

**TEACHING NIGHT AND FOG:
PUTTING A DOCUMENTARY FILM IN HISTORY**

**Donald Reid
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**

Night and Fog is the deportation seen and recounted by Christ... Alain Resnais offers the left cheek and it is we who receive the slaps smack in the face, each shot being a well-deserved blow. —François Truffaut¹

I have shown *Night and Fog* (1956), Alain Resnais's documentary film on the Nazi concentration camps, for twenty-five years in courses in modern European and modern world history. The film "presented the first graphic depiction of the working of the camps and of the techniques of mass murder used by the Nazis since the end of the first Nuremberg Trial in 1946."² It is a work of memory and of history and of the ambiguities and conflicts that the interplay of these entails. Spurred by the Network of Remembrance (*Réseau du souvenir*) in France, composed of deported resister survivors and the families of those who had died in the camps, and commissioned by the French republic's official Committee of the History of the Second World War to commemorate—to bring together in memory—the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the camps, *Night and Fog* takes viewers on the journey to the camps when they were in operation and, in 1955, when the film was made.³

We see no footage of prisoners leaving the camps, because they never truly left behind the experience. Resnais suggests this will be true of the experience of viewing the camps for the audience of *Night and Fog* as well. Jean Cayrol, a Catholic poet and resister arrested in 1942 and sent to the Mauthausen camp in 1943, wrote the script for the film. At its release, he explained that *Night and Fog* is not a "chilled relic." Rather

¹*Cahiers du Cinéma*, February 1956, reprinted in Richard Raskin, *Nuit et Brouillard* by Alain Resnais (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1987), 138. I would like to thank Daniel Letouzey for his close reading of this essay.

²Harold Marcuse, "The Revival of Holocaust Awareness in West Germany, Israel, and the United States," in Carole Fink, Philipp Gassert, and Detlef Junker, eds., *1968: The World Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 142.

³For excellent accounts of the making and reception of *Night and Fog*, see Christian Delage, "Nuit et Brouillard: a turning point in the history and memory of the Holocaust" in Toby Hagith and Joanna Newman, eds., *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television Since 1933* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), 127-39; and Sylvie Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard" *Un Film dans l'histoire* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007).

it is "a living witnessing,"⁴ in a meaning consonant with that given by those who witness for their faith: "The cloth [*la toile*] of the movie screen is not the cloth [*le linge*] of Veronica. [*Night and Fog*] is a film that burns the eyes."⁵ Unlike the veil of Veronica, the film has no miraculous qualities: It can neither restore sight to the blind nor raise the dead. And it cannot convert unbelievers or get authorities to punish the guilty, as Veronica's veil convinced the emperor Tiberius of the divinity of Christ and to send Pilate into exile. But the film has been endowed with talismanic powers in France. After the desecration of a Jewish cemetery in France in 1990, the response of a horrified nation was to broadcast *Night and Fog* simultaneously on all French television channels.

The first time I showed the film was to a class in modern European history, following a lecture and reading on Nazi Germany. I was taken aback when two students left the room crying. I arranged to see each individually. The first told me she came from a family where anti-Semitic comments were made regularly and she felt complicit. The second was angry: "Why did you show this to me? I was a happier person before I saw it." Both students responded in ways I think Resnais and Cayrol would have understood and appreciated, recognizing that confrontation with the camp experience changes us in deeply painful ways.⁶

Knowing how individuals living in a time and place, and with their own understandings of the world and their own needs and interests, evoke the past, and how historically-situated audiences confront these evocations, is critical to students of history. When screening a documentary such as *Night and Fog*, I start by reminding students that, as with all works of history, documentaries are creative works. Resnais explained, "I've always refused the word 'memory' à propos of my work. I'd use the

⁴ *Les Lettres françaises*, February 9, 1956, reprinted in Raskin, *Nuit et Brouillard*, 137.

⁵ *Le Monde*, April 11, 1956, reprinted in Raskin, *Nuit et Brouillard*, 38.

⁶ This event took place in 1982. In keeping with my contention that students should be aware of the historical specificity of the reception of texts, I think that greater dissemination both of material on the Holocaust and of images of graphic violence have almost certainly changed the way American students today view *Night and Fog*. The same is true in France. For a long time, when anti-Semitic acts or troubling issues about French collaboration during the war were in the news in France, the Ministry of National Education invariably asked middle schools and high schools to screen *Night and Fog*. Yet, in 1993-94, a teacher commented that "for twenty years, I showed *Night and Fog* to students who had been made sensitive by what had happened to people; for the first time, this year I will not screen it, because the students watch this documentary like a film of Stallone, now that violence has been made commonplace by movies." Éric Conan and Henry Rousso, *Vichy: An Ever-Present Past*, trans. Nathan Bracher (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 188-89.

word ‘imagination.’”⁷ The point is not that Resnais made up anything about the camps. He insisted on working with a survivor—Cayrol—to try to assure this did not happen. But, in turn, Resnais knew that “memory” is not transferable; his aim was to make the unimaginable imaginable. A documentary of only 32 minutes, the running time for *Night and Fog*, involves many decisions about what to show and not to show, what to say and not to say. As a documentary, *Night and Fog* is composed of numerous documents drawn from a variety of sources. Why were these documents created—most not for the use Resnais makes them—and why does Resnais present them in the order he does? What interpretation is he offering viewers as we move in the film from the present to the past and back to the present, now charged with a knowledge and awareness we might have lacked before?

