discourse shies away from or even disdains such an encomium: perhaps the very notion of a masterwork has become so contested, indeed deflated, over recent decades that it has become irrelevant, passé. For me, however, Lindeperg's book eminently deserves such a designation. When, after all, was the last time you read a book about a key film (or films), one that affords genuinely original historical and aesthetic insights, conveyed not only without recourse to specious, obscurantist academic jargon and "methodologies," but rather in finely wrought prose? That it has not yet been picked up for translation by an English-language academic press (which are admittedly going through some very parlous times), is a scandal.

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**Concentrationary Cinema:
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Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955)**
edited by Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman.
New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2011.
338 pp., illus. Hardcover: \$95.00.

**Uncovering the Holocaust:
The International Reception
of *Night and Fog***
edited by Ewout van der Knaap. London and
New York: Wallflower Press, 2006. Distributed in
the United States by Columbia University Press.
198 pp., illus. Paperback: \$26.00.

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This iconic image of Holocaust survivors is taken from footage shot by the Soviets in Auschwitz in the Spring of 1945, about three months after the concentration camp was liberated (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

tion to the production timelines provided by archival documents forms the admirable basis of her studies. She adds details about intentions and the filmmaking process in published and recently conducted interviews with many of the surviving principals. Throughout, her writing is informed by her reading of the most sophisticated theoretical and historical writings on the Vichy regime and the Holocaust. Her sensitive, readable analysis of the form of the film itself grounds her observations.

Among her many contributions to an understanding of the film, I find her account of the engagement of Olga Wormser (*née* Jungelson, later Wormser-Migot) in the project to be especially notable. Wormser, the least heralded contributor to Resnais's group, was, Lindeperg argues, crucial to the project's success. With Henri Michel, she had helped to devise the film's original narrative line based on two pioneering volumes they coedited in 1954: the famous anthology of texts by survivors, *Tragédie de la déportation*, as well as a collection of scholarly essays on the system of German concentration camps. Wormser also offered essential assistance to Resnais as he searched for still and cinematic images in Polish, Dutch, and

other archives. Lindeperg begins and ends her book with a sympathetic account of Wormser's life, and she subsequently supplemented her account in a short volume, *Univers concentrationnaire et génocide*, which she coauthored with the leading contemporary scholar of the Holocaust in France, Annette Wieviorka. Together they restore the contours of a major, alas too little known figure. Wormser's work on *Night and Fog* represented, they suggest, only the midpoint of her life-long quest to understand the demonically rationalized, sadistic cruelties of the German "concentrationary" system. *Night and Fog* was, of course, much more than that: it was also a work of film art of the highest caliber.

As Lindeperg makes clear, from its inception in the spring of 1955, *Night and Fog* has often provoked as much controversy as acclaim. Indeed, no sooner was it ready for distribution than the French censors insisted that certain images be removed because, presumably, they undermined the postwar republic's carefully contrived myth of a unified national resistance to Nazi tyranny during the Occupation. Despite the fact that the film had been made in part with funds from the French government, Resnais reluctantly had to mask out a still of a French *gendarme*,

wearing a distinctive *képi*, guarding one of the many concentration camps located on French soil in order even to obtain the right to show his film in public. That was only the beginning of his travails. The German Embassy in France soon thereafter tried (successfully) to have it withdrawn as an official French entry at Cannes because of the alleged prejudice it created toward a now peaceful ally that was about to be accepted into the NATO military alliance. This ham-handed intervention ironically made the film into a cause célèbre among intellectuals in France and West Germany, eventually leading to intense debates in the Bundestag and, even more surprisingly, to the film's wider distribution (though, unlike the original, exclusively in cheaper black-and-white format) in German schools.

