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Reconstructing Memory Through Time:

A Temporal Analysis of Alain Resnais' *Night and Fog* (1955)

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Abstract

This article explores the temporal, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of Alain Resnais' seminal short documentary *Night and Fog* (1955), analysing how it reconstructs Holocaust memory through cinematic form. Focusing on the film's innovative interplay between past and present, it argues that Resnais disrupts linear historical narration by employing fragmented temporal structures, contrasting visual styles (colour versus black-and-white), and poetic narration.

Through close analysis of visual and auditory techniques, such as archival juxtaposition, slow panning shots, dual-tense narration, and the strategic use of silence, the research dissertation demonstrates how *Night and Fog* challenges the boundaries of historical representation and fosters an active, morally reflective engagement with collective trauma.

The methodological approach integrates formalist film analysis with memory studies, drawing upon scholarly perspectives from Matthew Boswell, Andrew Hebard, and others to contextualise the short documentary film within broader discourses concerning Holocaust representation. Resnais's collaboration with poet and Holocaust survivor Jean Cayrol further reinforces the ethical imperatives of cinematic testimony and the profound moral invocation for audiences to assume the role of witness, thereby confronting historical trauma not as passive observers, but rather, as ethically engaged participants in collective memory.

Ultimately, the study concludes that *Night and Fog* remains a profoundly relevant cinematic work, collapsing temporal boundaries and resisting historical closure. It compels viewers to confront the enduring legacies of atrocity, positioning memory as a fluid, evolving process rather than a fixed historical record. Thus, this article contributes to ongoing discussions surrounding ethics, trauma, and the role of film in shaping cultural remembrance.

Keywords: Alan Resnais, Holocaust, temporality, memory, ethics, documentary

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Hailing from County Mayo, Ellen O'Hora studied the Bachelor of Religious Education and English undergraduate degree at Dublin City University. She now teaches at a post-primary school in Dublin, where she combines her love of literature and education, encouraging students to explore the power of language and storytelling. Outside the classroom, Ellen devotes her time to creative writing, crafting poetry and prose to reflect upon her curiosity about human experience, emotion, and connection.

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Introduction: Setting the Context of Memory and History in Holocaust Cinema

The cinematic depiction of memory, history, and trauma constitutes a profoundly impactful yet complex process, intertwining both personal and collective narratives which shapes our understanding of past events, whilst challenging the boundaries of representation and interpretation itself. Such intersection of memory and representation is apparent in Alain Resnais' seminal short documentary film, *Night and Fog*. This film navigates the unique interplay of temporal and aesthetic strategies to reconstruct the traumatic past of the Holocaust as it transpired during World War Two, thereby compelling audiences to engage in both active and reflective processes which transcend traditional historical documentation. At a time when the majority of first generation of Holocaust survivors have now passed away, this article examines the representation of Holocaust memory in the film, with a particular focus on how the film's temporal structure, aesthetic choices, and ethical dimensions showcase its continued relevance in discussions concerning collective trauma and historical remembrance.

Primarily, for the purpose of understanding the Holocaust in relation to the film itself, it is important to provide the context that the Holocaust was “the attempt by the Nazi regime to exterminate all of Europe’s Jews between 1933 and 1945.” (Cochrane & McDonough 1) This systemic persecution and mass genocide of six million individuals, orchestrated by the Nazi Regime under Adolf Hitler, also targeted other groups including “Jehovah’s Witnesses, Roma (Gypsies), homosexuals, people with disabilities,” and other communities deemed socially or racially undesirable. (Holocaust Museum Houston, Online). Under the Nazi regime, specific measures were implemented to confront the so-called “Jewish Question” which, according to Hitler’s chief ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, would “only be solved by the ‘biological extermination of all the Jews in Europe’.” (Cochrane & McDonough 57) This assertion provided a pseudo-intellectual justification for the regime’s escalating policies of marginalisation, imprisonment in concentration and extermination camps, involuntary servitude, forced deportation, and ultimately mass murder, reflecting the deliberate and bureaucratically organised nature of the Holocaust as both a racial and political project.

