Engaging History: *Nuit et brouillard*’s Cinematic Meditation on the Archive

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Alain Resnais’ 1955 documentary *Nuit et brouillard* emerged in a complex period in France’s history, fraught with competing memorial narratives. Ten years after the end of the Second World War, France was still grappling with a seemingly irreconcilable legacy of victimhood, collaboration, and resistance. The atrocities suffered in the labour and extermination camps, as well as the struggles of the French resistance fighters, were hard to forget, but the question of French collaboration with the Nazis was tucked away, as efforts to construct a nationalistic, collective image of “Résistance” reigned over political discourse. By the 1950s, this national image building was reinforced to erase France’s brutal colonialist repression of the Algerian independence movement from public address. It was in this context that Resnais released the film.

The film’s troubled production history and its negative initial reception signalled France’s struggle to look at its traumatic past (and present) with a critical eye toward national mythmaking. At the same time, its pioneering poetic-essayistic form challenged historical assumptions and broke open the idea of France as shaped by officially sanctioned remembrance. By disrupting the embedded power structures in different nations’ archiving practices as a means of recording official histories, and by engaging the archival object in a formal and reflective dialogue, Alain Resnais articulated a cinematic meditation on the limits of memory and historical representation, while critically questioning the present through an understanding of the past as trace.

By analyzing Resnais’ use of archival imagery and Jean Cayrol’s voice-over narration, I argue that Resnais draws on French national archives and personal experiences of the camps in *Nuit et brouillard* in order to challenge established national discourses in France around the Second World War. The film provides a revised historiography that
significantly departs from the vision of the status quo, and substantiates its claims by offering up its source material for viewer inspection. I begin by interrogating the role of the archive in the film’s production and release. I then move to an overview of French historiographical debates around the memorialization of the Holocaust, and an epistemological analysis of the archive as a concept. Finally, in the latter half of the article, I turn to textual analysis of the narration and the editing of images in several key sequences to demonstrate the multiple ways in which Resnais used the film to theorize the archive’s role in processes of remembrance, memorialization, and the writing of history in postwar France.

What marks Nuit et brouillard as an innovative historical documentary is its cinematic engagement with both the archiving process and the archival material from all levels of production. Indeed, from initial research to editing, the creation of Nuit et brouillard was much like the process of memory: creative, incoherent, and sometimes conflicting. Andreas Huyssen elaborates an important operational characteristic of memory as the articulation, in the present, of the past. The past does not simply exist in memory, he argues, “the mode of memory is recherche rather than recuperation” (Huyssen 3). Resnais’ excavation of archival fragments and subsequent organization of them in his film, offers a sense of temporal fluidity and dialectical tension between historical moments. This archival excavation and consequential juxtaposition recasts the process of remembering the past as an act of research instead of retrieval, as if from some repository of the past. Here, a brief overview of Nuit et brouillard’s production history, and France’s political climate at the time, will highlight the critical methodology employed to subvert official memorial discourses, both institutionally and formally.

The inception of Nuit et brouillard emerged from France’s political efforts to commemorate the victims and heroes of the Second World War. The initiative came from the Comité d’histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale and the Réseau du souvenir (Lindeperg, “Night and Fog: Inventing a Perspective” 72), an association
founded in 1952 whose mandate was to promote the memory of the “Déportation,”\(^1\) with the intent of elevating the memory of the deportee as the image of resistance. The association’s stated goal was to “transform memory into monument” (Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication et du Service interministériel des Archives de France). In 1954, the Réseau spearheaded the publication of an anthology of eyewitness accounts entitled “Tragédie de la déportation,” led by historians Henri Michel, who was a head at both the Réseau and the Comité, and Olga Wormser (ibid). In November 1954, for the tenth anniversary of France’s liberation, the minister of education inaugurated the exhibit entitled “Résistance, libération, déportation” at the Musée pédagogique du 29 de la rue d’Ulm in Paris, where Michel and Wormser announced the idea of a film about the German concentration camp system (Delage 83). The Comité had commissioned Anatole Dauman as the producer, who picked Alain Resnais to direct the film. Resnais was to work closely with Michel and Wormser, who would act as his historical advisors. Michel anticipated that the film’s historical value would lay in the authenticity of the archival images, and in a sober, sociologically informed commentary (85). While the film was born from a politically and institutionally motivated remembrance project, inscribed by the idealization of “la Résistance” within the French context of deportations and the concentration camp systems, its director and historians would ultimately redirect this memorial imperative. Indeed, the careful and thorough archival research that Michel, Wormser, and Resnais undertook to make the film uncovered a more nuanced and confrontational history than the Réseau’s push for a memorialization of war heroes.

