THE 2011 HOEFER PRIZES
FOR EXCELLENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

In Recognition of Writing Achievement in the Undergraduate Field of Study

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
MAY 18, 2011
Night and Fog and French Holocaust Memory

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HISTORY 209S

History and the Arts in Europe, 1500 - Present

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HISTORY
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Introduction

When Alain Resnais was awarded the Prix Jean Vigo in 1956 for his short Holocaust documentary, Night and Fog, there was great enthusiasm among the French population. Many mainstream newspapers applauded this decision, arguing that Night and Fog was vastly different from anything to which French audiences had ever been exposed. Le Monde characterized the film as “extremely moving yet simple,” and L’Humanité described it as “a shocking masterpiece.” The annual Prix Jean Vigo recognizes a young filmmaker’s independent spirit and unique directing style, and Resnais clearly exhibited such characteristics. Night and Fog, directed by Resnais and written by Jean Cayrol, French member of the Resistance and concentration camp survivor, illuminates the horrors of the Holocaust through shocking images and footage. It also points out the world’s failure to remember the Holocaust fully and the potential for such a terrible series of events occurring again.

When the film was removed from the French selection to the 1956 Cannes Film Festival, due to a request from the West German government, there was great uproar among members of the Resistance and concentration camp survivors who were particularly outspoken, characterizing the exclusion of this film as a travesty. Many believed that it was necessary to expose to the greater public the horrors of the Holocaust depicted in this film. At this point, the French were in the early stages of their recovery from WWII, and Night and Fog was no doubt the first visual introduction that many French people had to the Nazi concentration camp system. In this paper, I will try to discern how this film may have appeared to contemporaneous French
audiences given their limited knowledge of the Holocaust at the time and the persistence of Charles de Gaulle’s nationalist resistance myth—the idea that all French people had been united by their total resistance to the Nazis during the Occupation. I will explore the relationship between *Night and Fog* and the French perception of the Holocaust in the late-1950s. Ultimately, I will argue that *Night and Fog* spurred the beginnings of understanding about the Holocaust by exposing the public to the horrors it entailed, yet it also left intact the Gaullist myth of the period by avoiding any commentary regarding French complicity in the deportations or any mention of the systematic slaughter of Jews.

**The Holocaust in 1950s France**

Very little was known about the Holocaust until the late 1960s anywhere in the world. After the trauma of WWII, there was little interest in exposing new horrors, and the door was essentially closed on any public discourse on the Holocaust.iii The 1945-46 Nuremberg Trials gave minimal attention to the systematic extermination of European Jews; instead, the Nazi war criminals were convicted of conspiracy and waging a war of aggression. Although crimes against humanity and the mass extermination of Jews were mentioned at the trial, they received minimal attention compared to the extensive discussion about violation of international treaties. In her book *Harnessing the Holocaust*, Joan Wolf asserts that the Holocaust as we know it today was not even remotely part of the French post-war national consciousness: “The Holocaust did not exist at this time, and the Nazi genocide of the Jews was itself indistinct or unremarkable as an event with its own boundaries and significance.”iv The term genocide was rarely used to describe the events of the Holocaust. Many scholars agree that the Holocaust did not become widely discussed in France until 1967 with the Six-Day War. This late public recognition and understanding of the Holocaust can be attributed to the way in which two conditions, specific to
the 1950s, played off of and reinforced each other: the lack of reliable information on the Holocaust, both during and immediately after the war, and the French emphasis on the Nazi Occupation of France.

The lack of reliable information on the Holocaust during the war contributed to the late public recognition of this series of Nazi crimes. Because an event such as the Holocaust seemed so inconceivable, the Allies’ reports on the Holocaust during and after the event were often received with disbelief. The question of what French authorities, responsible for transporting thousands of Jews and Resistors to death camps in Germany and Poland, knew of the Final Solution still has not been fully answered. In their book *Vichy France and the Jews*, Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton argue that Vichy officials assisted the deportations of French Jews and allowed them to continue because of a Jewish refugee problem in France, as well as persistent French anti-Semitism. At the same time, however, they argue that the information that the officials had on the Final Solution was limited. Although there were numerous Allied reports, clandestine newspaper articles, and eyewitness accounts of the massacres of Jews, the Vichy government was reluctant to believe these sources. The Vichy official Pierre Laval, often considered responsible for the mass deportations, claimed that he was not aware of the Final Solution. The Germans were keen on concealing the death camps, and Marrus and Paxton write that the German authorities occupying France “told their subordinates to use guarded language and to hide the real objectives of the deportations.” The Germans relied on the story that Jews were being sent away for forced labor. Marrus and Paxton assert that the weak Nazi cover-up was enough to satisfy the Vichy officials, illuminating their indifference to the fate of France’s Jewish population, if not their overt support of the deportations.
Since few details about the Holocaust were acknowledged among French officials during the war, this information certainly did not trickle down to the general public. French police often responded to questions about the deportations by saying that people were being taken to “an unknown destination.” Thus, the mass exterminations were covered up by the Nazi occupying forces and Vichy officials, causing a lack of reliable information regarding Jews and deportees to the general public.