Moreover, the titular historical and poetic origins of *Night and Fog* further evoke the dual dimensions of historical terror and memorial reflection, linking the “Nacht und Nebel” decree’s systematic erasure of human lives to the film’s broader meditation on the mechanisms of forgetting and remembrance. As Bonner highlights in her text, *The New Executioners: The Spectre of Algeria in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog*, the phrase “Night and Fog” derived from the German expression of “bei Nacht und Nebel davon gehen” which translates to the concept of getting away or to “escape under cover of darkness or the night.” (Bonner 4) Adolf Hitler subsequently appropriated this phrase in the formulation of the “Nacht und Nebel” decree, promulgated on the 7th of December 1941, which sanctioned the clandestine arrest and enforced disappearance of individuals identified as political adversaries to German authority. Pursuant to this directive, SS operatives apprehended such individuals whereby they would “vanish without a trace into the night and fog”, purposefully concealing their fates to engender an atmosphere of pervasive fear and uncertainty among

populations residing in occupied territories. (Bonner 4) Hence, in pursuing the significance of the film's title, I consider this linguistic and historical inheritance becomes central to understanding Resnais' temporal reconstruction of memory, as the transformation of a phrase once associated with disappearance and state violence, evolves into a poetic vehicle for remembrance and ethical witnessing. Thus, through its temporal and aesthetic strategies, *Night and Fog* reclaims the language of erasure, converting the Nazi euphemism of concealment into an enduring act of cinematic memory that resists historical oblivion.

Markedly, following the aftermath of World War Two, the pioneering French filmmaker, Alain Resnais, sought to enlighten audiences across the world in 1955 with an "unabated flood of cinematic inquiry, remembrance, and self-questioning" in his groundbreaking short documentary film, *Night and Fog*, wherein the exposure of inconceivable atrocities from the Holocaust were showcased through innovative cinematography techniques and evocative visual imagery (Film Forum, Online). Resnais asserted that the creation of *Night and Fog* "wasn't a question of making another monument to the dead, but of thinking about the present and the future" as dual temporal frameworks which would not only reconstruct the collective memory of the Holocaust itself, but further, interrogate the manner in which trauma persists and transforms across time. (Bonner 1) Significantly, *Night and Fog* was commissioned by the French Republic's official Comité d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale as a commemorative project marking the tenth anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, whereby Resnais guides audiences through a temporal and affective journey between when the camps were "in operation and, in 1955, when the film was made" as a means of portraying the enduring resonance of atrocity within collective memory (Reid 59).

As such, the unsettling juxtaposition of the desolate postwar landscapes of Auschwitz and Majdanek with harrowing wartime footage produces a haunting visual dialectic that underscores the inescapability of historical trauma. As Reid contends, Resnais deliberately omits "footage of prisoners leaving the camps" as in his view, the liberation did not equate to escape, as those who survived "never truly left the experience" behind (Reid 59). Consequently, the film transfers the ethical burden of remembrance onto its audience, suggesting that the act of viewing *Night and Fog* constitutes a form of secondary witnessing, a confrontation with historical atrocity from which the viewer cannot remain unaffected or emerge unchanged. Notably, Resnais' cinematography style derives from his concerns regarding "the ambiguities of the human imagination and the unreliability of memory" (Harcourt, Online). This conceptual framework enabled Resnais to portray the interplay of past and present as a fluid and fragmented continuum in *Night and Fog* as a means of challenging the "rational reasoning and logical-linear discourse" characteristically employed in historiographical narratives. (Harcourt, Online) In order for Resnais' film to truly anchor the historical reality of the Holocaust, he enlisted the help of Jean Cayrol, a Catholic poet and "survivor of the Mauthausen camps," to accurately depict "the journey of the returned deportee" and the "context of mid-1950s France" in comprehending how memory and historical consciousness could truly confront making the "unimaginable imaginable" (Mroz and Ivan 05 and Reid 61). I consider this to be significant in relation to my analysis of *Night and Fog* as it highlights how this short documentary film positions itself within both historical and cinematic discourses to portray the temporality of time, whilst also engaging in an aesthetically nuanced and profoundly

impactful fashion to evoke an emotional and intellectual confrontation with the enduring consequences of historical atrocities.