Their pre-production archival research demonstrated, furthermore, the complexity of competing historical narratives that marked the official remembrance of the Second World War in France. By using archival imagery from Wormser’s documentation collected for the 1954 exhibit (including photographs of the liberation of the camps and objects and drawings belonging to the deportees) and by collecting archival photos and films from various war and camp museums, their search spanned the deportation to

\(^1\) A blanket term used in various French documentary and historical sources that does not specify details about who was deported or whether it was before or after the implementation of the Final Solution.
ghettos and camps, life (and death) inside the camps, and liberation in 1944-45. During the 1950s, the specific deportation and extermination of European Jews was largely obscured from French public discourse by the overriding historical thread of the concentration camp system (Lindeperg, “Night and Fog: Inventing a Perspective” 76), yet the team’s search for images from various sources enabled them to unearth this buried history and bring it to the public’s eye, in turn broadening the Réseau du Souvenir’s memorial call to immortalize resistance heroes. Ultimately, Nuit et brouillard’s narrative did not explicitly single out the fate of the Jews, but it is noteworthy that the archival research for the film nuanced the Réseau’s tunneled vision of history.

The team’s archival research involved the examination of several institutional archives’ holdings, which met with varying degrees of success as they faced some opposition from certain institutions. They searched the photographic archives of the Centre de documentation juive contemporaine, the Comité d’histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale, and the Amicale de Mauthausen, in addition to viewing footage of the liberation of the camps from the Actualités françaises, taken in the spring of 1945 (73). However, some of the army archives were more reticent to release material. As Resnais explains in a 1986 interview with film scholar Richard Raskin, the Service cinématographique de l’armée française, from which Resnais regretfully recalls mostly official ceremony images, prohibited the use of some of the shots he had nonetheless chosen with a note explaining the forbiddance had to do with the nature of the film (Raskin 53). Similarly, the London Imperial War Museum forbade access to its archives. Resnais stated in his interview with Raskin that he interpreted these bans as solidarity between the armies in refusing to talk about this part of documented history (ibid). The team still persisted to gather more archival material and headed to the Dutch Institute for War Documentation in Amsterdam and then to Poland where it continued its research at the Institute for Jewish History, the Documentary Film Studios in Warsaw, the Warsaw Ghetto museum, the Majdanek concentration camp, and the Auschwitz concentration camp (Lindeperg, “Night and Fog: Inventing a Perspective” 73, 75).
The team’s international scavenge for archival material from numerous institutions, as well as the restrictions they faced, are revealing of the vectors of power imposed onto archives and shaping its involvement in national forms of memorial representation. The archives they visited correspond to what Jamie Baron describes as the traditional historiographic notion of the archive: an official institutional repository of official documents (Baron 2). As such, the archive was elevated as a proprietor of empirical evidence and objective accounts of the past, which came to serve totalizing, unquestioned theorizations of history. As Mike Featherstone explains, the archive as institution, therefore, acted as a stronghold for national memory: “It was the building that acted as the sanctum, the place in which the sacred texts and objects were stored that were used to generate collective identity and social solidarity” (Featherstone 592). Over time, institutional archives gather records upon records, enabling the accumulation of data, but in doing so, questions arise around the preservation of historical knowledge: whose data is it? Is the collection process politically motivated or regulated? Is there a responsibility toward the public? As Baron and Featherstone point out, historically, the purpose of such collections served the construction of national identity. In this light, the preservation of historical knowledge, via those given records conserved in national archives, is in fact a process of selection that cultivates a dominant vision of the past.

Both Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida engage with the question of the archival conservation of historical knowledge, reformulating our understanding of the archive’s physically institutional power toward an understanding of it as a system that oversees how the past is remembered and articulated. For Foucault, the particular selection and ordering of documents determines a structure of power embedded in the narration of history (Foucault 28-29). Likewise, in his seminal Archive Fever, Derrida recognizes that the structure of the archival institution also determines the structure of the archival material, whereby the past is not simply preserved, but constructed by the archive: “The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida 17). This production is determined by the archive’s administrators, known as the archons, who carry hermeneutic authority at the intersection of what Derrida posits as the archive’s defining features: domiciliation (the archives’ permanent place of dwelling) and consignation (the
The act of gathering together signs into a synchronous unit where all the elements form an ideal arrangement (2-3). Ontologically, then, the archive as an institution is understood as taking place in a privileged residence where the archons’ power functions through the accumulation and classification of signs into a singular organized system. Through this configuration, heterogeneity would threaten consignation, so the archive becomes the site where grand narratives of history are commanded. In this context, mnemonic authority within public discourse is relegated to those who appropriate and arrange the past. Consequently, “there is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation” (Derrida 4). Building upon Derrida’s argument, then, the act of browsing through an archive and selecting certain records over others—of reading records against the grain—opens up a space for the formulation of historical counter-narratives, while potentially democratizing the historiographical process.