After the end of the war and the fall of the Vichy government, General Charles de Gaulle, leader of the Free French Forces, had immense popular appeal in France because he was seen as the figurehead of the true French Republic, which he argued had never ceased to exist. After the Allies defeated the Nazis and overthrew Vichy, the French looked to de Gaulle, as he was seen as part of the Allied victory, and he became President of the Provisional French Government. In order to reunite those who had taken different sides during the war and to rehabilitate France after the Occupation, de Gaulle tried to create a new French national consciousness. The “Gaullist resistancialist myth,” a term coined by Henry Rousso in his 1987 book, The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944, deemphasized the Resistance and instead focused on the French as a “people of resistance.” It attempted to create national unity by asserting that everyone had resisted the Occupation, thus attributing a sense of victory to the French. The Gaullist myth appealed to the general public because it proved to the French that they had served a purpose and had not just stood by under an enemy regime in the WWII struggle. I will go into further detail about the resistancialist myth later in the paper, but it played a major role in limiting the knowledge of the Holocaust in the post-war period.

Post-war discussions about the Holocaust were obviously connected to debates about the Jewish place in the French population. The Gaullist myth aimed to create a new national identity
based on the resistance and suffering of the French people during the war, and in doing so it
negated the importance of the suffering of sub-groups. Since Jews were only one group within
the greater French population, the Holocaust as a systematic extermination of the Jews did not
have a place in the Gaullist myth. Even many French Jews acquiesced in this new rewriting of
history, as they were eager to identify with this new nationalism: “In addition to searching for
lost relatives, caring for the enormous number of newly orphaned children, and rebuilding
community institutions, most French Jews were discursively committed in the immediate
postwar years to integrating their wartime ordeal into the national suffering of France.”\textsuperscript{viii} The
unique Jewish suffering during the war became characterized as part of the sacrifice that all
French citizens were forced to pay during the Occupation. There was no distinction between
what had happened to Jews in the concentration camps and the wider population in France
during the Occupation: “To wear the yellow star had been for Jews to ‘carry the cross’ with the
rest of the French nation.”\textsuperscript{ix} Thus, Jews initially made a concerted effort to incorporate their
experiences into the Gaullist myth and, in doing so, did not share their memories with the general
public until much later.

Ultimately, there appeared to be a fear among Jews that the extensive discussion of the
Holocaust would highlight their “Jewishness” and thus compromise their “Frenchness”. Wolf
places some responsibility on Jews for the lack of discussion of the Holocaust during this period.
They were not forced to keep quiet about it but instead chose to avoid bringing the mass
exterminations into the public consciousness: “Traces of the Holocaust in Jewish conversations
suggest that the period between 1945 and 1967 was not one of repression but disavowal.”\textsuperscript{x}
Ultimately, the strength of the Gaullist myth obscured recognition of the Holocaust as a
specifically Jewish experience.
It may also be that the Holocaust was a disturbing subject for many in France. According to Richard Raskin, in his book *Nuit et Brouillard*, concentration camp victims who did not follow the general trend and instead wanted to share their experiences were not well-received. People were not receptive to the stories of concentration camp survivors, perhaps out of guilt about French involvement or because they were simply not keen on exposing themselves to additional horrors of the war. Similarly, the Holocaust was a taboo subject in the arts after the war, particularly in reference to the Nazi atrocities against Jews. In general, it was an uncomfortable topic, but when it was portrayed, it was depicted as a crime against the Resistance or all of humanity and did not point out specific anti-Semitic aims.

