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# *Night and Fog*

(*Nuit et Brouillard*) . Directed and edited by Alain Resnais. Based on Olga Wormser and Henri Michel's *The Tragedy of the Deportations*. Assistant director: André Heinrich. Commentary: Jean Cayrol. Music: Hanns Eisler. Camera: Ghislain Cloquet and Sacha Vierny. 32 minutes. Argos Films, 1956.

Eichmann waits trial, Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* is widely read, new spasms of

wall-scribbling in Germany suggest, to skeptics, less a new spirit than a reshaped face. These events give a sudden relevance to Cinema 16's recent first U.S. screening of the original version of *Night and Fog*. Sponsored by a French government agency concerned with the history of the deportations, using documentary materials from both East and West Europe, the film attempts to sum up the concentration camps in a way made possible only by the lapse of years.

In poignant alternation we inspect the documentary record of the camps in World War II, shown in blue-tinted black and white, and the modern ruin of Auschwitz, pictured in the tones and colors of a summer afternoon. Black, thorny boundary wires, tall stanchions, brick walls in orange and red pass by as the film opens on Auschwitz today. While somber, brooding chords sound an undertone of lament Resnais's camera makes a deliberate, passionless examination, trucking steadily past dark tiers of slatted dormitory cots, past the gaping holes of time-sweetened latrines, along rusted railroads, worn by a dismal freight, across concrete ceilings scarred by the countless clawing fingernails of the gassed. These mute relics seem pathetically neutral, mere anachronisms almost, seen detached from their incredible history. Imagination recoils, conscience falters, and (it is perhaps Resnais's central concern) men forget. Suddenly, dramatizing memory's deceit, the sunlit browns and greens of the railroad vanish, yielding to images in ghostly tones of blue. A transport is drawing in, the engine steaming in some remote December's air. Police dogs and S.S. captains stand alert. Wagon doors are opened. Gaunt faces of terror, despair, and apathy stare out. A "selection" is made from those who survived the journey. "Those on the left will work—those on the right . . ." Soon we move forward again to the colors of today, to the remains of the camp hospital, "The Dream House . . . where there was risk of death by syringe, medicines were make-believe and dressings paper . . ." Then, back once more to pictures from the gallery of the past, of "an S.S. doctor . . . a disquieting nurse . . . useless operations . . . amputations . . . starved patients who ate their dressings."

Written in the historic present tense to match the wartime footage, and in the past tense when commenting on the colored images of today, Cayrol's spare, graphic, bleakly ironic narration repopulates the shadows of the ruins and restores their past, building in detail the varied levels of a society "whose aspect was the image of terror." The doomed, awaiting their ration of poison and fire, are put to work in the underground factories of I. G. Farben, Siemens, and Krupp. While the commandant and his wife chat with guests in their living-room—"as in any other garrison camp, though perhaps she is more bored"—smoking pyres are fed. Remote clerks sign orders for new supplies of gas. Distant engineers design "shower-room" killing-chambers for its use. There is a strategy in this comprehensive view. It shows a chain of complicity linking the fanatics to the cowed, the incurious, and the inert. When, near the end, limp heaps of the 13,000 unburied Belsen corpses are bulldozed into pits, we see this not as an isolated spectacle of horror, nor the camps themselves as mere sociopathic freaks, but as parts of an organic system designed, run, and consented to by men—men, for the most part, of a common kind. Enormity rested on small virtues and petty frailties. The dark, poisonous bloom of nightmare grew in a soil of day-to-day routine.

At the Nuremberg reckoning faces gabble their innocence, and leaving them to return and survey a last time the haunted wastes of Auschwitz, Cayrol speaks in a grave poetry of warning. Can we be sure, he asks, that those faces are really so different from our own? And if not, then what may the future hold? "War nods, but has one eye open . . ." Rising above the confusion of cold-war allegiances, *Night and Fog*, a symbol of the modern conscience, ends on a note of disturbed self-questioning and anxious doubt.—ROGER SANDALL