Resnais challenged the structures of power that often govern the archival process when he collected fragments of historical records from different national archives and repositories. This questioning of the relationship between authoritative dictates of history and memorial institutions lies at the heart of his three short documentaries of the 1950s: Les Statues meurent aussi (1953), Nuit et brouillard (1955), and Toute la mémoire du monde (1956). In his article on Resnais’ short documentaries, Matthew Croombs explains: “The particular institutions that they feature – the national library, the Musée de l’Homme, and the camp (as museum) – concern the epistemology of history, and the ways that the national past is made to cohere within totalizing, representational spaces” (Croombs 29-30). Through the processes of searching various centres belonging to different nations and selecting which archival objects to bring together to form a new collection in Nuit et brouillard, Resnais confronted the hegemonic nationalistic discourses of institutional historical conservation in France.

Upon the film’s completion in 1955, Resnais was confronted by the repressive nature of these nationalistic discourses. The French control committee viewed the completed film
and ordered the removal of the archival photo of a French officer guarding the Pithiviers camp (Lindeperg, *Nuit et brouillard: un film dans l’histoire* 144). In the background of the photo, a dozen or so prisoners are visible within a barbed wire perimeter. In the foreground there is the silhouette of a French gendarme, slightly profiled, and wearing a képi (the French military hat). The photograph was a lasting symbol of French collaboration with the Nazis in the arrest and internment of French Jews before their deportation.

![Fig. 1 Photograph of French gendarme, reproduced in *Nuit et brouillard* (1955)](image)

In the political climate of 1950s France, any reference to French activities outside of the self-image projected and sanctioned by the state was considered unsuitable for public discourse. With the memory of French complicity in Nazi horrors through the Vichy regime, and with France’s repressive colonial operation in Algeria, a major rift existed between the French experience of war and historical discourses as conserved by public record and held within the state’s archives. This rift created what Croombs articulates as a “crisis of appearances,” referring to “the absence of a criminal history that was conducted in the French public’s name yet erased from their view, and to the equally
invisible yet palpable existence of the state machinery responsible for that erasure" (Croombs 31). It is precisely within this crisis that Resnais’ use of the photograph in question in *Nuit et brouillard* intervenes and opens a space within the public sphere to challenge the suppression of uncomfortable moments in recorded history.

In March 1956, the production company, Argos, re-submitted the film to the control committee, but instead of replacing the photograph, the production team merely hid the gendarme’s képi beneath a dark shadow.

![Fig. 2 Censored photograph, reproduced in *Nuit et brouillard* (1955)](image)

This allowed Jean Cayrol’s narration to still accurately enumerate the French internment locations (“internés de Pithiviers, rafis du Vél' d'Hiv,’...”), while craftily preserving on screen the state’s censorship stamp (Lindeperg, *Nuit et brouillard: un film dans l’histoire* 153). This was but one of the ways Resnais resisted various forms of state censorship and intervention. When he directed his next film, *Toute la mémoire du monde*, which was commissioned by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he subverted the state agency’s intention to make a film displaying France’s modernization of knowledge by depicting the French national library as a “carceral space” (Ungar 73). His
confrontational cinematic representation of both the archive and those objects held therein sought to challenge this element of France’s nationalistic mythmaking.

*Nuit et brouillard*’s controversy did not end with the censorship of archival images. It was nominated by the Cannes Film Festival’s selection committee in the short subject category, but the State Secretary of Industry and Commerce did not list it as one of its entries, launching a slew of exchanges between political figures and film officials alike (Ungar 64). While official Cannes discourse promoted a conciliatory and uncontroversial festival atmosphere, growing Cold War tensions ultimately brought nations such as France to attempt to silence cultural outputs that upset diplomatic discourses (ibid). In the end, the film was presented at the festival, but not as part of its official selection.

The initial censorship of *Nuit et brouillard*, at both the level of its production and domestic exhibition, revealed the delicate nature of France’s war remembrance effort in the postwar years.² As historian Henry Rousso claims, France’s official memorial discourse was spawned by Charles de Gaulle’s heavy-handed call for a unified, glorious imaging of the war effort as a people *en résistance* (Rousso 28). This glazed myth of the past eclipsed the less palatable memory of the Vichy regime. De Gaulle’s myth of resistance and his discursive crusade to elevate a “certain image of France” (Greene 3) grew throughout the 1950s as the Cold War escalated in Europe, and as France violently fought against Algerian independence. Resnais’ cinema also probed the fissures in the myth of French national identity by reintroducing uncensored, disturbing images into its collective memory.