Let us start with the title. *Night and Fog* refers to a decree of December 7, 1941, mandating that resisters in western-occupied territories, whose cases could not be resolved immediately, would be deported. Cayrol tells us in *Night and Fog* that concentration camps had the qualities of “nocturnal stagings that so pleased the Nazis.”⁸ The designation *Nacht und Nebel* (NN) comes from Richard Wagner’s *Das Rheingold*, in which Alberich recites a magical incantation to render himself invisible to his slaves in order to torment them. However, the Nazi decree was intended to avoid trials and make captured resisters disappear: NN prisoners were not allowed to receive mail; all requests for information on NN prisoners’ location or survival were rejected. Keeping populations in occupied nations uninformed as to the fate of NN prisoners was seen as a way of controlling them. The very nebulous nature of the decree, the fact that NN prisoners often did not learn of their designation for some time and did not understand what NN meant, made it the site of morbid fantasizing during and after the war. However, NN did not refer to extermination; it concerned political prisoners, not those deported because of religion or ethnicity.

Cayrol had been an NN prisoner, but the vast majority of deportees were not. Why did Resnais and Cayrol choose the title *Night and Fog* for the film? Postwar France sought to repress confrontation with the extent of the Vichy regime’s collaboration with Germany.⁹ All French citizens had experienced hardship during the

⁷Jamie Monaco, *Alain Resnais* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 11.

⁸Jean Cayrol, *Nuit et brouillard* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 21.

⁹Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Joan Wolf, *Harnessing the Holocaust: The Politics of Memory in France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). In order to receive the right to screen *Night and Fog* in France, Alain Resnais had to mask the distinctive *képi* of a French gendarme guarding Jewish prisoners awaiting deportation to the East in a still photograph taken in 1941 at the Pithiviers transit camp in France. The postwar French state could not allow recognition of the extent of the wartime French state’s collaboration in deportation.

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war and it was difficult for many of them not to resent camp survivors for trumping their own tales of deprivation and loss. The concern of deportees and the historians with whom they worked on *Night and Fog* was that the experience of the camps would be forgotten—that the postwar world would, as the Nazis had decreed, relegate the experience to the night and fog. Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi, writing in Italy on the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the camps, lamented that it was now considered “bad taste to speak of the concentration camps.”¹⁰ This situation angered and frustrated Cayrol as well. Though he was a respected poet, Cayrol had trouble publishing his *Poems of the Night and Fog* immediately after the war.¹¹ Shortly before Resnais approached him to write the script for his film, Cayrol had a revealing experience. At Mauthausen, Cayrol’s fellow prisoners had hid him under a work table where he had written poetry as they worked. Cayrol lost these poems when the camp was liberated, but they were returned to him by an anonymous German in 1955. When Cayrol sought a publisher for the poems, he was told that it was time for “survivors to forget, to be quiet,” and the poems were not published until 1997.¹² *Night and Fog* was a response to this environment. With the wide dissemination of the film, reference to “night and fog” became a way of affirming that memory of the camps and those sent to them must not be repressed or forgotten in line with the Nazi decree of 1941.

After screening *Night and Fog*, I begin by asking students: “What is the subject of the film?” Invariably, they answer that it is about Germans killing Jews. I then ask how they know this. If they listen to the soundtrack (or read the subtitles) of the film, they will see that “German” is used only once, and then to identify a “German worker” sent to the camps. If students place the film into historical context, they see that in 1956 West Germany wanted nothing to do with foreign presentations of the Nazi past.

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Although this censorship was mentioned in the press in 1956, it did not become a focal point of commentators on the film until the 1970s, when the French confronted Vichy collaboration in the Holocaust. Lindeperg, “*Nuit et Brouillard*,” 143-156, 228. In the edition of the 1956 film widely distributed in the United States (Video Yesteryear, 1981), the bar over the *képi* appears at 5 minutes 15 seconds into the videocassette. Ewout van der Knapp is right to question the removal of the bar in the re-release of the film in France in 1992 (and on the DVD released in the US by Criterion Films in 1003). The scene is 4 minutes 45 seconds into the DVD of the film. (All other times given in this essay are from this DVD.) The bar used to censor the *képi* has, he notes, “become part of the film’s history.” “The Construction of Memory in *Nuit et Brouillard*” in Ewout van der Knapp, ed., *Uncovering the Holocaust: The International Reception of Night and Fog* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2006), 8.

¹⁰Primo Levi, “Deportees. Anniversary” [1955] in *The Black Hole of Auschwitz*, trans. Sharon Wood (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 3.

¹¹Jean Cayrol, *Poèmes de la nuit et du brouillard* (Paris: Editions Pierre Seghers, 1946).

¹²Jean Cayrol, *Alerte aux ombres 1944-1945* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997), 5.

West Germany joined NATO in 1955 and began rearmament; it was engaged in building a new Europe with France. Although Resnais and Cayrol were careful to attribute the concentration camps to the Nazis, not the Germans, this did not satisfy West Germany. The West German government included former Nazis and was very sensitive to East German charges that it was not totally immune to the legacy of Nazism. In 1956, when West Germany intervened with the French government to exercise the right of nations participating in the Cannes Film Festival to have a film that offended its national honor, *Night and Fog*, removed from competition, Resnais could not resist remarking that he did not know the Nazi German government would be present.¹³ Cayrol vented the anger of resisters at the complicity of his own government in this act of censorship: "France thus refuses to be the France of truth. Faced with the greatest butchery of our time, it accepts it only in the clandestinity of memory ... It rips from history the pages that don't please it, it takes away the word of witnesses, it makes itself complicit in the horror ... My German friends ... it is France itself which makes its night and its fog fall on our friendly and warm relations."¹⁴ *Night and Fog* was shown at Cannes, but not in competition. Albert Larroisse's *The Red Balloon* won in the category of "short film" in which *Night and Fog* would have competed.