Surprising, too, has been the multiplicity of interpretations *Night and Fog* has garnered in the many different countries in which it has been screened. In the later chapters, Lindeperg describes the ways in which *Night and Fog* was received in nations across the globe. From the United States and the Soviet bloc, the countries responsible for liberating the camps, to the now divided remnants of the perpetrator state, Germany,

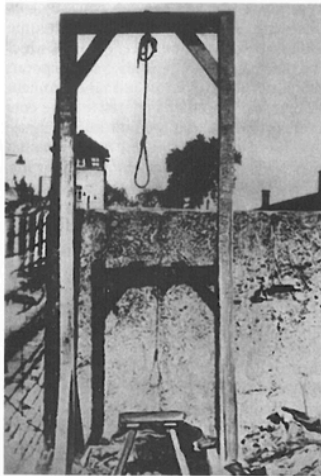
and to Israel, which asserted its claim to speak for the European Jews who had been Hitler's principal victims—each put its own “spin” on the film. That national ideologies and political calculations informed its reception is amply demonstrated in the generally fine collection *Uncovering the Holocaust*, edited by Ewout van der Knaap. Lindeperg's accounts duly acknowledge the contributions in this collection, though she often meaningfully corrects or expands them. This is particularly true of her discussion of the American reception of the film, which adds a great deal to the rather weak study by Warren Lubline.

The essays reveal that the film has been read in radically divergent ways in different countries over the decades. While it obviously focuses on the Nazis' premeditated crimes against humanity, Resnais and Cayrol themselves claimed that their work was motivated by and must necessarily be understood in the context of the sadly not dissimilar crimes perpetrated by France during its then raging, brutal colonial war in Algeria. This is a dimension that was just barely visible, even in France, at the time, though the idea was later given new life by an American scholar.¹ Curiously, even as his filmmaking colleagues were making such claims, Henri Michel was touring with *Night and Fog*, actively touting the film's universalist moral ethos as an emanation of French civilization, something he believed to be of particular value to France's colonial subjects in the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. Such a reading, which was congenial to French official circles, was not dominant in West Germany, however. There it was acclaimed as the first film to confront the mass murder of European Jewry (though not yet called the Holocaust), even though Resnais and Cayrol had quite deliberately sidestepped any direct address to the question of the Nazi Judeocide. Indeed, Cayrol himself had ultimately removed key references to Jews that had been in the script. The explanation for the German reception lies in part to the way the eminent Romanian-Jewish poet Paul Celan's somewhat free translation of Cayrol's words into German had reinvested them with references to the Jews as Hitler's particular targets.

As Nitzan Lebovic makes clear in his excellent historical essay, Israeli censors also expressed misgivings about the film's disregard for the “Jewish perspective.” The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 intensified the controversy, ultimately leading to Israel's Council on Motion Pictures' effort to control its screening with a film providing a “balancing” Zionist point of view. Decades later, moreover, some Jewish scholars abroad began to criticize Cayrol's voice-over narration for its paucity of reference to Jews. (They overlooked the fact that its single verbal mention of a potential Jewish deportee, but then only as one of many equal victims, was supplemented by the Jewish stars seen on the clothing of some of the victims in the clips from the Westerborg camp in Holland

that Resnais used.) Some even went so far as to complain that *Night and Fog* constituted a distracting cover-up of what we now call the Holocaust. “*Night and Fog* omits the particularity of the Jewish Holocaust,” wrote Robert Michael in the pages of *Cineaste* in 1984 (Vol. XIII, No. 4), “and, in doing so...it silently buries six million Jews in universal genocide.”

This is ironic, since many educators who use films to introduce the topic of the Holocaust to their classes have celebrated—quite incorrectly—*Night and Fog* as not only the first to represent the Judeocide but also as a prescient warning about the dangers of anti-Semitism. (Indeed, in France and Germany it eventually became a regular part of the curriculum for teenage schoolchildren, and many churches and civic groups screened it. Even today, when a major anti-Semitic incident occurs in France, the film is often pressed into service once more on national television.) If, however, *Night and Fog* did allow audiences of nearly sixty years ago an oblique glance at the agony of the Nazis' Jewish victims at a time when general interest in (and, certainly, knowledge of) the grim facts and statistics had radically receded from worldwide public awareness, the idea that they had or should have confined their attention to the fate of the Jews during the war would have been utterly foreign to Resnais and his team. Their perspective was deliberately broader: they consciously aimed at a universal humanist perspective toward all the victims. In their film, therefore, Jews are present among the victims, but at best as supporting players to the many others—Polish intellectuals, POWs, forced laborers, and political deportees—who had suffered in the camps.