*Nuit et brouillard*’s disruption of official memory involved the simultaneously poetic and dialectical treatment of the archival imagery itself. Resnais’ use of archives created a contemplative intersection of past and present by interlacing the archival images with

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² Resnais’ work had been censored before by the French government, which had fought to suppress in the immediate postwar years domestic criticism of its military operations abroad. For many years, only a truncated version of his 1953 *Les Statues meurent aussi*, which conveyed a strong anti-colonialist critique, was made available and it was refused a permit for commercial distribution until 1968 (Croombs).
contemporary footage through jarring editing. In one particular sequence describing the gruesome functionality and productivity of the camps, towards the end of the film, Resnais juxtaposes archival images of personal belongings with overt signs of death to disturbingly convey the trauma of the Holocaust by signalling to viewers the immense scale of this extermination campaign. Five photos exhibiting piles of personal belongings are jarringly interrupted by a shot of women’s hair. For an agonizingly long thirty-two seconds, the camera tilts down and then up an endless mountain of hair. It cuts directly to a shot of huge rolls of cloth, over which the narrator mentions the economic gain of using the hair to make these rolls. The next archival shot shows a man opening an oven, revealing a human skeleton inside. This is quickly followed by a lengthier bird’s-eye view shot of thousands of bones, which cuts to a wide shot of a large lettuce field, displaying what the narrator explains as the Nazis’ attempt to transform the bones into fertilizer. Next is a bold series of seven rapid shots of dead bodies, some piled and some decapitated. The viewer has little time to wonder what could possibly be done with the bodies before the next two shots quickly and casually show the making of soap. Finally, a short shot of a container filled with human skin is followed by a ten second tracking shot of delicately placed ‘paper’ drawings on a table. Through direct cuts and carefully chosen archival images, the editing in Nuit et brouillard highlights the historically documented process of transforming human beings into material goods.

Fig. 3 Mountain of hair (Nuit et brouillard)  
Fig. 4 Roll of cloth made of hair (Nuit et brouillard)
Whereas the contemporary footage can point towards an absence, this archival imagery also effectively indexes a disturbing abundance. The archival image’s ability to retain and retrieve an excess of historical information is key to destabilizing historical narratives that are formed through the imprint of time on place. In the concentration camps, where there is a dearth of photographs and footage showing the traumatic violence at the moment it was perpetrated, the traces and remnants of that violence nevertheless engulfed later footage shot in the camps after Liberation. The overwhelming urgency with which these remnants fill the frame signals celluloid’s inherent ability to record all details in front of the camera lens, including those which may become evidence of overlooked or supressed histories. This excess can potentially destabilize deterministic attempts at constructing a specific historical narrative, transmuting archival footage into what Paula Amad calls the counter-archive: “[…] a supplementary realm where the modern conditions of disorder, fragmentation, and contingency came to haunt the already unstable positivist utopia of order, synthesis, and totality” (Amad 21). In this realm, the excess that constitutes traumatic historical traces disrupts the silence and absence of the sweeping passage of time.

In another sequence, it is the counterbalance between the archival imagery and the contemporary footage that offers an affective engagement with different temporal lines. It begins in the present, as the camera enters a gas chamber and travels for thirty seconds in close-up across the ceiling, showing the fingernail scrapings of the victims. The seemingly endless backward tracking shot of the damaged white ceiling evokes the difficulty of representing such immeasurable pain and loss. Resnais then places a harsh archival close-up shot of a dead woman’s face. The next archival shots show groups of dead bodies and their subsequent burning in pyres (as an efficient alternative to crematoria). What the previous contemporary images cannot capture, the archival footage can, by visually filling the emptiness of the gas chamber as it is explored in 1955. As the contemporary footage encourages a thoughtful meditation on the unimaginable past, the archives attempt to counterbalance contemplation with a devastating historical referent. Conversely, the intercutting of the disturbing archival
footage with contemporary imagery prevents the sensationalizing of this trauma through a voyeuristic over-saturation of shocking visual material.

The careful montage of the archival imagery and the contemporary footage visualizes the history of the Holocaust by jointly alarming the viewer and asking him/her to ponder how time can fracture and displace memory. The balancing of the archival material with the contemporary footage engages the viewer with a reflective temporality where past and present meet, thus creating what Jamie Baron calls the “archive effect.” The “archive effect” relies on “temporal disparity” (Baron 18), articulated here through the contrast between the movement in the contemporary shots and the black-and-white static photos, enabling the viewer to recognize these latter images as archival documents. This effect cultivates a critical reflection of Resnais’ interplay of temporalities. In this sense, the archive effect deepens a sense of access to multiple points of entry into history rather than merely direct to an official repository of historical knowledge (7).