**How Was the Film Created to Impact Viewers?**

No matter what generation encounters it, *Night and Fog* will always be a shocking film. Given the limited information and minimal public knowledge of the Holocaust in 1956, *Night and Fog* was a milestone. Resnais used many images of piles of corpses, buckets of heads, dismembered bodies, and nude and emaciated prisoners to convey the horrors of the Holocaust. The film also offers a look into the hidden world of the camps, including the homes of the camp officials, the camp hospital, and the cruel, inhumane procedures that were performed there. The film flashes between black and white and color. Black and white is used when the film deals with the concentration camps during the Holocaust, and color is used during the retrospective portions showing present-day footage of the abandoned camps. In the color parts the narrator discusses more philosophical questions regarding the Holocaust, such as responsibility and accountability and also emphasizes the importance of remembering the Holocaust to insure that such a horrific series of events does not happen again. The central themes of the film would have been shocking to audiences in 1956 when it was released. From a critical perspective, *Night and Fog* focuses
on three primary themes: the distortion of modern principles for evil ends, the duplicity of the concentration camps, and the dehumanization and brutality experienced by camp victims.

The values that came to embody modernity—order, precision, organization, and technology—were distorted to effect the success of the Holocaust. That the principles of the Enlightenment had been used for something so appalling would have been shocking to contemporaneous French audiences. The film describes the construction of concentration camps as being executed just like any other building project, such as a hotel or stadium, would have been: carefully, with great precision and attention to detail, and accompanied by models and plans. This careful planning is highlighted in a scene with Heinrich Himmler, who emphasizes his motto: “We must destroy, but productively.” The film further illuminates the Nazis’ form of productive destruction by showing how everything was put to use for something else. The piles of hair, shoes, glasses, and bones were all transformed into valuable products for the Nazi war effort. Hair was used to make rugs and cloth, and bones were used to make fertilizer. The sense of order in the concentration camps is shown by the numerous and massive Nazi record books. The camera tracks someone flipping through pages and pages of the record books that include thousands of names. The names of the dead are clearly crossed off with red ink. The narrator comments on this scene and emphasizes the enormity of the concentration camp system by saying: “They fill hundreds of ledgers, thousands of files.”

The concentration camps required an immense amount of technological prowess, and the film illuminates this by showing the ovens and other methods of destruction invented for the sole purpose of mutilating or killing people. The narrator emphasizes the extraordinary knowledge and technology needed to exterminate millions of people. In describing the building of the camps, the narrator highlights the perversion of knowledge: “Architects calmly design the gates
meant to be only passed through once.”xvi Architects and inventors fully committed themselves to the Final Solution and created structures that would lead to the deaths of millions. André Pierre Colombat, in his book The Holocaust in French Film, highlights this skewing of the goals of modernity, stating: “The lives of the victims are cut into pieces, classified, and recycled by and in the Nazi war machine. The metamorphosis of the imagination and creation is destroyed to be replaced by the metamorphosis of horror and death.”xvii A contemporaneous viewer would have likely been shocked by the way in which concepts they believed promoted the greater good were distorted for evil.

The dark duplicity of the concentration camps would likely have been one of the most striking aspects of the film to contemporaneous viewers. Night and Fog opens with the narrator pointing out the irony of the setting of the Holocaust, saying: “Even in a peaceful landscape, even in a meadow in harvest, with crows circling overhead with grass fires, even a road where cars and peasants and couples pass, even a resort village with a steeple and a country fair, can lead to a concentration camp.”xviii This sense of irony continues throughout the film, particularly with the juxtaposition between the images of the concentration camps when they were in use and the modern color images. In addition to the juxtaposition between the outer world and inner world of the concentration camps, basic aspects of day-to-day life at the camps also had a distinct irony. The camera focuses in on a sign that says “Bathroom/Disinfection,” and then the narrator says: “under the pretext of hygiene, nudity strips the inmates of all pride in one stroke.”xix The gas chambers were labeled as mass showers, meant to restore cleanliness and dignity to the prisoners who had been traveling for days, yet instead showering resulted in the opposite. In a later scene, the camera zooms in on a quaint plaque with village scenes and arrows showing different locations in the camps, and the narrator says: “Rustic signs direct everyone
home. The kapo has only to tally up the day’s victims.”xx The camera then focuses on a kapo with a large chart used to tally up those who had died. The camp was both a home to the prisoners and a slaughtering ground, and the juxtaposition of these two images highlights this irony.