Yet the story does not end there. Although the West German government did not favor screening of *Night and Fog* before an international audience at Cannes, it came to recognize the need to inform younger generations of Germans of Nazi atrocities; the film's placement of responsibility on the Nazis, rather than the German people, fit the dominant approach to the issue at the time in West Germany. West Germany purchased a number of copies of *Night and Fog* and made them available to youth groups and to schools. By the 1970s, *Night and Fog* was widely shown in West German schools, sometimes even to elementary school students.¹⁵ If older Germans found *Night and Fog* uncomfortably reminiscent of films of the camps that Allied occupying forces had required Germans to watch after the war,¹⁶ it figured widely in accounts by members of the 1968 generation as an impetus to questioning their parents about their behavior during the Third Reich, the lynchpin of student revolt in West Germany. At the midpoint of Margareth von Trotta's film about a member of an ultra-

¹³Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 161.

¹⁴*Le Monde*, 11 April 1956.

¹⁵Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 232. This practice has continued since unification. *Night and Fog* had not been widely distributed in East Germany. Between 1996 and 2000, the Federal Republic distributed some 1,500 videos of *Night and Fog* to be used for instructional purposes. Ewout van der Knapp, "Enlightening Procedures: *Nacht und Nebel* in Germany," in Ewout van der Knapp, ed., *Uncovering the Holocaust*, 78.

¹⁶Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 176.

leftist, terrorist group, *Marianne & Juliane* (1981), we are shown the final three minutes of *Night and Fog* in a flashback of Marianne, the future terrorist, and her sister watching the film as teenagers. Later, we see the sisters reviewing similar black and white footage of emaciated, dying inhabitants of the Third World and Marianne answering the question posed at the end of *Night and Fog*: "I'll never put up with people doing nothing about it."¹⁷

If Resnais' and Cayrol's project to denounce the inhumanity of the camps limits references to Germans, what of the extermination of the Jews? Isn't this a film about the Holocaust? There is significant footage relating to the extermination of the Jews in *Night and Fog*, but no mention of which particular groups were sent to camps for immediate extermination. The audience hears a lone mention of a deported Jew and sees occasional glimpses of the Star of David sewn on deportees' clothes, but without any explanation of what this meant. In class this is a time and opportunity to review the diversity of deported groups (and the French term *déporté* used for all of them) and their fates: Jews, Roma and Sinti (gypsies),¹⁸ gays, resisters, and diverse "asocials," a term officials used in camps. Jews, Roma and Sinti were dispatched to extermination camps; the others were sent to concentration camps where they were worked to death in inhumane conditions. *Night and Fog* merges the two experiences, mixing footage from the diversity of camps to make the camps into one entity.¹⁹ The Holocaust, the project to exterminate the Jews, is the absent presence of *Night and Fog*. Although histories of the making of the film reveal that Resnais and the historians with whom he worked began with recognition of the particular experience of the deported Jews,²⁰ this is absent from the film: Annette Wieviorka is not wrong to say that, although *Night and*

¹⁷The scenes appear at 45-48 minutes and 68 minutes into the videocassette of *Marianne & Juliane* (New Yorker Video 1998). However, there is some ambiguity in von Trotta's intertextuality. The footage from *Night and Fog* is followed immediately by extensive treatment of the inhumane conditions in which Marianne is being kept in prison. Her sister Juliane, who had been shown as more visibly affected by *Night and Fog* as a teenager, gags herself to try to experience the pain of the forced feeding her sister Marianne is undergoing in prison. Students debate whether von Trotta is trying to suggest some relationship between the inhumanity of the camps and of the prison or to have viewers reflect on the bathos of such efforts by radical fellow travelers.

¹⁸The girl looking out the slats of a train wagon at Westerbork (6 minutes 24 seconds into the film), often taken as an emblematic Jewish deportee, was, in fact, a Sinti. She was sent to Auschwitz and died there. Lindeperg, "*Nuit et Brouillard*," 63.

¹⁹Raskin presents the shooting script of *Night and Fog*, with each piece of footage identified by the particular camp depicted. This information, not presented in the film itself, helps viewers interpret what they see. Raskin, *Nuit et Brouillard*, 65-131.

²⁰Lindeperg, "*Nuit et Brouillard*;" Christian Delage and Vincent Giugueno, *L'historien et le film* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 59-78, 215-26.

