2004 Second Place Critical Analysis

Score in Night and Fog and One Survivor Remembers

Parents and children torn apart. Skeletal figures staring vacantly up from filthy hospital beds. Brutal torture and sadistic experiments meticulously performed on human victims. The Holocaust was one of the most unimaginable atrocities mankind has ever seen. Because of its tremendous scale, with nearly nine million people killed, the full monstrousness of the Holocaust is hard to comprehend. Many prefer to think of this tragedy as some long ago, distant event. An unexplainable evil that will hopefully never happen again. We must realize that humans still possess the potential to perform horrific acts of hatred and genocide, that the Holocaust could be repeated. We must remember the Nazi’s inhumanity, in all its detail, so that we can recognize and prevent it from happening in the future.

Many filmmakers have realized this need to remember. They try to capture the essence of the Holocaust, to show the personal struggles of its victims, and to convince their audiences to remember what was done to these innocent people. Two of the most moving and detailed Holocaust documentaries are Night and Fog, by Alain Resnais, and One Survivor Remembers, by Kary Antholis. Both directors use music to build their films’ tone and emotional power. They carefully entwine music with visual images to reveal the common theme of each film. Though their specific approaches differ, both directors juxtapose score with visual images to deliver the message that we must never forget the Holocaust.

The score of Resnais’s film, composed by Hanns Eisler, does not follow the typical pattern of cinema orchestration. Instead of mirroring the emotions of fear, hatred, or sorrow that one would expect to feel when looking at Resnais’s incredibly disturbing footage, the music contrasts with the images in the film. In doing so the score not only emphasizes but also adds another dimension to those images. The audience’s first encounter with the score of Night and Fog is in the film’s opening credits and introduction. This was the first documentary that had ever been made about the Holocaust. Its subject matter alone terrifies, and a typical movie score would
try to heighten the audience’s fear with unsettling music, but the music to the opening credits of this film is almost romantic. A swelling orchestra plays dramatic, upbeat string music in a major key. The odd music choice continues as the camera rolls over images of country fields that house the empty barbed wire enclosures of an abandoned concentration camp. For this footage a flute trills peacefully in the background, reminiscent of Edward Grieg’s ethereal “Morning Air.” One would expect this music to accompany images of tranquil alpine meadows, not the skeleton of a death camp. But despite its nonconformity with the images, the calm, romantic music serves a specific purpose. The Nazis had come out of nowhere, bursting into the quiet lives of millions of people. The serene music reminds us that the invasion of the Nazis happened in peaceful, ordinary places like this field. The music entreats us to remember what the world was like before the Nazis came, while the contrastingly grim images remind us of how that world soon changed.

Contrary to Resnais’ technique, Antholis uses score to complement the emotions that his subject, Gerda Weissmann, feels. As in Night and Fog, One Survivor Remembers first uses score in the film’s introduction. The narrator describes how the Nazis forced thousands of girls to march through the snow until only a few remained alive. Then a short, tragic piano solo accompanies the narrator’s poignant statement, “These are the memories of one of those survivors.” As Gerda begins her story, she becomes emotional, pausing and blinking back tears, and the piano accompaniment emphasizes the nostalgic, wistful tone of her story. Unlike Resnais’ technique of contrasting picture and sound, Antholis uses melancholy music that reflects the feeling of the images and statements. As the introduction continues, a peaceful Chopin waltz plays to pictures of Gerda’s hometown Bielsko and the house where she once lived with her family. This tender music helps the audience feel how much Gerda loved her family and her old life, and how much she lost in the war. Like the tragic piano solo, this music reminds the audience how real, individual people suffered because of the Holocaust. Antholis’s choice of music complements Gerda’s mood and helps the audience connect with her story.

