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Beyond Informing: The Visual Language and Historical Impact of *Night and Fog*

*Night and Fog* is a French documentary about the Holocaust, more specifically Auschwitz and its prisoners. This documentary shows footage from the time of the Holocaust as well as footage of revisiting Auschwitz roughly ten years after the war has ended. The controversial documentary *Night and Fog* discusses the treatment and living conditions of Auschwitz's prisoners; the planning and execution of the film was done very carefully, research and scouting for film locations, archived photographs and video, and even the music. Each element was crafted to effectively tell the story of the prisoners.

The Holocaust is a rather difficult topic to tackle when making a film on its significance, especially for the time of the film, roughly ten years after the horrific events. *Night and Fog* used both color and black and white in the film to differentiate time, present day in color and the past in black and white. The images and video in the documentary were seen as rebellious even though they are representations for those who were repressed (Mroz, Cerecina, 115). The director of the film had said that he decided to use the two contrasting color gradings because he feared the film would come across as 'a sort of film-romanticism' if he had kept the entire documentary in black and white (ORT). He was trying to avoid this message with the film, as he wanted to create something that would inform and show the true events of Auschwitz. The



Fig 1. Front gate of Auschwitz with the train tracks that prisoners came in on.

present-day portions of the film shows the ruins of Auschwitz with the overgrown grass and bright skies. I believe this is to give the idea of the overlooked events of what truly happened to the prisoners.

Using both archived photographs and videos as well as new footage in the

documentary without transition was as if

they were breaking the “skin” of history (Mroz, Cerecina, 115). Auschwitz is now abandoned, people visit and learn about the history, but seeing it captured alongside real footage from the camp brings more meaning and a better understanding of how real and terrible the conditions were. This moment in the film comes quickly after showing people boarding the trains to be sent to Auschwitz, the film shows the tracks and asks the question of what they are looking for. It then goes on to mention the many dead bodies that might have fallen out once the train doors open, and this is the moment where it sets in that this is less of a documentary to inform, but a film to open the watchers eyes and realize the true impact of the Holocaust. The locations that they decided on to film as well as the archived footage they decided to use took much research and precision to properly capture their message (Mclane). Throughout the film there is a back and forth of present day and past footage, in many cases the narrator would describe what we are seeing in present day, with stories of the past. I believe this was to help solidify the realness of Auschwitz, being able to see the remnants of what the prisoners endured. One moment in particular was footage of a prison that the SS had built in a makeshift town, the narrator goes on

to describe the confinement those prisoners had, and emphasises that the air vents do not muffle the sounds of the screams. The footage lingered on the vents outside, not only telling, but showing the horrific remnants of the torture. (21:54) Another moment in the film that was emphasised by the lingering



Fig 2. Incinerator that is captured in the present-day footage.

footage was when speaking about the gas chambers and incinerators, they are shown for a relatively long time compared to other present-day footage of the ruins (25:40). This could be for the purpose of them being the most commonly known events in the Holocaust. This too is shown when they focus on the gas chambers specifically, the camera glides over the ceilings of these rooms and the narrator speaks on the scratch marks from fingernails of those fighting to survive. This points to the importance of not only the images from the camp, but the added layer of being able to see these remnants today (ORT).

The film did not only focus on the prisoner's treatment in Auschwitz, but also spoke on the prisoner's activities while in the camp. The prisoners often made puppets, monsters, and boxes that they kept hidden from the guards. Many of them also wrote notes and recalled dreams in an attempt to keep their minds sharp and coherent, they often turned to god as well. Some of

the prisoners tried to organize politically to get one of the more common criminals in the camp to take charge. They were more like a family in some regards, they often took care of those that were worse off than them, sharing food, bartering, and organizing help (17:13). In a last ditch attempt to get help when one was sick, they would take them to the hospital at camp, while they would be in hopes of finally getting a real bed to themselves, they often had to fear lethal injection (18:08). While in the hospital, they would be severely neglected, starved to the point of eating their own dressing gowns, and even tested on (18:26). These moments in the documentary



Fig 3. A tattooed number given to the prisoner on their arm.

are extremely gruesome but important in reason of informing about the true goings on of the camp. These people were trapped in the camps, never knowing and never assuming they would be free again. This quote from the documentary showed the

idea of being trapped, but seeing from an outsider's point of view as well as the prisoner. "The real world, with its peaceful landscapes, the world from before, might be glimpsed not so far away. But for the prisoner it was an illusion. For this world was finite, self-contained universe, bound by towers" (15:42). This moment in the documentary truly solidified the idea of captivity and mental strain that was put onto the prisoners, leaving the viewer with a glimpse into what the prisoners had seen as a reality.

The music in the film was meant to be a more calming tone, because of the film's gruesome topic and images, the music was composed to be deliberately unsentimental (ORT). The composer wanted the music to create a sense of detachment from the horrific images being

shown along with the music, but in moments of present-day shots the music was meant to fill the underwhelming landscape. Choosing the music for this film was a very important decision, if the images and videos were not properly taken into account, it could come off as quite tone-deaf. This music furthers the idea of the film's importance, a film that is not meant to be interesting, but one that is meant to capture and inform the audience. The documentary's purpose was not necessarily well received to some the public at the time of its release. The film was requested to be withdrawn from the Cannes Film Festival due to fear that it would damage Germany's international relationship and cause hatred towards Germans (German History). It was argued that the film was not blaming Germans for everything that had happened during the Holocaust, but instead how humanity had the

capacity to allow such things to take place (German History). This quote from the film points to this idea of not placing blame on one country, as well as a statement to the world as a whole on the importance of proper remembrance. "We



Fig 4. Prisoners at a barbed wire fence.

tell ourselves it was confined to one country, one point in time. We turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to the never-ending cries..." (32:40). While some did not take kindly to this, later in the film's lifetime it became a teaching tool in France, starting in 1991 (German History). Even though the film is considered obscene to classical theorists of cinema as it is a problematic medium when representing death (Landesman) the film was voted fourth best documentary of all time in 2014 (German History).

*Night and Fog* used many forms of media to get a point of importance of the Holocaust and its need to be informed across. I personally believe the film did an incredible job of using artistic style to inform the audience about the prisoners of Auschwitz and the connection to the present-day.

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