Many of the camps had all of the aspects of a traditional village, with zoos, bands, brothels, and hospitals. In an up-close shot of the surgical block, the narrator comments on how convincing the hospital is: “For a moment you would think you were in a real clinic.”xxi The camera then enters a concentration camp hospital and shows that in reality “pointless operations, amputations, experimental mutilations” occurred there. xxii These hospitals contradicted the normal definition of the purpose of a hospital—people were never cured; in fact their bodies were used in experiments that exacerbated their conditions. Night and Fog shows that the Nazis tried to have a semblance of normalcy in the concentration camps, and this attempt created a dark irony that added to the Holocaust’s horror.

Night and Fog’s use of disturbing images of the dehumanization and brutality of the concentration camps is arguably the most iconic element of the film. Although such photos and moving images are used throughout the film, they are used most effectively to portray the brutality and dehumanization of the concentration camps in the scenes focusing on the hospitals and on the liberation of the camps. In the scene of the hospital, the camera first zooms in on the outside of the hospital building at an unnamed concentration camp and then brings the viewer into the building. The viewer then sees a moving image of emaciated patients, piled two to a small bed, trying to stay alive. Through extremely effective editing techniques, Resnais forces the audience to confront the misery of this situation. The camera zooms in on the faces of the prisoners, who stare straight at it, maybe looking for help, as they struggle to breathe. This brings
the viewers up close to these concentration camp victims who lie in a hospital, generally a place of health and care, yet are denied any sort of meaningful assistance and left to starve, causing them to eat their dressings. To French viewers, the hospital was the ultimate symbol of Nazi cruelty, as it was a total hoax. The narrator explains this, saying: “The medicines are make-believe. The dressings are mere paper. The same ointment is used for every sore and every disease.”

We leave the hospital scene with a photo of a dead prisoner with his eyes wide open as the final image.

In the tour of the surgical block, the viewer is introduced to the SS doctor and nurse, who are not actually there to heal patients; instead they experiment with toxins and mutilations on the prisoners’ bodies. With so little appreciation given to the human body, the kapos also “try their hand.” The final image of this scene is a photo of a completely emaciated human body—the hipbones are starkly visible as they protrude out of the skin, and the legs are stick thin. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of this photo is that the gender of this patient is unclear. Resnais leaves us this memory of the concentration camp hospitals—a human being so starved and sick that even the most basic aspects of the human body become questionable.

Although there are many scenes with images of piles of mutilated bodies and emaciated corpses, perhaps the most effective scene to use such images is the one showing what the Allied forces encountered when they liberated the camps. The narrator sets the scene for the demise of the concentration camp system, saying: “When the Allies opened the doors...” and then the camera moves to a landscape of corpses, laid on the ground as far as the eye can see, allowing the viewer to experience the concentration camps from the perspective of an Allied soldier.

Next, we learn that because of the magnitude of the killings, the Allies were unable to deal with all of the corpses properly. This part is not narrated; instead the audience confronts the mutilated...
corpses without any distraction. We see hundreds of naked, mutilated bodies piled on top of each other in such a way that it is impossible to make out which body parts belong to which bodies. With so many cadavers and no proper method of burial, tractors push them into mass graves, and the camera focuses up close on bodies being thrown around. We also see moving images of Allied soldiers piling up heads that were detached from bodies. The camera is used quite effectively in this part, as it focuses in on each photo of the piles of disfigured corpses for about five seconds, forcing the viewer to take a good look. Also, the camera shots are stark and simple. With no narration or special effects, the viewer looks straight at the images and thus is brought face to face with the hundreds of destroyed bodies and forced to confront the Nazi tragedy.