1. Aesthetic Approaches to Representing Trauma and Memory

Significantly, Resnais' utilisation of "archival material juxtaposed with present day footage" offers a profound sense of temporal oscillation between the periods of the Holocaust and its immediate aftermath, which further creates visceral experiences for the audience to reflect upon the persistence and elusiveness of traumatic memory (Hebard 88). Notably, one key technique which the director employs to confront the immeasurable trauma and memories of the Holocaust is the manner in which Resnais preserves these fragments of memory through visual and auditory means. Through the juxtaposition of present-day footage of the concentration camp sites with the stark black-and-white archival images, Resnais produces a temporal disjunction that allows the viewer to experience both the haunting remnants of the past and the chilling presence of its legacy. As Matthew Boswell contends in his text, *Holocaust Impiety in Literature, Popular Music and Film*, Holocaust documentaries are "highly dependent on access to the geographical sites of memory and eyewitness accounts" (Boswell 131). For instance, the opening sequence of *Night and Fog* appears as an antithesis to the historical documentary format by immediately immersing the audience in a contemplative and unsettling atmosphere as the narrator, Michel Bouquet, outlines how the "peaceful landscape" of a picturesque expanse of verdant green fields can "lead to a concentration camp" of Auschwitz-Birkenau (00:01:39 – 00:02:09).

The stark contrast between the tranquil beauty of the present-day setting and the horrors that once unfolded in the concentration camp is further expounded upon by Resnais' camerawork throughout the duration of this short documentary film. As Kate Kennelly contends, Resnais' camerawork "subtly traps" audiences into experiencing the "inevitability of this confrontation," as a means of dismantling any sense of emotional or temporal distance. (Kennelly, *Bright Lights Film Journal*) This technique is especially significant in highlighting the moral corruption documented and "manipulated by the Nazi photographers" during their regime (Hebard 110). For instance, the director recognises the imperativeness of challenging how these images were originally framed to serve Nazi propaganda, as observed in the insertion of archival footage from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* into the film (Hebard 110). Crucially, her cinematic documentation of the September 1934 Nazi Party Nuremberg rallies has widely been regarded as an essential "example of the art of political film propaganda" due to its masterful orchestration of visual spectacle, spatial composition, and rhythmic montage, all of which served to glorify Adolf Hitler and aestheticise the ideological unity of the Nazi regime (Sennett 45).

Through his deliberate insertion of these propagandistic film sequences, Resnais exposes the seductive aesthetics through which Nazi ideology once concealed its own brutality and reconfigures Riefenstahl's glorified vision with a postwar framework of moral reckoning. In doing so, Resnais highlights the dual purpose of the camera in both distorting and revealing historical truth, demonstrating how the same medium that once glorified power can also expose its aftermath. By juxtaposing these manipulated images with raw, unfiltered archival footage and contemporary

shots of the abandoned camps, he underscores the ethical responsibility of visual documentation. This approach not only dismantles the deceptive narratives constructed by the Nazis but also reclaims the power of the camera as a tool for bearing witness, “The only visitor to the blocks now is the camera,” thereby compelling the audience to critically engage with the ethics of representation and the responsibility of film in preserving historical truth. (00:02:26-00:02:28) The camera’s slow rotation over the abandoned barracks visually enacts this idea of bearing witness, contrasting the fluid motion of the lens with the stillness of the site. Hence, I consider that this act of temporal and ethical reappropriation observed in *Night and Fog* not only dismantles the visual language of totalitarianism but further invites viewers to confront how cinema itself can both preserve and distort historical memory.