Fog includes significant footage on the extermination of the Jews, the film "in no way concerns the genocide of the Jews."²¹

Most American students have learned only of the extermination camps for Jews, not the other concentration camps. One discussion can be held about the reasons historians have to separate the two experiences. However, examination of *Night and Fog* also offers students the opportunity to ask why certain ways of presenting and remembering the past take root in different times and places. One explanation for the absence of reference to Jews is the French refusal after the war to confront the cooperation of the collaborationist Vichy Regime in the deportation of Jews from France to their deaths in extermination camps. Wiewiorka develops this argument, contending that the deported resisters, particularly Communists, sought to incorporate the deportation and murder of Jews into a narrative of deportation in which resisters held leading roles, despite the fact that many more Jews died.²² Another explanation is that French universalist republican ideology made the French mistrustful of dividing up the persecuted. The Nazis and the French who collaborated with them had separated Jews from other French; the republican response was to refuse to preserve this division in representations of memory of this past. What some see as evidence of anti-Semitism, others see as a response to it. And finally there is the apparent concern of Resnais and Cayrol that the film could not act as a "warning mechanism," in Cayrol's words, for a range of inhumane practices, if it was framed in terms of Germans and Jews. This is the danger of all efforts to universalize a historically-specific experience, to remember an experience by making it the bearer of lessons or mandates in a different historical setting. Whatever the reasons for the decision made in 1955 not to differentiate the experience of the Jews from other deportees, this, for Omer Bartov, introduced "a major distortion of the historical record" in a film often used to introduce or to foster memory of the concentration camp system.²³ As teachers of history, our job is not to censor

²¹Annette Wiewiorka, *Déportation et génocide. Entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Plon, 1992), 223, note 94.

²²There was no place for immediate sites of extermination in the discourse of a "concentration camp universe"—the title of deported resister David Rousset's influential 1945 account of what he learned at Buchenwald—which developed in France after the war and which took on new life in successive generations of condemnations of the Soviet gulag, labor camps which in their *raison d'être* resembled the concentration camps of Nazi Germany more than the extermination centers. This in turn explains why Communists in France, faced with the need to refute the parallels made between the Stalinist Soviet Union and the Third Reich, turned from ignoring the specificity of the Holocaust to emphasizing it.

²³Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst. The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 171. This makes troubling the fact that in France in the late 1980s-early 1990s government distribution of tapes of *Night and Fog* and screening of the film on television "became the almost Pavlovian response to anti-semitic acts or statements or the allegations of Holocaust deniers." Lindeperg, "*Nuit et Brouillard*," 229. Viewers are intended to think of the Holocaust when shown a film

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such materials, but to develop our students' historical understanding of why the past is presented in different ways in different societies at different times.

However, there is another explanation of the paucity of references to Jews. The Nazis maintained secrecy about the extermination of the Jews and made great efforts to destroy documentation about the Holocaust. Historians dependent on archival documentation need to make this historical reason for the existence or absence of documentation itself a part of their problematic. This is a fundamental, but often ignored, issue for students engaged in the study of history. However, there is quite a bit of footage of Jews in *Night and Fog*, though it is not identified as such. While the iconic photograph of the Jewish boy with his hands up (an image first brought to public attention by Resnais in *Night and Fog*) was taken by the Germans documenting their destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto,²⁴ and footage of Jews boarding trains at Westerbork (in The Netherlands) was the work of Germans seeking to show the "utility" of this camp,²⁵ much of the most graphic material on the camps in the last part of *Night and Fog* comes from film made by Western Allies when they liberated the concentration camps in Germany, not the extermination camps for Jews, which had been shut down by Nazis before the arrival of Soviet troops.²⁶ However, a number of Jews were sent to camps in the West in the chaotic final months of the war. Anne Frank died at

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that does not mention it.

²⁴See Richard Raskin's riveting study of the history of this photograph and its use: *A Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study in the Life of a Photo* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2004).

²⁵Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 62.

²⁶For many students, the single, most searing image in *Night and Fog* is that of the bulldozers pushing corpses into a mass grave, the brutal act of cleaning up what should not and can never be cleansed. Students often cite this as evidence of Nazi dehumanization of their victims, but it is only secondarily so, for if the emaciated corpses are the product of the Nazi project, the decision to clear them away expeditiously to prevent the spread of epidemic disease, was made by the Allies. In 1945, the British made a film from footage of camps the Allies had liberated; it includes many of the clips which Resnais would use in *Night and Fog*. The film, including the 1945 script, is available as a PBS video, *Memory of the Camps*. Students asked to compare this film to *Night and Fog* can analyze decisions Resnais made in choosing some of this footage and not other parts of it, the similarity and differences of the script by Colin Wills and that of Cayrol, and the importance of Hans Eisler's music in *Night and Fog*, because the British film does not have a score. Another avenue to pursue with students is the use of images as evidence in making the case against perpetrators. The end of *Night and Fog*, when individuals deny responsibility for what the viewer has just seen, replicates an element of the Nuremberg trials, in which the prosecutor Robert Jackson made use of film of the camps—some of the same images viewers see in *Memory of the Camps* and in *Night and Fog*—in making his case at Nuremberg. This is the subject of Christian Delage's excellent film, *Nuremberg: The Nazis Facing Their Crimes* (DVD, Lions Gate, 2007).

at the heart of the camp experience is replicated in demeaning photographs of naked men and women awaiting death. However, students also see evidence of inmates' resilience, manifested in acts of creation.³⁰ Why are we shown these works? Do they soften the inhumanity of the camps? Not in the minds of the deported resisters who participated in the film. "Man is incredibly resistant," Cayrol tells us. After the war, the French addressed their experience of defeat and collaboration by embracing Charles DeGaulle's mantra that the French had been a people in resistance. This was certainly what the Ministry of Veterans' Affairs had in mind when it set the condition to its allocation of funding for the film, that the film be sure not to forget the Resistance. However, resistance in the camp could take different forms than that the Ministry had in mind. For deportees, including deported resisters, the camps had been the site of great inhumanity, but, for this very reason, the appearance of art (like the poems Cayrol himself had written) and of acts of solidarity among prisoners was evidence that the camps had also been the sites of *sui generis* acts of resistance, whose memory was what the survivors could offer to the moral rebuilding of France and Europe, which had to accompany the economic and political rebuilding.³¹

If students look for material about the Holocaust on the Internet, they will quickly find sites devoted to Holocaust denial. *Night and Fog* provides an opportunity to address the nature both of Holocaust denial arguments and of the documentary film. Although *Night and Fog* does not deal with the Holocaust as a separate topic, it cannot be interpreted as a work of Holocaust denial. Failure to discuss the specificity of the

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postwar trials of Nazi war criminals.