Through the shocking images and themes of the film, Night and Fog impacted the way in which the French thought about the past. After the Holocaust, there was a trend toward dissociation from the atrocity, as people avoided confronting what had happened. According to Raskin, many Holocaust survivors saw it as their duty to describe their experiences to insure such a tragedy never happened again. Since the general public was not receptive to stories of the Holocaust, survivors felt as though their stories could not be heard. This lack of an audience was coupled with a feeling that words could not adequately express experiences of the concentration camps. One survivor explained his inability to describe his experience accurately, saying: “I have failed. Nothing I can say can conjure up to you what we went through; I have failed.”xxvi Night and Fog ameliorated this sense of failure. It gave people an effective means through which to describe their experiences. The film allowed survivors to transmit their memories of the Holocaust to others.
Many scholars suggest that the film also affected French thinking about the present 1950s period, but the powerful Holocaust images were probably so overwhelming that they raised very little concern about current issues. Raskin argues that Night and Fog forced the French to confront the parallels between the Holocaust and increasing French atrocities in Algeria in the 1950s. He claims that the final scene, in which the narrator says “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,” pertains to French Algeria and suggests that many aspects of Nazi Germany remain prevalent in the modern day. Raskin writes that Cayrol and Resnais “managed to redefine the Nazi horror as a basis for gaining awareness of the hidden face of present events.” Although there is no visual or verbal mention of Algeria in the film, Resnais agreed that he intended for the film to highlight the parallels between the Holocaust and Algeria, saying: “It was all about Algeria.” Ultimately, French audiences in the 1950s would not have been receptive to a subtle political message about Algeria in this film. Given how little was known about the Holocaust in France in the 1950s, the disturbing images and themes of this film would have been monumental for French audiences. Thus, the shocking images and ideas of Night and Fog would have overshadowed any subtle political messages Resnais may have intended to convey.

**The Gaullist Myth in 1950s France**

This part of the paper will focus on the development and persistence of the Gaullist myth in post-war France. In order to have a full understanding of the myth and its significance in Holocaust memory, we must first have some insight into Vichy France and the involvement of the French in the deportations. On August 27, 1940, Vichy repealed the Marchandeau Law that outlawed religious or racial discrimination in the press. This was the first step in the new
Vichy Jewish policy and allowed anti-Semitism to spread through publications. On October 4, 1940, the Statut des Juifs, a new Jewish statute, authorized French officials to intern foreign Jews in concentration camps or assign them to certain living areas. These laws were instated under the guidance of the Nazi occupying forces but were also deeply rooted in French anti-Semitism. Initially, only foreign Jews were targeted because of France’s persistent refugee problem, but starting in 1941 Vichy officials began to round up French Jews as well. The most notorious round-up of Jews began on July 16, 1942, when French policemen rounded up Jews and brought them to the Vélodrome d’Hiver, the large indoor sports stadium in Paris, where they were kept for many days before being deported to various concentration camps in France and eventually the former Polish territory. The Vél d’Hiv’ was notorious for its poor conditions—the stadium was supposed to house 15,000 spectators, but 22,000 people were held there before being deported. In addition, there were no sanitation or health services, and starvation was rampant.

Most Jews and members of the Resistance were held in French-run concentration camps before being deported to the extermination camps in Germany. Drancy, the best known of these camps, was a partially-constructed apartment complex in a suburb of Paris. According to Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton’s seminal book Vichy France and the Jews, Drancy was “an antechamber to Auschwitz,” as sixty-seven of the seventy-nine deportation trains carrying Jews to the east left from this particular camp. Marrus and Paxton characterize Drancy as a “thoroughly French institution” because it was run solely by French officials and policemen, with very little German oversight. The camp earned a reputation for horrendous conditions, and a French report on the camp concluded that the misery endured at Drancy was
incomprehensible. Conditions there were worse than those of its German-operated counterparts in the East:

Those who have not with their own eyes seen some of those released from Drancy can only have a faint idea of the wretched state of internees in this camp which is unique in history. It is said that the notorious camp of Dachau is nothing in comparison with Drancy.

In fact, the conditions at Drancy were so poor that rations, general cleanliness, and overall appearance were said to have improved after the camp was taken over by the Germans in July 1943. The differences in the camp under French and German control suggest that the French were not simply following German orders but purposefully made Drancy miserable for its inhabitants.