Moreover, the utilisation of a calm and poetic narration, voiced by Michel Bouquet, coupled with the prosaic, unsettling, fragmented visuals, contributes to a sensory overload that evokes the emotional gravity of the Holocaust whilst challenging viewers to engage with history in an active, critical manner. From its opening sequences, the film foregrounds a deliberate tension between the ostensibly ordinary aspects of daily life within the camps and the underlying extremity of their atrocities, establishing a recurring dialectic that underscores the banality of evil. For instance, the prelude sequence invokes the concept of “spatial and temporal dualities” through Cayrol’s poetic script and Bouquet’s composed delivery, whereby the observation of how “The blood has dried, the tongues have fallen silent” and “the only visitor to the blocks now is the camera” exemplifies the poetic qualities of the film’s narration, as its condensed, vivid imagery, rhythmic parallel structure, and metaphorical personification of the camera create a reflective, meditative tone that evokes ethical engagement and underscores the themes of absence and memory (Boswell 138). Through this measured narration, the film manipulates temporality and foregrounds spatiality, as the camera lingers on surfaces and objects to underscore the pervasive sense of absence (00:02:48-00:02:52). In doing so, it compels the viewer to inhabit the void left by atrocity, thereby exemplifying its sustained exploration of spatial and temporal dualities.

Similarly, the narrator’s voice in *Night and Fog* serves as a temporal conduit, grounding the audience in the horror of the Holocaust whilst resisting emotional detachment and encouraging active engagement. Bouquet’s measured cadence and reflective tone help to reconstruct memory not as fixed history, but rather as a dynamic experience that moves between past and present. This vocal presence mirrors the film’s temporal structure and reinforces the idea that memory is not simply retrieved but continuously reshaped through time. As Bonner notably observes, the “exposition of the camps’ quotidian routines (roll calls, mealtimes) and institutions” presented in the archival footage are contrasted jarringly with the “mass deaths (starvation, typhus), slaughters, [...] and post-mortem mutilations” portrayed in the 1955 film sequences (Bonner 7). This interplay of voice and image is exemplified in the sequence where Bouquet’s calm narration accompanies the archival footage of the treatment inflicted upon deceased Holocaust victims under the supervision of Nazi guards. It is evident how Bouquet describes in a manner that is both restrained and deliberate the various items that the Nazi’s preserved, manufactured, and stockpiled in the warehouses, including disturbing remnants such as “Nothing but women’s hair” which was “used for making cloth,” and the chilling assertion that “From the bodies they make soap” (00:24:30-00:25:44).

The narrator's calm, almost detached tone resists sensationalism, compelling the audience to confront the horror through reflection. This measured narrative delivery transforms factual description into a poetic act of witnessing, bridging the temporal distance between the archival imagery and the 1955 present-day footage. In doing so, Bouquet's narration reinforces Resnais' broader project of reconstructing memory through time as a means of inviting the audience to engage ethically with the enduring traces of atrocity, rather than to consume them as historical spectacle. Thus, I consider these visual and auditory techniques work collectively to reconstruct the Holocaust as a phenomenon which fluidly oscillates between past and present, wherein the resistance of closure is continuously evoked through the confrontation of the traumatic past which persists as an enduring reality within the present itself.

2. Temporal Juxtapositions and the Passage of Time

The establishment and subsequent dissolution of the dichotomy between past and present in *Night and Fog* can also be effectively examined through three interrelated aesthetic strategies which include, colour, movement, and sound. These formal elements operate as temporal mediators as a means of dissolving the visual and auditory boundaries between both the archival footage and the 1955 present-day sequences. In doing so, they articulate the short documentary film's sustained negotiation between historical memory and its continuous representation to underscore the persistent influence and unresolved trauma of the Holocaust within contemporary consciousness. For instance, the alternation between monochrome and colour imagery does not merely distinguish temporal registers, but rather, it collapses them, whereby the viewer is situated within a liminal space where memory and immediacy converge. Likewise, Resnais' employment of specific fluid camera movements through the now-desolate concentration camps and the haunting, discordant score, serve to animate spaces of absence, and transform these sites of atrocity into enduring loci of remembrance. Considering these particular factors, I argue that these three elements coalesce to obscure the boundaries between historical memory and modern interpretation, underscoring the malleability of time and the enduring impact of historical context on contemporary perceptions.

