The Cinematic Power of Night and Fog

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A contemplative camera glides fluidly through a vacant field, one that appears like any other. As it glides, somber images of barbed wire, dilapidated barracks, and rusted railroad tracks beckon the audience to witness the ruins of the Aushwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. “Going slowly along the tracks, seeking what?” asks narrator Michel Bouquet. These questions are more rhetorical than anything, allowing the audience to question their own moral and social obligations to the unfathomable. For the sake of humanity, it is crucial to remember the events of the Holocaust and deny them from happening again. Released only ten years after the end of World War II, *Night and Fog (1955)* was one of the first Holocaust films to represent the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. Being a documentary about such an event, the film poses several problems with how it represents this topic. “How does one document inconceivable horrors and incalculable pain? How does one maintain the image’s power to shock without evoking either total disbelief or incapacitating grief?” (Flitterman-Lewis, 205). Even the filmmakers are aware of how futile documenting such an event would be: “What hope do we have of truly capturing this reality?” the narrator continues. In order to express the inexpressible, Resnais and writer Jean Cayrol use a powerful tactic of presentation. As noted by Fitterman-Lewis, “a horror too great to be encompassed must be approached obliquely, even metaphorically.” (209) *Night and Fog* approaches this difficult expression through the use of juxtaposition and carefully structured narration, which, when combined, facilitate what Renais calls “constructive forgetting.” In perhaps the best way to capture the horrific reality of the Holocaust, the cinematic strategies in *Night and Fog* assist audiences in perceiving a grim reflection of
one of the most shocking crimes in the annals of human history.

Alternating between temporalities, the present and past are indicated by color film and archival footage recorded by the Nazis themselves and the liberators of the concentration camps. The arrangement of these images gives the audience two perspectives of the same event. It is effective to begin with the present, seemingly distanced from the horror. Then, it is necessary for viewers to be thrust into the revulsion of the past. Suffering victims, medical experiments, and immense piles of human hair are only a few examples of the atrocities shown in the archival footage, an exercise in the grim perils of forgetting. It is by this cinematic technique, the alternating sequences of time, that the director is able to place viewers into the event itself. The various tracking shots of the “present” (as in 1955, or even now) are a time to reflect on the macabre images and narration the audience has witnessed. This time for reflection is vital because it allows audiences to process a mental image of the camps (“another planet…”), which is horrifically crafted by the poetic voice-over. The tracking shots have an additional meaning, one that presents a vast difference between the viewing of archival footage (“fact”) and providing the audience with a subjective view of the massacre’s aftermath. This subjective witnessing of various visual representations—buildings, a field, barbed wire, bunks, ceilings, ovens—creates a distinct mental world for the audience. Engaging the viewer personally, the images present a world that is familiar—the same world they live in. “A disturbing sense of strangeness results from the juxtaposition of the visibly horrifying documentary material and the impassive calm of the vacant landscapes.” (210) Indeed, it is admittedly difficult to accept that such tremendous carnage could occur in a place that appears all too recognizable. The shocking truth is that the event and its victims could be anywhere, anyone, at any time.
The tenses used by the narrator also create a unique platform for audience participation and contemplation. During the archival footage, the narration is voiced in the present tense, while the tracking shots of the present-day camps are accompanied by, for most of the film, narration in the past tense. Consequently, the structure of Night and Fog renders the past and present as interconnected moments of time, prodding the audience to concurrently witness and contemplate the tremendous horrors of the Holocaust.

The way the audience is addressed within the film is another component that makes Night and Fog so powerful. A crucial transition in audience engagement occurs during the film. At first, the audience is regarded as an impartial observer of the footage, not talked to directly as Cayrol describes the calculated process of constructing a concentration camp. As the film progresses, an “I-You” (“As I am speaking to you at this moment…”) relationship is established between narrator and audience, and finally becomes “We” (And here we are…looking at the ruins today.”) This change explicitly addresses the audience, drawing them even closer to the events. “Who is responsible?” the narrator continues, including the audience in his question. The audience is then expected to participate in the moral and social implications, to be aware of their own responsibility when confronted with such carnage. “Presence, responsibility, and active engagement make both viewer and filmmaker witnesses to history, projecting the film’s implications beyond the theater and into the future, binding them in the social processes and moral obligations of human culture.” (215)

How does one begin to illustrate the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust? The
dimension of suffering cannot be demonstrated by mere sight and sound. However, through the cinematic techniques of juxtaposition, a deliberately constructed narration, and audience engagement, Resnais has provided a strategic viewing platform that depicts the horrors of the Holocaust without trivialization. By expressing the inexpressible, Night and Fog imparts audiences with the crucial responsibilities of reflection and remembrance.
Works Cited