When the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was being set up, the museum at Auschwitz-Birkenau sent about twenty pounds of hair. The U.S. Museum's Content Committee, composed of scholars, religious leaders, museum officials, and survivors debated whether to display the hair. Many believed it was important to show the hair as an important element of the historical record, but the survivors, knowing that the hair could have come from their mothers or sisters, opposed display of it. The Committee agreed and decided to show only a photographic mural of material at the Auschwitz Museum, including photographs of the two tons of human hair there. Timothy W. Ryback, "Evidence of Evil," *The New Yorker* (November 15, 1993), 68-69.

³⁰If oppression is immanent in the objects of everyday life, resistance might be as well. We see a recipe recorded by a prisoner (at 16 minutes 14 seconds), a common activity among starving inmates of the female concentration camp at Ravensbrück. Was this a recipe recorded by Germaine Tillion, whom Lindeperg identifies as having contributed the cloth with writing on it we see just before the recipe? Intent that those who operated the camps eventually be tried and punished, Tillion recorded the names of camp officials in code in apparently anodyne recipes. Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück* (Paris: Seuil, 1988).

³¹Donald Reid, "From Ravensbrück to Algiers and Noisy-le-Grand: Dialogues with Deportation," *French Politics, Society & Culture*, 22:3 (Fall 2004), 1-24. For discussion of one work of art created by a deportee as an act of resistance and which was the fruit of other prisoners' solidarity—and contributed to this solidarity, see Donald Reid, "Available in Hell: Germaine Tillion's Overture of Resistance at Ravensbrück," *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 25:2 (Summer 2007), 141-50.

Bergen-Belsen, site of the horrific British film of bulldozers pushing dead bodies in *Night and Fog*; the viewer of Resnais' film sees a photograph of Elie Wiesel on a bedstead at Buchenwald.²⁷

If insufficient documentation can be a problem for any historian, the director of historical documentaries dependent on film footage faces particular problems. Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), a documentary on the Holocaust done thirty years after *Night and Fog*, is an implicit critique of Resnais's film. Lanzmann's response to the inadequacy of filmed documentation of the Holocaust is to use no contemporary footage at all, and to shift from the position that there is inadequate film of the Holocaust to saying that it is an event that is not possible to represent directly. (Lanzmann is notorious for having said in response to Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* that if the SS had taken footage of the Jews dying in a gas chamber, he would destroy it.²⁸)

What do we see in the film? This is a question that students answer in many ways. A few are troubled by seeing a work of art made from the graphic depiction of anonymous inhumanity. For others it is the pile of women's hair, evidence of Nazi inhumanity, but also a presentation of Jews (without recognition of their Jewish identity) in an inhumane way consonant with Nazi views of them.²⁹ The humiliation

²⁷The photo appears at 10 minutes 58 seconds into *Night and Fog*. Wiesel contrasted *Night and Fog* to other filmed presentations of camps like *Holocaust* ("marked by vulgarity"), in praising Resnais' film for its authenticity. Raskin, *Nuit et Brouillard*, 8 note 1.

²⁸Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 110-11. Resnais contrasted black-and-white footage of the world of the camps, swarming with people, to the film he shot at Auschwitz in 1955, in color, but with no humans present. Lanzmann responded by eliminating footage of the camps, but filming (in color) survivors, bystanders, and historians talking about the camps several decades later. I often accompany *Night and Fog* with screening of footage from *Shoah* of Abraham Bomba (chapter 2 of disc 3, New Yorker Video, 2003). Bomba is a Jewish survivor who cut the hair of women who were to be gassed at Treblinka. He speaks about facets of his experience only when prodded by Lanzmann; Bomba is unlike Cayrol, who wrote with the fear no one would be willing to listen. Bomba is the individual for whom there is no place in *Night and Fog*. In telling his story, he also returns an element of humanity to the corpses and to the pile of hair we see in *Night and Fog*.