A concentration camp gallows as seen in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

The principal goal of *Concentrationary Cinema*, Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman's new anthology of texts about *Night and Fog*, is to underscore precisely the wider historical and moral angle from which they believe that the film should be viewed. They and their coauthors, however, also wish to extrapolate from their analyses of the film to make far more ambitious conclusions about its import and meaning for our contemporary world. Their basic argument is that *Night and Fog* has been misperceived to be a Holocaust film. Rather, *Night and Fog* aimed at evoking what they call “the concentrationary,” a word that sounds awkward in English, and for good reason: it is a literal translation of part of the title of a famous French book, *L'Univers concentrationnaire* by David Rousset, a former Trotskyist and concentration-camp inmate. This groundbreaking study, completed in August 1945 and published in 1946, was perhaps the first in France to unmask the camp system, highlighting its deadly ironies, indeed, its lethal absurdities. Rousset had in mind the kind of camp to which most political prisoners like Cayrol and himself were sent—Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Mauthausen. These were concentration camps located in Germany and Austria; horrible beyond measure, they were certainly distinctly different from the Polish “extermination” or “death” camps like Treblinka, Belzec, or Auschwitz-Birkenau to which Jews (and many Romany people) were sent to their deaths, often within minutes of their arrival. Most Jews, in fact, did not experience the “concentrationary space” Rousset defined. This was the very space Resnais attempted to portray in his nondocumentary, elliptically exquisite evocation of camp horrors.

Toward this end, he employed, in Pollock and Silverman's words, “radical techniques of montage and disorientation and camera movements to expose invisible knowledge hidden by a normalized, documentary presentation of a reality that could become bland and opaque unless agitated by disturbing juxtapositions and prolonged visual attentiveness.” Connecting “past to present, here to there,” Resnais's strategies attempted “to shock us out of comforting dichotomies that keep the past ‘over there,’” the better to revivify engagement with the ongoing dilemmas of living in a post-Nazi concentrationary era burdened by sensational revelations about the horrors of the Soviet gulag and French colonial atrocities. In this new historical period, *Night and Fog* assumed—and continues to insist on—new obligations for viewers and citizens: “to see ‘what it means that ‘everything is [now] possible.’”

This paramoral concern should be of universal general interest, no more relevant for Jews than anyone else. As for Hannah Arendt, a major theorist of totalitarianism and one of the key thinkers Pollock and Silverman draw on to theorize this new era,

vitality at stake in the realized idea of the camps is nothing less than “the very concept of the human.” In each of their essays, therefore, they and their collaborators move from “micrological,” exceptionally detailed comments about passages of the film to much larger claims that operate at a conceptual altitude rather loftier than might initially appear to be relevant when seeing the thirty-two-minute-long *Night and Fog*. (Sometimes this process seems to be reversed, as the authors move from large abstractions to a close reading of the filmic text.) Many of the contributors, moreover, regularly invoke a panoply of European intellectual luminaries—Theodor Adorno, Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, Zygmunt Bauman, Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, and Aby Warburg are among the most often cited—to add dimensions of implication for which the film comes to serve at times primarily as a kind of metaphor or symbol.

Some of the claims are very large. Max Silverman draws on Cayrol's rhetorical self-conception as a Lazarus raised from the dead to conjure a new form of “concentrationary memory” that, in his opinion, marks our era. A Lazarean art rooted in such memory will, he writes, “be founded on a ‘doubling’ (and troubling) effect...to cast us into a state of the ‘in-between,’ ‘into a sensation of floating, a state of mental and rootless wandering.’” An art rooted in this “fearful remembering” will exist as “a haunting, (and hence a disturbance) of the present, a site of the in-between, of doublings and overlappings, of an uncanny superimposition of the visible and the invisible, the here and the elsewhere, and the living and the dead.” These passages are not atypical of the difficult, at times rather abstruse writing in many of the essays, and they afford a sense of the kinds of speculative ambitions animating the authors.