The method of juxtaposing stark archival imagery of suffering and death with contemporary footage, and narrativising a connection between these images through a lyrical yet probing voice-over, was innovative compared to other archive-based documentaries being made at the time. Jean Cayrol’s voice-over narration was key in
inviting the viewer to question the cinematic meditation on the archive. A Catholic French poet, Cayrol survived concentration camps during the Second World War. He joined the French Resistance in 1940, but in 1942, he was denounced and incarcerated at the Fresnes prison, where he stayed for ten months (Jean Cayrol: Nuit et brouillard, 73). In 1943, he was deported to the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp (74) under the “Nacht und Nebel” (“Night and Fog” or “Nuit et brouillard”) Nazi directive aimed against political activists and resistance helpers. In his interview with Raskin, Resnais reflected on the initial team-forming process for the production of Nuit et brouillard and states that he in fact only agreed to direct the film on the condition that Cayrol write the commentary, precisely because of his experience as a survivor (Raskin 48). He explains, however, that Cayrol struggled initially with revisiting this traumatic period of his life and fell ill after viewing an early cut of the film. Cayrol reportedly told Resnais he could not write the narration from within the editing suite, but would instead write it from memory (54). The ensuing narration did not completely match the visual narrative, so Chris Marker, friend to both Resnais and Cayrol and Resnais’ previous collaborator, was brought on board and rewrote Cayrol’s text (ibid). When Cayrol healed, he took Marker’s revisions and completely rewrote the script himself.

Cayrol’s voice-over narration, combined with Nuit et brouillard’s provoking counterbalance of archival imagery with contemporary footage, challenged the formula of contemporaneous documentaries about concentration camps. From the end of the war until the early 1960s, such documentaries fell into two principal categories: the newsreel-type and the expository compilation film (Hirsch 32). In these forms of documentary, historical explanation aimed for authoritative objectivity through raw footage (as in the newsreel form) or through a diachronic assemblage of images (as in the compilation form), presented as evidence and accompanied by an omniscient commentary, thus binding together a grand narrative of historical events (33, 37). In these two types of filmmaking, archival imagery was typically regarded as reliable visual evidence of the past and therefore used as a means of visualizing a moment in history. Resnais challenged this classical positivist use of documentary evidence in Nuit et brouillard by confronting the archival image’s status as empirical evidence and pointing
towards potentially alternative readings of seemingly benign images. For example, in an
aforementioned sequence, a shot of human bones is followed by a shot of a lettuce
field, over which the narrator simply and succinctly explains that fertilizer is made with
the bones. The understated narration and the dialectical juxtaposition of an image filled
with remnants of death with another image of vast growing fields effectively
contextualizes the Holocaust’s concentration camps within the economic reality that
many profited from the Final Solution.

As *Nuit et brouillard* broke away from the mould of these contemporaneous, more
conventional documentary uses of archival footage, formal and narrative filmmaking
strategies for historical documentaries continued to evolve and were questioned in the
decades following its release. Debates over the value of archival imagery in historical
documentary films reached a pivotal point in the 1980s with the release of another
French film about the Holocaust: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). Avoiding archival
images completely, Lanzmann’s film is notable for its refusal to depict the terror of the
Holocaust, instead relying on testimony as the only way, he believed, to authentically
offer a grasp on the incomprehensible nature of its experience. He remained within the
boundaries of what can be imagined by denying any concrete depiction of the murder of
millions (Koch, Daniel, and Hansen, 21). Lanzmann’s rhetoric around *Shoah* was part of
a larger debate in the 1980s in trauma and media studies over the reliability of visual
representation to truthfully convey the incomprehensible horrors of a trauma like the
Holocaust (Guerin and Hallas 7). The ambivalence of filmmakers and scholars toward
the image’s ability to adequately depict large-scale traumas gained traction after the
Second World War. This ambivalence was rooted in the idea that the event’s atrocity
and enormity constitutes a representational limit (Hirsch 4-5). Film scholars like Ilan
Avisar, author of *Screening the Holocaust: Cinema’s Images of the Unimaginable*
(1988), focused on the challenges of the visual representation of such an indescribable
event: “the Holocaust represents a reality so fantastic and so extraordinary that it defies
our basic notion of empirical reality, the raw material of every mimetic art” (Avisar 1).
Through this type of representational discourse, and productions like *Shoah*, the
mediation of this empirical reality, long hailed as archival imagery’s unique authority, was called into question.