²⁹A "brisk trade [in human hair] emerged between German death camps ... and German felt and textile manufacturers who used the versatile fibre in the production of thread, rope, cloth, carpets, mattress stuffing, lining stiffeners for uniforms, socks for submarine crews, and felt insulators for the boots of railroad workers ... human hair 'was often used in delayed action bombs, where its particular qualities made it highly useful for detonating purposes' [in the words of an assistant to Auschwitz doctor Josef Mengele] ... The [20 kilogram] bales were marketed to German companies at twenty pfennigs per kilogram." As the Nazis left no "smoking gun" documents and destroyed the crematoria at Auschwitz before abandoning the camp, the presence of cyanide from the Zyklon gas used to kill Jews in the concentration camps in the piles of human hair seen in *Night and Fog* was used as evidence in the

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Holocaust does not constitute denial. However, the fact that students raise this question can be used to show them that as readers of documents, they themselves are situated historically. At the time *Night and Fog* was made, denial of the Holocaust (as opposed to repression of discussion of it) was not broadly disseminated. The denial of the Holocaust that is now widespread is a later phenomenon, related to a resurgence of antisemitism and to the heightened resentment of Israel and what critics believe is a rationale for its illegitimate existence. Deniers' strategy has been a hyper-attentiveness to historical detail. They are, of course, not concerned with the presentation of images in *Night and Fog* as depictions of a generic deportation, when they are of Jews being deported and designated for extermination. Looking at *Night and Fog*, Holocaust deniers concern themselves with the occasional questionable assertion or factual error in the film.³² Are the marks on the ceilings of gas chambers from the fingernails of those being killed as we are told in *Night and Fog*? Probably not, but since one cannot interview the dead, we will never know. It was long believed, as we are told in *Night and Fog*, that the Nazis made soap from the corpses, but it is now known they were unsuccessful at doing this.³³

More revealing is the photograph in the film that purports to show unidentified deportees rounded up at the Vél d'Hiv, the site in Paris of a large round-up of Jews for deportation in July 1942. This is how the photograph was labeled in the archives in which historians working on the film found it. The photo was not correctly identified until 1983, when Serge Klarsfeld, master sleuth of Nazi Holocaust perpetrators in hiding, showed that the photograph was, in fact, of individuals suspected of collaboration with the Germans being rounded up at the Vél d'Hiv after the liberation of France in 1944.³⁴ The deniers' method is to argue that any documentary error in a text such as *Night and Fog* throws into doubt the totality of the text. Starting from consideration of this position, students can move to analysis of the documentary film as an historical document itself. Instead of dismissing *Night and Fog* for inaccuracies, might errors in the film enable viewers to interpret the context in which it was made? After the war, the extreme right in France sought to absolve itself by pairing the crimes of collaboration with Germany with acts taken during the purge of collaborators at Liberation. This was anathema to deported resisters. Those who worked on *Night and Fog* knew of the Vél d'Hiv round-up in July 1942, but had still been in concentration camps during the immediate post-Liberation period. The fact that archival documents contain errors and that witnesses and historians bring their own experiences and

³²See, for example, Robert Faurisson, "How many deaths at Auschwitz?" *The Revisionist* (2003), note 11, at www.vho.org/tr/2003/1/Faurisson17-23.html (accessed on October 6, 2008).

³³Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 92-93.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 58-59. The photograph of Vél d'Hiv' appears at 4 minutes 50 seconds into the film.

understandings of the past into play are important lessons for students, who see that documentary films need to be analyzed with the same attention they bring to all documents. A documentary error does not necessitate abandoning the whole of a text, but might be revealing of new insights into the production of the text itself and what this error reveals about the historical context in which the text was made.

To understand *Night and Fog* as a work of history and a work of art, and to understand what guides viewers to interpret the images as they do, students can analyze the role of music and of the script in reception of the film. Hans Eisler wrote the music for the film. His life offers a commentary on the historical context of the film. Eisler, a German Jew with close ties to the Communist Party, had to leave his homeland during the Third Reich. He went to Hollywood, but became a target of Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigations after the war. Forced to leave the United States, he moved to East Germany. How does Eisler's score enhance the effect the film has on viewers? Resnais's answer was that "the more violent the image, the lighter the music. Eisler wanted to show that the optimism and hope of man always existed in the background."³⁵ However, the music itself conveyed arguments as well. Eisler worked elements of *Lied der Deutschen (Deutschland über alles)* into the music for the footage of Germans loading Jews into railway cars at Westerbork. This had been the national anthem of the Weimar Republic and was that of the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) as well. The West German government cut this part of the soundtrack from the copies of *Night and Fog* it distributed to German schools.³⁶ A generation later, West German filmmaker Alexander Kluge went one step further. In *The Patriot* (1979), he used music from *Night and Fog*, which had become widely known in a film to remember the victims of the Germans, to accompany footage showing Germans as the victims of history.³⁷

Resnais had wanted a deportee like Cayrol to write the text for the film. Cayrol's brother, Pierre Resnais, a resister as well, had died in a concentration camp. Cayrol spoke of Franz Kafka and his novel *The Penal Colony* as the first thing he thought of

³⁵Gaston Bounoure, *Alain Resnais* (Paris: Seghers, 1974), 119. Cayrol said he would have preferred to "the Dantesque vision" of *Night and Fog* a "comic opera on the period in which I was losing my youth." Cayrol's ironic text and what he calls "the close to waltzes on Hitler" of Eisler—"I wanted to be delirious," wrote Cayrol—respond to this. Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 124, 135.

³⁶Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 139. Eisler had, after all, written the East German national anthem.

³⁷Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst*, 140-41. However, this appropriation is yet more complicated. Unbeknownst to Resnais, Eisler had originally written the music heard in *Night and Fog* which Kluge would later use in *The Patriot*, for an East German drama on the German invasion of and defeat in the Soviet Union, in an effort to express both mourning for the loss of Germans and celebration of the socialist victory. Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 136-39.

when he'd entered the camp.³⁸ Cayrol's prize-winning novel, *Je vivrai l'amour des autres* (1947) addressed the difficulty of returning to France from the camps. In an extraordinary collection of articles, *Lazare parmi nous* (1950), Cayrol developed the figure of the deportee who survived as Lazarus, who had experienced death and returned, forever affected by the experience.³⁹ In an essay on "Lazarian art," Cayrol moved from camp memoirs to a re-reading of the literary canon as it existed before the camps, not to search for political precedents, but for intimations of the emotional experience of the camps, which Cayrol in turn saw traversing postwar culture: "the corruption of our world by the concentration camp or Larzarian element."⁴⁰ Cayrol

³⁸Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 120.

