François Truffaut once called *Night and Fog* “the greatest film ever made.” If you don’t believe me, here is the exact quote: “The effective war film is often the one in which the action begins after the war, when there is nothing but ruins and desolation everywhere: Rossellini’s *Germany Year Zero* (1947) and, above all, Alain Resnais’ *Nuit et brouillard*, the greatest film ever made.” Certainly it is one of the two or three most powerful and intelligent nonfiction films ever made (I hesitate to call it a documentary, for reasons that will follow); and it is also, among those many movies that have taken on the loaded subject matter of the Holocaust, perhaps the most aesthetically sophisticated and ethically irreproachable.

The rap against most Holocaust films is that they exploit the audience’s feelings of outrage and sorrow for commercial ends; and, by pretending to put us vicariously through such a staggeringly incomprehensible experience, they trivialize, reducing it to sentimental melodrama. Alain Resnais has done nothing of the kind. Making this film in 1955, only ten years after the liberation of the concentration camps, with the wounds so fresh, he did not presume, first of all, to speak for the victims and survivors of the camps: he chose as his screenwriter the novelist Jean Cayrol, a man who had actually been imprisoned in one. Second, neither he nor Cayrol presumed to offer a comprehensive guide to the concentration camp universe. Quite the contrary: the voiceover is filled with skepticism and doubt, and a sympathetic awareness of the viewer’s resistance, conscious or unconscious, to grasping the unthinkable. “Useless to describe what went on in these cells,” and “Words are insufficient,” we are told again and again in the voiceover narration. “No description, no picture can reveal their true dimension.” And: “Is it in vain that we try to remember?” Meanwhile, the viewer is calmly given information about the Nazis’ extermination procedures. Thus the dialectic is set up between the necessity of remembering, and the impossibility of doing so.

*Night and Fog* is, in effect, an antidocumentary: we cannot “document” this particular reality, it is too heinous, we would be defeated in advance. What can we do, then? Resnais’ and Cayrol’s answer is: we can reflect, ask questions, examine the record, and interrogate our own responses. In short, offer up an essay. Moreover, by choosing to compress such enormous subject matter into only a half-hour (think, by contrast, of Claude Lanzmann’s over-nine-hour *Shoah*, [1985]), the filmmakers force themselves into the epigrammatic concision and synthesis of essayistic reflection.

This effort at analysis and reflection is one of the ways the filmmakers work to evade pious sentimentality: indeed, the voiceover narration (masterfully spoken by Michel Bouquet) is delivered in a harsh, dry, astringent tone, filled with ironic shadings (though, according to the filmmaker himself, he asked Bouquet to deliver his lines in a “neutral tone”). The magnificent score by Hanns Eisler is also employed ironically: the lovely, lyrical flute passages collide with harrowing images, the Schoenbergian pizzicato strings signal the revving up of the Nazi machine. (Just as Cayrol’s text is unusually elegant, dense, and poetic for a film voiceover, so the Eisler score is not your typical movie background music, but a modern composition that has since been performed in concert halls.)
The visuals mix color photography, for the present, and black-and-white, for the past. While some of the black-and-white stills and film footage are absolutely horrific (the shoveled corpses, the piles of women’s hair), there is no attempt to recapture that horror in the present-day footage of the camps. Resnais, by his own admission, strove there for “the most realistic color, the most faithful reproduction of the actual place.” The color photography uses a tentative, probing, tracking shot and panning approach. “We go slowly along them, looking for what?” the narrator asks dubiously. In brooding about the connection between location and history, architecture and death, the film makes the ironic point that the buildings of each concentration camp went up matter-of-factly, by ordinary construction methods (“contractors, estimates, competitive bids, and no doubt a bribe or two”), that the watchtowers had different design mannerisms (“Swiss style, garage style, Japanese style”), that they could even be picture-postcard pretty, that “nothing distinguished the gas chamber from an ordinary blockhouse.” Past and present finally converge in a chilling pan shot of a ceiling, over which the narrative voice tells us: “The only sign—but you have to know—is this ceiling, dug into by fingernails. Even the concrete was torn.” This “but you have to know” (mais il faut savoir, in the original French) has a double meaning: a) you wouldn’t see it unless tipped off to what it meant and; b) you must take this in now, you can no longer escape knowing it.

The black-and-white archival footage and the color photography are conjoined entirely by straight cuts, no process shots, and the whole is a triumph of editing. We remember that Resnais began in movies as an editor, and his first films, shorts that also included VanGogh, Guernica, Les Statues meurent aussi, and All the Memory of the World, were all impressive assemblages, which accentuated by montage the disjunctions and continuities between past and present. Night and Fog looks forward, in Resnais’ career, to other films that would obsess over memory and forgetfulness, such as Hiroshima mon amour (1959), Last Year at Marienbad (1961), Muriel (1963), and Providence (1977).

This film also anticipates, and helps bring about, a whole fascinating, cutting-edge genre, the essay-film, championed especially by Chris Marker (who collaborated with Resnais on this film as well as Les Statues meurent aussi), practiced as well by such diverse figures as Michael Moore, Jean-Luc Godard, Ross McElwee, Harun Farocki, Yvonne Rainer, and Raul Ruiz. All these filmmakers have rejected the objective neutrality presumptions of traditional documentaries, and have striven to turn film into a medium expressive of idiosyncratic, personal thought.

Finally, it may be well to take up the suggestion by Truffaut, quoted earlier, that Night and Fog has tremendous significance as a film against war, against violence itself. Movies that purport to dramatize “War is hell” almost inevitably make the experience of battle glamorous and exciting. Only by looking back reflectively and trying to understand the sufferings and disasters of history, “when there is nothing but ruins and desolation,” can we commit ourselves to prevent further atrocities—a point made loud and clear in the final voiceover, which for once abandons its tone of modest scrutiny and allows itself a moment of well-earned, didactic passion.