Markedly, the alternation between past and present in *Night and Fog* is deftly articulated through the juxtaposition of archival footage, encompassing both Nazi-produced imagery and recordings by the liberators within the concentration camps, thereby reinforcing the film's exploration of historical memory and representation. As Cayrol ascertains, the cinematography within this short documentary film endeavours to showcase how these concentration camps are not simply "chilled relics" of a bygone era, but rather, a "living witnessing" of the enduring and pervasive impact of historical trauma itself (Reid 59 & 60). To illustrate this point further, the primary camera techniques utilised in this short documentary film consists of panning, tracking, and stationary shots, all of which are employed alongside a various camera angles comprising of close-ups and wide-angle shots. As Susan Gubar denotes, "the Holocaust is dying" through the passing of survivors themselves and "cultural amnesia" (Boswell 131). Thus, it is evident that Resnais' strategic incorporation of the archival footage alongside the 1955 present-day footage becomes a crucial cinematic tool, underscoring the tension between historical memory and the erosion of direct testimony.

In essence, the utilisation of both a tracking shot and wide-camera angle lens which surveys the abandoned present-day concentration camp's key features of barbed-wire fences, derelict watch-towers, and wooden blocks, initially showcase how "no footsteps are heard except our own" thereby emphasising the eerie stillness and haunting solitude of the site. This quiet contemplation of the concentration camp's haunting remnants is subsequently interrupted by the "stampede of the Nazi Rally" in 1933, with archival footage which starkly contrasts the present desolation with the chaotic violence of the past (Kennelly, Bright Lights Film Journal). Thus, I feel as though the juxtaposition in this particular opening sequence to be a compelling manifestation of the film's exploration of the passage of time as a fluid and non-linear construct, as the tranquil observation of the concentration camp's present-day state, captured through the wide-angled lens and tracking shot, serves as a moment of reflection, whereby the viewer is invited to reckon with the silence left behind by the horrors that once occurred there (00:02:45).

Likewise, a defining sequence of tilting and panning shots further exemplifies the temporality of time between the present-day and past footage occurs in the latter half of *Night and Fog* when the "Nazi camera catalogs the process of extermination" particularly in relation to the gas chambers and the methods used to dispose of the mass accumulation of bodies, as a means of "attempting to reduce it to the application of scientific procedure" (Hebard 110). Markedly, Resnais employs lingering tilting and panning shots to immerse the audience in the final moments and emotions experienced by each victim as depicted. This technique is particularly evident during the tour of the gas chamber, atonally referred to by Michel Bouquet as "an ordinary block," wherein the camera's prolonged and measured movement underscores the harrowing nature of the Holocaust victims' fate (00:21:42).

For instance, throughout the present-day tilting and panning shots, the deliberate pacing of the camera's lingering movement on the barren compartmentalised sections of the gas chamber, effectively portrays the final moments of despair and resignation faced by the Holocaust victims as audiences as guided the sterile and haunting remnants of the space. This confrontation of the stark reality of the atrocities committed within this gas chamber is further emphasised through Michel Bouquet's expository narration, whereby he documents alongside the tilting and panning camera shots how "the doors were closed," "a watch was kept," and that the only sign of human presence was how there was "fingernail scrapings on the ceiling" to the extent that "even the concrete was scratched up" (00:22:06-00:22:29).

The meticulous cinematography employed in this sequence not only immerses the audience in the harrowing atmosphere of the Nazi regime but further serves as a poignant reminder of the profound human suffering endured in such merciless conditions overall. Moreover, this deliberate pacing enhances the relationship between Resnais' camerawork and the Nazi's archival footage, wherein the following sequence depicts the extensive methods undertaken by the Nazis to dispose of the mass accumulation of bodies within the concentration camp itself. To illustrate this point, a focused observation of the mechanical and impersonal nature of these actions through archival photographs and dawdling panning shots reveals the chilling efficiency with which the Nazis orchestrated their genocidal processes. For instance, the visual archive of the charred corpses embedded beneath the soil, with smoke emanating from the ground as the pyres which were

installed “when the crematoria prove[d] insufficient,” to be a true reflection of the scale and methodical execution of the atrocities carried out in the concentration camp, as it confronts the moral implications of the bureaucratic brutality through the manner in which the camera lingers on the smouldering earth (00:22:54).