The widely held belief that the meaning behind an unaltered archival moving image is inextricably linked to a real world referent has since been replaced by an acknowledgment of archival footage’s mediated nature (Swender 3). Today, documentary scholars agree that visual representation is a construction. It involves more than the conception of the image as pure re-presentation, as outlined in André Bazin’s 1960 essay “The Ontology of the Photographic Image. Indeed, the mere intervention of the camera within a space enacts a mediation through various visual and aural signifiers, such as angling, framing, positioning, and sound, to name a few (Renov 26). In her article “Claiming the Found: Archive Footage and Documentary Practice,” Rebecca Swender classifies archival footage based on categories of specificity that characterize the footage in its original form (that is to say, before its insertion in a secondary text). Two of these categories are relevant to the discussion of Resnais’ Nuit et brouillard: historical specificity and conventional specificity. Historical specificity refers to the viewer’s assumed knowledge of the historical world, whereas conventional specificity signals the image’s over-familiarity to the viewer and the accepted truth claim that can no longer be detached from its iconicity (Swender 5). While Swender refers to archival moving images in her article, the same could apply to archival photos as well; both of which are used in Resnais’ film. An interesting consequence of historical and conventional specificity occurs in Nuit et brouillard through the collage of archival imagery, taken at different times during the war: the images of deportees lying on their bedsteads, which are now known to have been taken by Americans at Buchenwald upon liberation (Lindeperg, “Night and Fog: Inventing a Perspective” 79), are combined with images of walking prisoners taken by the Nazis to give a rundown of daily life in the camp. Over the years, some scholarly experts researching concentration camp photographs taken over the course of the war have questioned the strategy of using camp photographs interchangeably to depict the trauma of the camps (78). Increased contextual knowledge means that photographs taken from the time of internment and others taken from the time of liberation from the camps were no longer seen as
interchangeable in portraying the horrors of the concentration camp system. Interestingly, despite the theoretical discourse on the distinctiveness of the context in which each photograph was taken, the images blend disturbingly well in *Nuit et brouillard*. In other words, the distancing effect produced by the Nazi photographs of naked or beaten prisoners recalls a similar raw dissociation in the photographs of dead or dying prisoners taken during liberation. This similarity evokes the limits of archival imagery in providing indexical evidence and specificity.

Nevertheless, Resnais’ approach towards the archive continues to be relevant to documentary filmmaking and archive studies, given his critique of the French state’s mythologizing of history through the alternative historiography he proposes in *Nuit et brouillard*. Central to Resnais’ vision is the confrontation between the past and the present, an act that potentially encourages historical reflection and raises awareness about contemporary struggles in France through disrupting official national discourses. By engaging the past with visual explorations of traces and archival remains, *Nuit et brouillard* encourages an active examination of the meaning of history as it affects the present, and the ways in which the present correspondingly shapes understandings of the past.

This transition away from chronological historical reproduction to critical engagement with the historiographical process set the tone for an important trend in cinema, cemented in later years by avant-garde films. In *Shadows, Specters, Shards: Making History in Avant-Garde Film*, Jeffrey Skoller argues that avant-garde or experimental documentaries, in their formal experiments with the medium of film and historiography, evoke the past only through the present and resist the production of historical knowledge through the re-creation of indexical signs that point to what can be said and seen about the past (xiv). Though Skoller is talking about avant-garde documentaries, this articulation of representational language, especially as it concerns historical events that push the limits of what can be expressed, can also be found in a type of documentary film concerned with a filmmaker’s and/or subject’s journey of “return” (Insdorf 300). One such example is *Birthplace* (1992), a Polish documentary by Pawel
Lozinski. Following the film’s subject Henryk Grynberg as he returns to his hometown in Poland to try to uncover what happened to his family during the Second World War, the documentary provides a direct plunge into the experience of return and memorial discovery without much contextual explanation. The lack of contextual information shifts the burden of meaning making onto the viewer, who must glean clues from the scarce imagery about the passage of history. At the end of the film, Grynberg discovers where the body of his father was un-commemoratively buried and he searches the site with a group of locals. The scene resists the use of archival photos of Grynberg’s father and instead focuses on his rotted skull as the primary link to the past. The careful and patient archaeological search for the skull encourages an active involvement by the viewer, as s/he witnesses only the tangible effect of the passage of time without reference points.

Fig. 7 Birthplace (1992)
Conversely, *Nuit et brouillard* offered a formula decades before that combined imagery of the past and the present, in order to position historical mediation as an active process that invites critical reflection.

Indeed, by continually balancing imagery of the past with pensive travelling shots of the contemporary landscape of the camps, *Nuit et brouillard* provides the contemplative space for the viewer to process history as it affects his/her present. By contrasting the black-and-white archival images with the contemporary colour footage, the shorter takes of the archival material with the longer takes of the contemporary footage, and the stasis of the archival photography with the movement of the camera in the contemporary shots, Resnais clearly contrasts the two temporalities through these formal differences, and invites the viewer to investigate the impact of time.