³⁹Hanna Arendt also describes the camp survivor as like Lazarus risen from the dead. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1973), 441. François Mauriac saw in Elie Wiesel "the gaze of a Lazarus risen from the dead yet still held captive in the somber regions into which he had strayed, stumbling over desecrated corpses." "Foreword" to Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), xix. Mauriac's letter of 5 May 1958, in response to Wiesel's appreciation for the preface, is addressed to "Cher Lazare Wiesel." François Mauriac, *Nouvelles lettres d'une vie (1906-1970)*, ed. Caroline Mauriac (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1989), 297. André Malraux brought the figure of Lazarus as the deported resister who returned into criticism of disputes over how the past should be remembered: "What dismays me is to see Lazarus coming back from the dead to argue over the shape of the tombs." Cited by Susan Rubin Suleiman in *Crises of Memory and the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 74.

Many have described the movement in the film from the Nazis coming to power and the construction of the first camp at Dachau in 1933 to the end of the regime and the camps in 1945 in terms of the stations of the cross, beginning with the historians who laid out the exposition at the origin of *Night and Fog* and who went on to serve as primary historical consultants for the film. Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 56. Vincent Pinel, in his *fiche filmographique* on *Night and Fog*, long the most detailed study of the film (reprinted in Raskin, *Nuit et brouillard*, 142-46) speaks of Resnais' "transposition of the Christian idea of 'original sin': "the first crime against humanity brings a defilement that it will be difficult to erase." All who follow will be born with an original sin that no baptism or affirmation of faith can wash away. Arnaud-Jean Cauliez was blunter, suggesting that the viewer of *Night and Fog* would feel the return of original sin (*Télé-Ciné*, July-August 1956, reprinted in Raskin, *Nuit et brouillard*, 148-49). Cayrol and others used the discourses they had, in his case Christian, to make sense of the unfathomable. Recognizing this, students can think about how individuals and societies faced with the traumatic, the unimaginable, use their most valued discursive resources to characterize and understand these experiences. Many Marxists confronted with the camps did the same with Marxist discourse, and there are traces of this—what appealed most in the film to 1968 era radicals—in *Night and Fog*. Students can ask how the use of discourse developed in very different historical contexts can enhance and can distort our understanding of events and experiences like those of the Nazi camps.

⁴⁰Jean Cayrol, *Lazare parmi nous* (Paris: Seuil, 1950), 12. *Night and Fog* is criticized for failing to make clear the particular experience of the Jews in the Holocaust. The Lazarus metaphor reveals an element of the difference between the memory of the camps we see in *Night and Fog* and the memory of the Holocaust. The Lazarus figure returning from the camps is a figure of continuity. Scarred, haunted, and traumatized, he returns with the ability and curse of seeing what could not be seen before in the culture

(continued...)

hailed Albert Camus, resister, but not deportee, as “the first historian and researcher” of Lazarian art.⁴¹ Students engage easily with Cayrol’s use of irony to tell of the imbrication of the normal world in the construction of the “apparent city” [*cit  vraiseemblable*] with all the accoutrements: entrepreneurs bid for contracts and gave bribes; buildings were constructed in different styles, Alpine or Japanese or no style at all; there were hospitals with illusory treatments in a world devoted to death; with “their storehouse of Nazis at war” of human hair, bones, and fat, the camps evoked industrial production, efficient in its inhumanity.⁴² However, what begins with the distancing implicit in irony becomes for viewers the far more threatening origins of the abnormal in the practices of a world like that in which they live, which they know as normal.

Night and Fog had its origins in deported resisters’ fear that memory of the camps would be relegated to a history past and forgotten. The film’s concluding passage makes clear that Cayrol did not, as he said, write as a “war veteran,” for the battle in which he had engaged continues.⁴³ The camps were built with the practices and the language of the world in which we live today. At the end of the film, we see camp officials from the lowest to the highest ranks deny “responsibility” for what went on in them. Guilt (the word used in German translations of Cayrol’s text) suggests crimes committed by individuals, crimes for which most viewers could absolve themselves. However, responsibility, the term used by Cayrol, places far more onus on the viewer: responsibility for not opposing systems that could perform criminal acts; responsibility for ignoring inhumane acts invisible to those who do not want to see. The Nazi concentration camps might be gone, but we must not ignore their successors today. In the final line of the film, Cayrol reminds us that one does not cure the “concentration camp plague,”⁴⁴ an echo of Albert Camus’s last sentence of *The Plague* (1947): “... the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good.”⁴⁵ *Night and Fog*

⁴⁰(...continued)

he left. The Holocaust is the narrative of a break, the extermination of Yiddish culture with those who carried it. On this rupture, see Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

⁴¹Cayrol, *Lazare parmi nous*, 77.

⁴²Cayrol, *Nuit et brouillard*, 32, 36, 39.

⁴³Cayrol, *Lazare parmi nous*, 8.

⁴⁴Cayrol, *Nuit et brouillard*, 43.