These lingering shots prompt the audience to absorb the silent, empty spaces that once bore witness to immense suffering, and connect the present’s eerie stillness with the horrors revealed in archival footage itself. By using the panning shot in this manner, Resnais not only emphasises the passage of time but also reinforces the haunting continuity of memory, wherein the audience are invited to confront the residual impact of past atrocities as they persist in the physical remnants of the concentration camps overall.

Additionally, the use of colour within *Night and Fog* serves as a crucial visual marker of the temporality of the time of the film’s production by distinguishing the present-day footage from the archival imagery. Significantly, Resnais achieves the remembrance of the Holocaust through his fractured structure of colour comprising of “Eastmancolor instead of Agfacolor” to represent the present-day 1955 footage, whilst the “black-and-white” colour grading signifies the past visual imagery archives incorporated throughout the short documentary film (Hebard 95). Noteworthy however is Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s assertion that at various instances in *Night and Fog*, it is difficult for viewers to distinguish between archival and present-day footage based on Resnais reconstruction of the “photographic texture” pertaining to the documental footage recorded during the internment of those in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp (Hebard 95). For instance, during the initial presentation of the concentration camp’s desolate buildings, the “night-time lighting explicitly removes color from the shot” to imitate the black-and-white aesthetic of the archival footage to establish a cohesive visual narrative linking the past and the present (Hebard 95). I consider Resnais’ deliberate blurring of temporal boundaries through the imitation of the colour-grading and photographic texture of the archival footage to be a striking technique.

Of particular relevance, however, is the significance of sound in *Night and Fog*, as it serves not merely as an accompaniment, but rather as a profound emotional and moral counterpoint to the film’s harrowing imagery. In this sense, Resnais’ collaboration with the German-Austrian composer Hanns Eisler functions as a deliberate intervention in the dialectic between visual testimony and auditory affect, striving to establish a nuanced equilibrium between the sensory modalities of sight and sound in the cinematic engagement with atrocity. Eisler composed the score specifically to respond to the film’s visual structure, carefully calibrating musical motifs, instrumental textures, and tonal austerity to correspond with the oscillation between archival footage and contemporary sequences, rather than providing continuous emotional reinforcement. As Culbert argues, a substantial proportion of “films scores provide music only at selected (and predictable) spots,” and therefore, Eisler’s intervention reconfigures the relationship between sound and image as one of estrangement rather than alignment (Culbert 261). Through this deliberate detachment, the score resists aesthetic absorption and instead foregrounds the limits of representation in articulating historical atrocity (261). As Culbert further notes that “the score invites the viewer to combine past and present, because of an aural continuity,” a gesture that collapses temporal distance and situates the spectator within an ongoing historical and ethical

confrontation (261). In this manner, the soundtrack becomes a medium through which the act of witnessing is transformed from passive observation into moral participation, thereby reinforcing the film's refusal to consign atrocity to a closed past overall.

In examining the instrumentation employed throughout *Night and Fog*, Resnais highlighted how Eisler's application of music "was something akin to a 'second level of perception,' whereby he could "simplify the music the most during points of high drama" and "elaborate it significantly at moments when the eyes are no longer engaged." (Music and the Holocaust) By employing a minimalist palette of solo string instruments, Eisler orchestrates a subtle yet potent auditory counterpoint to the film's stark imagery. For instance, musicologist Albrecht Duemling notes how the "string orchestra serves to 'populate' the empty landscape in the prelude", whilst the subsequent use of small chamber ensembles and solo lines in scenes depicting "the piles of corpses" redirects attention from the mass of bodies to the individuality of each victim. (Culbert 261-262) This tender, restrained scoring humanises those who perished, emphasising their lives and full humanity rather than reducing them to abstract statistics.

Such an inversion of conventional scoring practice underscores Eisler's refusal to manipulate the viewer's emotions through direct correlation between sound and image. Instead, his measured orchestration cultivates a reflective distance that allows for contemplation as opposed to sensational response. The alternation between restraint and elaboration produces an auditory rhythm which effectively mirrors the film's oscillation between the archival footage and the contemporary 1955 present-day colour sequences, thereby reinforcing the continuity between past and present. In this way, Eisler's score functions not as an emotional cue, but as an epistemological framework, wherein the interplay of silence, dissonance, and tonal austerity mediates perception, ethical engagement, and memory as a whole.