Additionally, the imagery of both the past and present share a status as visible evidence. Previously recorded or physical, these traces are reanimated by their cinematic juxtaposition into a reflective temporality where past and present meet, recalling Baron’s “archive effect.” The oppositional presentation of black-and-white imagery with the colour contemporary footage enables the viewer’s recognition of the former as archival. In addition to the aforementioned archive effect, the temporal disparity created by this juxtaposition in *Nuit et brouillard* also produces an “archive affect,” or an emotional reaction to the imprint of time’s passage on people and places (Baron 21). Baron explains that through the archive affect, the viewer attributes to the archival document not just evidentiary authority over the past, but also a sense of loss, and she argues that in *Nuit et brouillard*, “[…] the production of temporal disparity forces us to recognize that the past is irretrievable even as its traces are visible” (ibid). While the archive affect’s disturbing recognition of time’s inscription on bodies and places cogently shapes *Nuit et brouillard*’s form, I contend that this temporal disparity does not necessarily force a recognition that “the past is irretrievable.” While a feeling of loss is evoked by the presentation of images of dead, mutilated bodies, and barren places, the archive affect and affect in *Nuit et brouillard* probe the limits of representation and open up reflective opportunities for the viewer to access the past. In line with HuysSEN’S
conceptualization of memory as “recherche,” this process of retrieval demands a form of imaginative viewing when facing this melding of archival footage with images of the contemporary ruins. One striking example of this imaginative potential is the sequence toward the second half of the film describing the city-like nature of the camps accompanied by Jean Cayrol’s evocative commentary. The narration explains how there were hospitals, red light districts, residential districts, and even prisons in the camps. As the camera tracks across the exterior of the building that was once a prison, the narrator reflectively comments on the futility of describing what occurred here, leaving the viewer to fill in the gaps. Then, in a haunting moment of visual tact, the camera travels across the air vents at the bottom of the building, pauses at one of them, and the narrator very simply states: “les bouches d’aération ne retiennent pas le cri.”3 This imagining of the camp’s disturbing past that this representative strategy subtly imposes on the viewer epitomizes the kind of affective engagement with the past that Resnais’ film provokes. The openings that he leaves throughout the film for the viewer to conceive the horrors of the past open up an experiential point of contact with historical fact.

Jean Cayrol’s commentary is a determining factor in the film’s ability to invite the viewer into contact with the past. Cayrol’s experience as a survivor of the concentration camps had heavily influenced his writing. After the war, he developed a style in modern French literature known as the Lazarean novel, whose narrative world is similar to the concentration camp system in that characters are often trapped in a space, elusively searching for meaning and facing the paradoxical impossibility and necessity to communicate with humanity (Colombat 139-140). This sense infuses Cayrol’s poetic language in Nuit et brouillard with a self-reflective call to arms, made evident by the following excerpt from his narration: “Cette réalité des camps, méprisée par ceux qui la fabriquent, insaisissable pour ceux qui la subissent, c’est bien en vain qu’à notre tour nous essayons d’en découvrir les restes.”4 This cynical tone, which permeates through most of the narration, is imbued with a charge of accountability aimed at the viewer. It

3 “The air vents do not withhold the screams” (author’s translation).
4 “This reality of the camps, scorned by those who build it, elusive to those who endure it; it is in vain that we now try to discover its remnants” (author’s translation).
does so through several means, most notably its unsentimental honesty, its irony, and its warning. In one sequence in the latter half of the film, where the systematic extermination process of the camps is unveiled, the narration calmly describes the truth of this inhumanity, without sensationalizing it. Over images of gas chambers and crematoria, the narrator’s tone remains neutral and the words themselves are descriptive yet unemotional. This not only offers the viewer the freedom to respond affectively on his/her own terms, but it also enables the other formal elements to speak for themselves. Over unsettling photographs of several emaciated dead bodies, the narrator simply states: “Quand les crématoires sont insuffisants, on dresse des buchés.” Given the harshly poignant quality of the photographs combined with the lyrical score, the narration does not need to be overly sensitive. In its simplicity and straightforwardness, it efficiently compliments the visual and musical emotional appeal.

The narration’s dispassionate quality does not, however, preclude cunning commentary. At key points during the film, the commentary ironically remarks upon the image, preventing the viewer from simply visually absorbing it and forcing him/her to take position in regards to the historical representation. For example, at the beginning of the aforementioned sequence that outlines the extermination processes of the camps, the narration explains the Nazis’ strategic plans for killing over photographs of the construction of crematoria. The next shot is the contemporary view of a crematorium on a sunny day, over which the narrator states that crematoria can have a postcard look and tourists get their picture taken in front of them. This sternly articulated comment injects a hint of cynicism, allowing the spectator to reconsider what is being shown. Furthermore, the narration jokingly offers a sombre remark on the inadequacy, or even inappropriateness, of a common practice of taking photos in and around the crematoria as a means of commemoration, itself a form of historical tourism. Sardonic insertions like these provide the film with critical reflections on such shocking visible evidence of past atrocities.