When WWII and the German Occupation of France ended in 1944, 75,000 people had been deported from France to Nazi extermination camps, and only three percent of those deported survived. About a third of those deported were French citizens, while the rest were foreign refugees. Vichy officials did not discriminate based on age for the deportations, and 8,000 of those deported were under thirteen, while 8,700 were over sixty. Despite the enormity of the deportations, they fell short of Nazi expectations that 100,000 to 270,000 people should be taken to the extermination camps. According to Marrus and Paxton, the Germans were disappointed with the mediocre results of the deportations in France, but did not blame the French for obstructing the forced removals, thus suggesting that the French instituted anti-Semitic policy willingly.
Much of the scholarly work on the French deportations focuses on the question of what the Vichy officials knew about the Final Solution. In response to the question of where deportees were taken, French officials often said that a Jewish state was being created in Poland, or that Jews were used as a workforce for the German war effort. Although there were some reports and eyewitness accounts of Nazi extermination camps, top Vichy officials claimed, after the fact, to have received them with disbelief and discredited them. Yet, the Vichy government instituted anti-Semitic measures, which were not openly questioned by the top officials, showing that anti-Semitic and discriminatory measures were accepted by those in the government. The Germans could not have executed deportations of such magnitude without involvement of the French. Marrus and Paxton highlight this point, stating: “Even when these measures aroused private reservations among Vichy ministers and administrators, there was no open dissent from within, no systematic refusal to apply any of the new laws.” Ultimately, it is unclear what exactly Vichy officials knew about the details of the Final Solution, yet Marrus and Paxton assert that their involvement and compliance was vital to the success of the Nazi plan: “One can only speculate on how many fewer would have perished if the Nazis had been obliged to identify, arrest, and transport without any French assistance every Jew in France whom they wanted to slaughter.”

After WWII ended, French society was divided into two camps: those who had resisted the Vichy regime of Marshal Pétain and those who had collaborated. The Sorrow and the Pity, a 1969 French documentary describing French collaboration with the Nazis, showed how people were harassed after the war for their collaboration. For example, women who had been involved with Nazi soldiers were forced to have their heads shaved in public. General Charles de Gaulle, war hero and leader of the French Free Forces, returned to France as a strong leader during this
tumultuous period and sought to reunite the population under the myth that the French were a “resistance people” and that the French republic had never ceased to exist. De Gaulle focused less on the resistance fighters and more on the entire French population. He altered the common conception of the term “resistance”; instead of referring to a select few, it was attributed to all French people. Rousso characterizes the term as such: “The ‘resistance,’ for its part, had stemmed from France as a whole, from the France of Joan of Arc and the polis. This rewriting of history responded to a widely felt need.” Under de Gaulle’s myth, resistance was a defining attribute of the French population, and he described the significance of this unity in his speech at Épinal on September 29, 1946: “... there is among all Frenchmen a fundamental solidarity, a common and indivisible ground for the defense which they have spilled in the course of long centuries and only yesterday again, much blood and many tears.” De Gaulle evoked a sense of solidarity among all French people, including those who lived centuries ago. Because of its collaboration with an outside power, the Vichy government contradicted many of the values of the Republic. Thus, at the end of the war, de Gaulle made an effort to re-emphasize these values by arguing that they had always been present.

With this resistancialist myth, de Gaulle made a distinction between the French people and the Vichy state. In his Épinal speech de Gaulle posed the French populace against the Vichy regime: “Thus we expressed our conviction, as strong as it was well considered, that in this conflict which for France represented ideologically the struggle between freedom and totalitarianism, to betray French ideal would have meant to deny French France, in other words to destroy ourselves.” In very strong terms and poetic language, de Gaulle argued that the French populace was united against totalitarianism and the imposed Vichy regime and thus upheld true French values throughout the period. The Sorrow and the Pity depicts the reality of
the situation to be quite different from de Gaulle’s characterization. The documentary describes an acceptance of Vichy among the general population. Most individuals interviewed for the documentary agreed that they had done very little to resist the actions of the regime and considered disappearances of Jews to be a common occurrence that garnered little attention. Many claimed that they had sincerely supported Marshal Pétain, and numerous French women had relationships with occupying Nazi soldiers. After the war, de Gaulle skewed reality and told the French that they had all been resisters. Rousso argues that the Gaullist myth falsified the truth and allowed for the “obliteration of Vichy and the redefinition of the Resistance as an abstraction, an achievement not of the resisters’ but of ‘the nation as a whole’.”

Ultimately, resistance nationalism took attention away from the Holocaust. As the Gaullist myth stressed the suffering and resistance of the French people, focusing on the Holocaust as a Jewish experience would have detracted from this new form of nationalism, as Jews were seen as a unique sub-group. Emphasizing the horrors of the Jewish experiences of the Holocaust would have made French sacrifices seem minute. The Gaullist myth was very much based on a sense of French nationalism, and, because of this, only specifically French experiences fit into it.