Ultimately, these three interrelated aesthetic strategies consisting of colour, movement, and sound highlights to me Resnais' ability to collapse the historical distance between the past and present, and therefore, suggests that the horrors of the past are not confined to history, but rather, persist in collective memory and contemporary landscapes as a whole.

3. Representing Atrocity: Temporal Ambiguity, Memory Reconstruction, Ethics

Crucially, a pivotal aspect of Resnais' reconstruction of memory through time lies in the deliberate utilisation of verb tenses by the narrator in *Night and Fog*. This linguistic strategy grants the audience a distinctive dual perspective, simultaneously engaging them as active participants, whilst promoting reflective contemplation of the events depicted in this short documentary film.

Notably, Jean Cayrol's poetically layered and introspective screenplay is atonally narrated in both past and present tense by Michel Bouquet, a French actor, who serves as a critical conduit for the film's thematic depth and its engagement with historical memory. As Boswell contends, the dubbed narration over "picaresque imagery" in this short documentary film, warps "a form that in previous decades that had been mainly limited to travelogues, news and political propaganda" (Boswell 133). By stripping the narration of emotional inflection, Bouquet's voice portrays the

viewer's "resistance, conscious or unconscious, to grasping the unthinkable," and in doing so, it reflects the complex temporalities of time itself (Lopate, *The Criterion Collection*).

Specifically, during the archival footage, the narration of these scenes are "voiced in the present tense," whilst the post-war shots are narrated in the "past tense." (Christie, 2) For instance, the opening sequence is distinctly marked by a "mounting tension between the façade of a calm present and the ultimate encounter with the repressed past that lurks just beneath it," whereby the raw resurgence of repressed memory is captured by Resnais' camerawork alongside the poetic narration of Michel Bouquet (Kennelly, *Bright Lights Film Journal*). To illustrate this point further, Bouquet marries the opening sequence, of a slow panning shot depicting a meadow to reveal a barbed wire fence with the line, "A peaceful landscape" (00:01:30-00:01:39). This pattern of interplay between camera shots and narration highlights how the peaceful backdrop of the post-World War Two period has "become a metaphor for the prisoners once held in concentration camps," as similarly to the opening shot of the meadow field, which is captured in its vibrancy and unbounded expansiveness, the prisoners of the concentration camp, as showcased in the archival showreels, are presented as confined and afflicted individuals behind the barbed wire fences. (Medium).

Throughout *Night and Fog*, Resnais also conveys quite graphic and emotionally charged scenes with both a disturbingly melodious sound score and complete silence. In particular, Hanns Eisler's melodic film score, with its paradoxically soothing yet ominous tones, stands in stark contrast to the harrowing brutality depicted in the explicit images and footage that document the tragedy and horror of the concentration camps. For instance, Eisler reduced his scoring to solo instruments such as the flute, clarinet, and violin as the "horror of the black-and-white documentary sequences" unfolded, thereby heightening the emotional resonance of the visuals (Wise Music Classical). This minimalist approach reflects the fragmented nature of memory itself, where traumatic events are often recalled in isolated, disjointed moments rather than a cohesive narrative. Using these delicate, solitary instruments, Eisler captures this sense of vulnerability and fragility, evoking the distant yet emotionally charged presence of the past, which lingers hauntingly despite its fractured form.

Furthermore, Resnais' approach serves a dual purpose, presenting the historical truth of the Holocaust whilst fostering a moral engagement which compels viewers to confront the ethical implications of bearing witness to atrocity throughout the film. By eschewing closure and portraying history as an ongoing, unresolved trauma, I consider Resnais invites viewers to confront their role as witnesses, to engage in an ongoing process of ethical reflection throughout the duration of this short documentary film.