⁴⁵Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Albert A. Knopf, 1962), 278. The camp may have been site of the plague, but this made survivors like Cayrol and Wiesel “plague-stricken,” in (continued...)

evokes resistance within the camps, but calls on resistance today against the inhumanity that created them and let them persist.

West Germans were sensitive about the presence of former Nazis in their government. Communists, reeling in 1956 from Nikita Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's camps during his "Secret Speech" to the twentieth congress of the Soviet Communist Party, feared that viewers would see Cayrol's concluding question as an accusation directed at them.⁴⁶ In fact, Cayrol and Resnais had in mind the use of "regroupment centers" by the French Army in the ongoing Algerian War of Independence:⁴⁷ "Do the new executioners really have a different face than our own?"⁴⁸ Pierre Daix, another resister deported, like Cayrol, to Mauthausen, and a Communist, wrote in 1956 of the shame he felt when a colonial subject looked on him. But, he

⁴⁵(...continued)

the words of Jacques Doniol-Valcroze (*Cahiers du cinéma*, May 1956, reprinted in Raskin, *Nuit et brouillard*, 147). They carry an experience that can be, and should be, deeply unsettling to a world which maintains a quarantine from confrontation with the camps, even when it does not think it is doing so.

⁴⁶*Night and Fog* was first shown on American television in a cut-and-paste version in which the camp scenes were edited to focus on extermination, and an extended conclusion on Communist atrocities was added. Lindeperg, "Nuit et Brouillard," 206-16.

⁴⁷Henri Michel, the director of the Committee which commissioned *Night and Fog*, and historical consultant for the film, feared Cayrol and Resnais would be successful—that French youth would draw the parallel between Nazi practices and French practices in Algeria. Michel himself envisaged showing *Night and Fog* in former French colonies to make inhabitants realize how much better French colonization was than other alternatives Africans could have experienced! *Ibid.*, 226-27.

⁴⁸Cayrol, *Nuit et brouillard*, 42. In 1960, Resnais signed the "Manifesto of the 121," asserting support for the right of French men to refuse to serve in the army pursuing the war in Algeria. Cayrol's next project with Resnais was the film *Muriel* (1963), set in Boulogne-sur-Mer. *Muriel* features a French soldier Bernard, who has returned from Algeria. *Muriel* implicitly asks what if a German combatant had set out in 1945 to address elements of the experience presented in *Night and Fog*. The film is set in the fall of 1962, not long after the end of the war. Bernard is haunted by memory of his fellow soldier Robert's torture of the Algerian woman, Muriel, that he witnessed in Algeria. As Bernard recounts her torture in a clarity and wrenching detail unlike any other element of the script, he screens his ineptly made movie of scenes of North African life, "very postcard" in Cayrol's words, and of young men goofing around for the camera. Jean Cayrol, *Muriel* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 89-90. The juxtaposition of these anodyne images with the narration of the brutal death of Muriel recreates in a minor mode the contention in *Night and Fog* that the most inhumane acts emerge from a world of recognizably humane images. If *Night and Fog* was the documentary that made the effort to show what had happened, the footage in *Muriel* shows how film can totally miss "what happened," can preserve another memory. The French were defeated in Algeria, but there was no Nuremberg trial, no archives available in the 1960s to reveal what the French had seen and done. In the character of Bernard, Cayrol asks what if perpetrators who deny responsibility at the end of *Night and Fog* could not dismiss their acts easily as does Robert, who touts to Bernard the amnesty the French republic gave to all French soldiers for their acts in Algeria. *Ibid.*, 115.

continued, *Night and Fog* allowed him not to avert his face: "For the first time, taken from our very own experience, a short film proclaims out loud that we didn't live in vain in the prisons of death; that our country would draw publicly all the lessons."⁴⁹

Night and Fog offers an excellent opportunity for students to engage a document of history as historians of a document. They can move beyond an initial question: Is the film true to the truths the film seeks to convey? After *Night and Fog*, Resnais began work on a documentary about Hiroshima. However, he abandoned it in favor of his first feature-length dramatic film, *Hiroshima mon amour*, written by Marguerite Duras. At the beginning of this film, we see documentary shots of the devastation of Hiroshima and hear a French actress, herself haunted by the trauma of having had her head shaven as a collaborator when France was liberated for her love affair with a German soldier. She is in Hiroshima to perform in an "edifying film on peace" and tells us what she has seen at the museum of Hiroshima.⁵⁰ The man who becomes her lover, whose family died in Hiroshima, repeatedly replies that she has seen nothing in Hiroshima. In her "synopsis" of the film, Duras wrote that "it is impossible to speak of Hiroshima. All one can do is speak of the impossibility of speaking of Hiroshima." Then she corrects herself. One can speak of Hiroshima; the "sacrilege" is Hiroshima itself.⁵¹ What historians can speak of and what they cannot is at the core of any viewing and interpretation of *Night and Fog*.

⁴⁹*Les Lettres Françaises*, April 12, 1956, reprinted in Raskin, *Nuit et brouillard*, 140-41.

⁵⁰Marguerite Duras, "Synopsis" in *Hiroshima mon amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 6. *Hiroshima mon amour* was withdrawn from competition at Cannes so as not to offend the United States, which had made use of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima. Jean-Louis Leutrat, *Hiroshima mon amour*. Alain Resnais. *Étude critique* (Paris: Nathan, 1994), 37.

⁵¹Duras, "Synopsis," 2-3.