**How Did *Night and Fog* Relate to the Gaullist Myth?**

The persistence of the Gaullist resistancialist myth is evident in many aspects of *Night and Fog*, namely the fact that Jews are not explicitly mentioned. Rather than characterizing the Holocaust as an atrocity specifically targeting Jews, *Night and Fog* depicts it as a universal crime against all of humanity. At the same time, however, *Night and Fog* is clearly geared toward the French, as it focuses specifically on the ways in which French people suffered during the
Holocaust and thus leaves the Gaullist resistancialist myth intact. The film neither overtly questions nor strengthens the myth. In her essay, “The Voice of Silence,” Louisa Rice argues that Resnais did not disrupt the French trend of “selective mourning,” choosing to remember certain aspects of the WWII period and forget others. She argues that de Gaulle’s myth purposefully left out the Vichy government’s involvement in the deportations: “Under his leadership, the Vichy government was ‘removed’ from French history: the shame of collaboration was not to be remembered.” Night and Fog did not bring Vichy collaboration back into the French consciousness; instead it reinforced the idea that the French had been both victims and resistors.

Night and Fog gives special attention to the French as opposed to the Jews and describes the Holocaust as an event that hurt all of humanity, rather than one select group. The word “Jew” is never mentioned in the film, despite the visibility of the Jewish star in many photos and moving images of the film. The failure to verbalize the systematic slaughtering of Europe’s Jewry is certainly significant. Instead of drawing attention to the Jews, Resnais treats them as simply another group of prisoners. In fact, far more attention is given to members of the Resistance and French political prisoners than to any other group. The title, Night and Fog, relates to the Nazi “Nacht und Nebel” decree, which was implemented in November 1941 and targeted political activists and resistance organizations in Nazi Germany’s occupied countries. The name of the decree, “Nacht und Nebel,” translated to “night and fog,” directly refers to the way in which foreign political prisoners were supposed to be transported to the concentration camps in Germany—they were to disappear into the night and fog. In a letter regarding the decree, Field Marshall Keitel instructed that “The prisoners are, in future, to be transported to Germany secretly, and further treatment of the offenders will take place here; these measures
will have a deterrent effect because: A. The prisoners will vanish without a trace. B. No information will be given about their whereabouts or their fate."xlviii Thus, if the correlation between the “Nacht und Nebel” decree is relevant, Night and Fog was intended to focus on political deportees, not the Jews. By choosing a title that singles out political prisoners, Resnais excluded all other groups of prisoners and increased the film’s appeal for the French because it aligned with the Gaullist myth.

The limited knowledge of the Holocaust, coupled with the persistence of the Gaullist myth in post-war France, kept the Holocaust from the public consciousness for a significant period. French discussion of Nazi atrocities centered on the way in which the French suffered, and Night and Fog was no deviation from this. Although to a certain degree the film is about universal suffering, the French political prisoners are singled out and the rest of the prisoner groups blend together. The film makes no verbal mention of Jewish prisoners, but in describing the deportations, the narrator talks about French resisters: “interned at Pithiviers, captured in Vél d’Hiv’, members of the resistance rounded up in Compiegne.”xlix The Resistance is the only specific group mentioned in the outline of the deportations, and this decision to focus on the French experience reinforced the idea that the French had been a resistance people.

Night and Fog demonizes the Nazis and focuses on the way in which French resisters would have suffered, but it does not condemn the Vichy government for collaboration in the deportations. The French Board of Censors requested that Resnais change two particular parts of the film. First, he was asked to cut the image of a French guard looking in on a concentration camp. The guard’s nationality is obvious because of his characteristically French cap, the kepi. Resnais refused to remove the image but agreed to place a bar across it, obscuring the guard’s cap, thus making his nationality un-clear. Resnais was also asked to remove one of the images
of the piles of bodies that appears at the end of the film. The Board of Censors said that this image was far more gruesome than the others in the film and that it was too violent and graphic for viewers. Resnais refused to take the advice of the Board and insisted that that image must remain. The fact that Resnais was willing to edit the image that exposed the French guard’s nationality but insisted that an additional image of a pile of corpses remain is interesting and significant. In editing the image of the French guard, Resnais proved that he was not concerned with exposing French involvement in the Holocaust, as it was not his intention in the film. Resnais’ differing responses to the two censorship requests showed that he was interested in illuminating the horrors of the Holocaust but not intent on going so far as to open up French guilt.