Significantly, the deliberate utilisation of absolute silence functions as an effective ethical and auditory technique by compelling viewers to confront the unspeakable atrocities of the Holocaust concentration camps. As Hebard ascertains, at various instances in *Night and Fog*, "the narration breaks off, seemingly unable to find appropriate words, and yet the camera continues to show" (Hebard 98). In one striking instance of this, Bouquet informs us that "Words are insufficient" as the camera lingers on the haunting images of decapitated Jewish heads strewn into a pile in a wooden barrel, whilst their emaciated bodies lie discarded nearby on the cold, concrete

ground (00:25:32). This stark juxtaposition of silence and archival images forces the audience into an uncomfortable proximity with the reality of mechanised death, where words fail, but the visual testimony remains inescapable. The language of witnessing is most pronounced in *Night and Fog* when there is an absence of narration, as in these moments, viewers undertake a personal and moral reckoning, thereby emphasising the profound limits of language when confronted with the magnitude of unimaginable suffering.

Crucially, however, is the relationship established between the narrator and the audience over the duration of this short documentary film as a means of bridging the distance between historical record and moral reflection, transforming the act of viewing into an ethical encounter with the past. At first, the audience is regarded as an “impartial observer” to the archival documentation of the camps and the physical remnants of atrocity, whilst towards the end, they are “expected to participate in the moral and social implications” of what is revealed (Christie 3). This shift from detachment to ethical engagement reflects Resnais’ complex negotiation between witnessing and representation, as the film’s immersive techniques and measured narration compel the viewer to inhabit, however uncomfortably, the moral weight of history. For instance, Bouquet’s consciously subjective commentary of statements such as “As I speak to you now” and “For a moment you might think you were in a real clinic,” evolves into a direct conversation which ultimately dissolves the temporal divide between past and present, cultivating a shared perspective grounded in remembrance and moral responsibility (00:28:40 & 00:16:46). This rhetorical progression draws the audience into the film’s moral terrain, transforming them from passive viewers into implicated witnesses.

Moreover, when the narrator poses the question of, “Who is responsible?”, the question shifts from abstraction to direct moral address, and thereby implicates the viewer in the ethical weight of remembrance overall (00:28:16). By situating the viewer in an affectively charged proximity to sites of historical suffering, Resnais interrogates the ethical limits of empathy and the aesthetic mediation of atrocity. This culmination reaches its most potent expression in the film’s final sequence, where the narration collectively warns, “We pretend it all happened only once, at a given time and place” and “We turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to humanity’s endless cry” (00:30:14-00:30:18). As such, rather than offering a resolution, the film’s conclusion enacts a collapse of temporal and ethical boundaries, foregrounding the recursive nature of trauma. This refusal of closure demands that viewers reckon with the enduring legacies of violence and the complicity embedded in contemporary structures of power. This resulting confrontation compels a critical reassessment of whether the act of witnessing, however ethically motivated, risks reinscribing trauma through its visceral representational strategies. So *Night and Fog* not only confronts the potential for visceral trauma in its spectatorship, but also transforms the act of viewing into a process of ethical remembrance, resisting passive consumption and compelling active reflection on the responsibilities of memory overall.

Conclusion

When situated within the broader discourse of cinematic memory, Alain Resnais’ *Night and Fog* masterfully intertwines temporal, aesthetic, and narrative strategies to challenge cinematic portrayals of historical trauma. By juxtaposing colour and black-and-white imagery, lingering

camera movements, and dual-tense narration, Resnais collapses boundaries between past and present, urging an unsettling yet necessary reckoning with the Holocaust's legacy. Furthermore, his utilisation of visual and auditory dissonance resists historical closure, positioning memory as an ongoing process, unfinished process rather than a static act of commemoration. Through its synthesis of ethical restraint and formal innovation, *Night and Fog* exemplifies how cinema can function not merely as an archival record of atrocity but as a site of moral inquiry that transforms spectatorship into ethical participation. In compelling the viewer to oscillate between detachment and engagement, witnessing and complicity, Resnais redefines the act of remembrance as an enduring responsibility rather than a retrospective gesture. Ultimately, this dissertation has demonstrated how *Night and Fog* endures as a pivotal cinematic work that continues to shape contemporary discourses on historical remembrance and the representation of collective trauma overall.

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