5 “When the crematoria prove insufficient, pyres are set up” (author's translation).
While Cayrol’s commentary encourages the viewer to reconsider how she or he understands the ways in which we document and represent the past, it also morally confronts the viewer at the end of the film. Over archival footage of war trials followed by archival footage of dead bodies being tossed into pits, the narrator asks who is accountable:

“Je ne suis pas responsable,” dit le kapo.
“Je ne suis pas responsable,” dit l’officier.
“Je ne suis pas responsable.”
Alors qui est responsable?”

Visually, the sequence transitions to contemporary travelling shots of murky water and ruins covering the camps and the narration begins to use a plural personal pronoun, indicating the inclusivity of the warning. It cautions us that we look upon these ruins with the false belief that such evil died along with them. It warns us about our naïveté about its potential recurrence, and about our ignorance of other sufferings occurring contemporarily: “Qui de nous veille de cet étrange observatoire pour nous avertir de l’arrivée de ces nouveaux bourreaux? Ont-ils vraiment un autre visage que le nôtre?”

In its critical reflection on atrocities seemingly locked in the past, the narration here clearly articulates Resnais’ intention to politicize the film as an awareness-raising artistic intervention into French public discourse. In an interview, Resnais presents *Nuit et brouillard* as a tool for shedding light on viewers’ forgetfulness (or ignorance) of ongoing human rights violations, while reiterating his unwillingness to make the film as simply a monument for the dead: “Je ne voulais pas faire un film ‘monument aux morts.’ C’est ça dont j’avais très peur, c’est de faire un film qui soit ‘Plus jamais ça.’ Non, ça ne recommencera pas” (Raskin 51). His resistance to making a film that holds the naïve hope that history will not repeat itself was undoubtedly shaped by his experiences witnessing numerous atrocities, committed during and after the war. More specifically, Resnais had in fact stated that the essence of *Nuit et brouillard*’s message was to allude

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6 “I am not responsible,” says the Kapo. “I am not responsible,” says the officer.” “I am not responsible.” Then who is responsible?” (author’s translation).
7 “Who among us keeps watch from this strange observatory to warn of the arrival of our new executioners? Are their faces really different from our own?” (author’s translation).
8 I did not want to make a film as a monument to the dead. What really scared me was to make a film that said “never again. No, this will not happen again.” (author’s translation).
to France’s current operation in Algeria (Croombs 29). While there are no direct references to this within the voice-over narration, the final words can be read as much an indictment of France’s suppression of Algerian independence as it can of the Holocaust:

“Il y a nous qui regardons sincèrement ces ruines comme si le vieux monstre concentrationnaire était mort sous les décombres, qui feignons de reprendre espoir devant cette image qui s'éloigne, comme si on guérissait de la peste concentrationnaire, nous qui feignons de croire que tout cela est d’un seul temps et d’un seul pays, et qui ne pensons pas à regarder autour de nous et qui n'entendons pas qu'on crie sans fin.”

The power of these last words lies not only in their intended reference to events within the 1950s context, but also, sixty years later, in their continued defiance of assumptions about history as a closed narrative isolated in the past.

As its journey across shifting debates over modes of historical representation shows, Alain Resnais’ *Nuit et brouillard* continues to be relevant to contemporary audiences and scholars as a creative work of archival documentary. Through the film’s critical engagement with the official archival sites in its pre-production, its release in a time of repressive nationalistic revisionism in France, and its juxtaposition of archival material and contemporary footage through reflective formal devices (such as rhythmic editing, pace change, framing variation, and contemplative movement), *Nuit et brouillard* has insistently broadened the ongoing debates over the limits of historical mediation in documentary. By excavating jarring photography and film footage of genocide from their official institutional repositories, and by animating these images alongside archaeological explorations of their physical heritage in the present, Resnais nuances prior readings of officially sanctioned records of the past. Guided by Cayrol’s voice-over narration which demands viewers’ collective introspection, the resulting historical narrative simultaneously questions the indexicality of the archival image and challenges the viewer’s acceptance of its meaning. Resnais’ treatment of archival imagery, then,

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9 With our sincere gaze we survey these ruins, as if the old monster of the concentration camp lay crushed forever beneath the rubble. We pretend to take up hope again as the image recedes into the past, as if we were cured once and for all of the scourge of the camps. We pretend it all happened only once, at a given time and place. We turn a blind eye to what surrounds us and a deaf ear to humanity’s never-ending cry” (author’s translation).
questions assumed knowledge about the past by engaging with modes of historical representation that critically reflect on the signification of images of the traumatic past, amidst its eerily calm legacy in the traces of the present. From Resnais’ contested archival research for the film’s production, to the film’s critical positioning of archival imagery and its subsequently contentious distribution in France, *Nuit et brouillard* re-envisioned the ongoing historical narrative of national unity, constructed at the expense of self-reflection and accountability, by subverting the dominant rationalized discourses of traumatic history.

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