Night and Fog did not focus solely on French Holocaust suffering. If this had been the intention of the film, it would have included far more overt references to particular members of the Resistance and French Jews, and it would have gone into further detail about the brutality of the Nazi Occupation of France. Instead, the film exposed the universality and tragedy of the Holocaust, with a slight bias of attention toward France. Nothing in the film questions the values of the Gaullist myth. At the same time, Resnais did not emphasize the suffering of the French to a great extent—the film is much more about the universality of the Holocaust than the experiences of a single group. Perhaps Resnais included references to the Holocaust’s impact in France in order to present the Nazi atrocity to the viewers in a way that they could understand. The film reinforced the values of the 1950s French population and showed them the horrors of the Holocaust without disrupting their understanding of French Vichy history. Resnais’ intention in the film was to present the Holocaust, not to de-bunk the Gaullist myth, and because of this, Night and Fog was reflective of the time and place of its origin.
Conclusion

Perhaps Night and Fog was the beginning of greater discussions about the Holocaust in France. Although the film reinforced the Gaullist falsification of history during the Vichy period and failed to expose French involvement in the deportations, it can be seen as a milestone because it brought the Holocaust into the public discourse. It was not until the Six Day War in 1967 that French Jews asserted the importance of their Holocaust experiences, opening the door to confronting of the Holocaust’s systematic extermination of the Jews. Most discussion of the Holocaust prior to 1967, such as that in Night in Fog, referred to it as an example of Nazi destruction, not as something specifically targeting Jews. The Holocaust and Jewish identity were not inextricably linked as they are today. To many Jews in 1967, the possible obliteration of Israel was seen as worse than the Holocaust. French Jews were very outspoken in their efforts to prevent this by exposing their traumatic experiences during the Holocaust: “For the first time, they spoke publicly and with emotionally charged rhetoric to the rest of the French nation about the Holocaust, which they presented as a trauma: singular, incomparable, and incomprehensible.” The emphasis placed on the trauma of the Holocaust in relation to the destruction of Israel played an important role in bringing the Holocaust into the public sphere as a specifically Jewish series of events.

Although Night and Fog did not push the boundaries of acceptability and expose French involvement in the Holocaust, it was ahead of its time in bringing the issues of human rights and crimes against humanity into public discourse. In the color portions of the film, intended to depict the present day, the narrator raises greater philosophical issues. The final scenes of the film discuss responsibility for the Holocaust. This part begins with various kapos and Nazi officials in court saying, one by one: “I am not responsible.” Next, the narrator asks: “Then who
is responsible?" and the camera zooms in first on the face of a prisoner, then on a pile of corpses, forcing the viewer to seriously contemplate, on both a personal and statistical level, where the responsibility lies for the death of millions.

The film ends as the narrator warns against such a horrific series of events ever occurring again and argues that everyone was responsible for the Holocaust. Resnais presents the idea that it is the responsibility of every individual to prevent crimes against humanity: “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.” With this warning as the ending words of the film, Resnais puts the horrors of the Holocaust in a modern framework and urges viewers to be mindful of atrocities and crimes against humanity that occur all the time. Even if contemporaneous viewers would not have been receptive to such a message, Resnais made a contribution by depicting the Holocaust as a crime against humanity. Night and Fog worked within the constraints of its time: it shocked viewers, but did not disrupt their national identity. Ultimately, in presenting visual images and an eloquent depiction of the Holocaust, as well as introducing the concept of crimes against humanity, Night and Fog can certainly be considered a milestone and significant contribution to the modern understanding of the Holocaust.

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2 Raskin 35
3 Daughton, J.P. Class Lecture. Introduction to Modern European History. Stanford University, Stanford, Cal. 4 November 2009.
v Marrus, Paxton 354

viii Wolf 17
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x Wolf 30
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xi Raskin 3:40
xiii Resnais 2:15
xiv Resnais 8:29
xx Resnais 12:21
xx Resnais 18:03
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li Raskin 30
lii Raskin 34:57
liii Resnais 29:45
liv Resnais 31:15
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