Readers of such texts should avoid, however, the impulse simply to throw up their hands at the sometimes high-flying terminology derived from continental master thinkers deployed by highly educated university professors. I admit to being challenged sometimes, and for quite a while, by what is being claimed in such passages. I found myself rereading, weighing, and testing what was on the page. This was certainly intellectually taxing. Ultimately, however, the effort to parse what many of the authors



Massive mounds of footwear, seen in this image from *Night and Fog*, bear testament to the function of the Nazi extermination camps (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

wrote to glean new insights proved very worthwhile. There are moments, for example, when Silverman brings his terms to bear in an uncanny way on passages of the film I had seen many times before, but had never before attempted to fully make sense of them. In the famous opening shots showing the landscape surrounding a camp from inside its perimeter, for example, he notes that “a multiple splitting and doubling takes place as the barbed wire acts as an ambivalent conduit for a new vision: the vision from the present looking in at the past is doubled by the vision from the past looking back at the present, outside and inside the camp are no longer mutually exclusive, and filming itself is composed of a vision split by the barbed wire.” Some may be inclined to regard such comments as an overreading, even a radical remaking of the filmmakers' intentions in constructing these shots. In all candor, sometimes I thought so, too. At others, however, as in the example just cited, such remarks persuasively opened up a “gesture of cinema” to a possible implicit meaning I had overlooked.

Invariably in essays of such complexity and scope, many small but consequential historical errors are bound to occur. The very fine French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman is wrong to say that nearly a million and a half people died at Majdanek; current research puts the number at roughly one tenth that number. Nor is he correct when stating that most visual documentation of Auschwitz comes from a film he calls *Chronique de la libération d'Auschwitz*, which he fails to identify as a Soviet propaganda work that was never completed and revealed only in a compilation film constructed by German filmmakers some forty

years after the camp's liberation. In their introduction, Pollock and Silverman claim that Billy Wilder directed an early American “re-education” film about the camps called *Death Mills*, shown to the German public in the early months of 1946. Wilder, however, only briefly served as a consultant. As the memoirs of Czech Jewish director, Hanuš Burger, clearly demonstrate,² credit for the film primarily belongs to Burger and scriptwriter Oskar Seidlin, a gay German-Jewish journalist (later a distinguished Ohio State University professor of German literature), who worked for the American military govern-

ment of occupation. And Pollock and Silverman are wrong to claim that the eminent Soviet cinematographer Roman Karmen was the only cameraman who filmed the Majdanek camp when it was captured virtually intact by the Red Army in July 1944. At least eight other Poles and Russians share that honor.

These (and other) mistakes are troubling, and they point to how much more historical research on the earliest attempts to represent the Holocaust and the camps still needs to be completed. In the meanwhile, however, the kind of intensity that often emerges from the dialectical relationship between intellectual brilliance and obscurity “haunting” many of the texts can open one's eyes to speculative dimensions of the visible text of *Night and Fog*. In the best of them, like Silverman's and Pollock's own contributions, as well as Debarati Sanyal's extraordinary essay on allegoresis, Didi-Huberman's on the afterlife and readability of images of the Shoah, or Emma Wilson's on the tropes of facility in the still and moving images Resnais used, much of enormous value can be learned from those who seek new ways to understand this still elusive, still compelling work. Whatever their flaws, these essays are whetstones to sharpen one's thinking. ■

End Notes:

¹ See Charles Krantz, “Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard*: A Historical and Cultural Analysis,” in Sanford Pinker and Jack Fischel, eds., *Holocaust Studies Annual*, Vol. III [1985] (Greenwood, FL: Penkevill Press, 1987), pp. 107–120; and “Teaching *Night and Fog*: History and Historiography,” in *Film & History*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (February 1985): 2–15.

² *Der Frühling war es wert* (Munich: Bertelsmann, 1977). *Night and Fog* is distributed in DVD by The Criterion Collection, www.criterion.com.