Later in One Survivor Remembers, when the Nazis first arrive, a violin solo plays in expectant, uncertain, nervous tones. As images of columns of soldiers flash by, the solo builds in speed and intensity, mirroring the growing fear and anxiety in the hearts of the people of Bielsko. After the Nazis take control of Bielsko, Gerda and her family are confined to the basement of their home. Still, Gerda breaks the rules one time
to go out and visit her old garden. As she looks up at the room she used to live in, Beethoven’s Für Elise plays in the background. This wistful music reflects the young girl’s plaintive wish that the war had never happened. By mirroring Gerda’s emotions, the music helps the audience feel more deeply the tragedy Gerda is experiencing and allows them to see the Holocaust’s effects on a more individual level. The differences between the two directors’ techniques become even clearer as the two stories shift to the nightmare world of Nazi imprisonment. The first shots of concentration camps in Night and Fog are accompanied by music that could be from The Twilight Zone. Violins pluck out high, jumpy notes and a solo trumpet plays discordant tunes. The images Resnais shows his audience are sickening: hundreds of naked prisoners being crowded together, shaved, and given dehumanizing tattoos. But the music does not focus on the personal feelings of the prisoners, their shame, outrage, and fear. It does not call simply for pathos from its audience. Instead, with its alien tones, it highlights how unreal everything seems. By playing that music with those specific images, the film asks the question “How is it even earthly possible that people could do such horrible things to one another?” The music reveals the unbelievable strangeness of what was happening to the prisoners to help the audience feel how important it is for them to keep such abominable things from happening again.

Gerda Weissmann had similarly devastating experiences in her slave labor camp. At one point conditions were so bad that she considered jumping in front of a train to end her suffering. She then felt a sharp pain in her neck and remembered a promise she had made to her father that she would never do such a cowardly thing. During Gerda’s whole flashback, Antholis repeats the same peaceful waltz that had played when the audience was first shown pictures of Gerda’s hometown and her old house. Replaying that waltz emphasizes Gerda’s wistful, homesick feelings and also helps reinforce her memory of her father. By showing the suffering Gerda endured and playing music that brings to mind the family and the happiness she once had, Antholis stresses the need to remember what the Holocaust took from its victims. It destroyed real families and drove girls like Gerda to despair.

As the two stories build towards their climaxes, Resnais and Antholis continue to use their musical techniques to bring across their films’ messages. The horrors continue in the concentration camps of Night and Fog. Resnais shows his audience pictures of corpses hanging on barbed wire fences, lists of thousands of names
of the men and women in the camps, lines of naked people waiting to enter gas chambers, and parchments made out of human skin. Once again, through all of these images the music contrasts with instead of accentuating the atrocity. For example, when the screen shows piles of dead people stuck between the logs of pyres, the accompanying music is the same Grieg-like, serene flute music that we heard at the beginning of the movie. The film makers are not trying to manipulate their audience’s emotions with heartrending music screaming out the tragedy and the horror. Instead, this out-of-place scoring emphasizes the wrongness of what is happening. How can this even be real? Such crimes against humanity seem impossible, but they did happen, and thus they are all the more important to remember. The peaceful music also reminds the viewer of the opening sequence of quiet fields. How could the world have gone from something as tranquil as those fields to something as hellish as the pyres? Because the juxtaposition of images and music forces the audience to think about what they’re seeing, it also forces them to acknowledge that, unreal though they seem, the evils of the Holocaust did happen.

It is only at the very end of Night and Fog that the music starts complementing the film’s subject matter. The dramatic music from the opening credits returns as the narrator asks the question “Who is responsible then?” The swelling, building orchestral music begs for the audience to think about everything they’ve just seen, to let it sink in and to feel its full impact, and then to ask themselves the question, “How did this happen?” They must remember what they’ve seen of the Holocaust so that they themselves will not repeat it. The final moments of the score are a crescendoing drum roll, like one might hear before an execution or the announcement of a sentence. This is an important moment for the audience. They must make the decision to accept the truth of what they’ve seen and to act to keep these atrocities from ever happening again.

In One Survivor Remembers, the final bit of score accompanies a description of how many young women were lost on the death march that Gerda and her friends went through. Once again, Antholis uses the Chopin waltz, and it plays on through the last image, a photograph of young Gerda in braids smiling shyly out at the audience. This musical motif ties the film together, reminding the audience of Gerda’s happier days at home, her times of trial in the labor camps, and the sorrow she felt for the loss of her friends. It binds the audience to the complete story of this young girl and helps them see, on an individual level, the toll of the Holocaust.
Resnais portrays the horrors that Nazis inflicted on their prisoners in gruesome detail, but with more emphasis on the Nazi’s actions than on the individual prisoners’ experiences. *Night and Fog*’s score emphasizes this unbelievable cruelty by contrasting graphic footage with peaceful music. Antholis, on the other hand, focuses entirely on one woman’s memories and feelings from her stay in a slave labor camp. The score of his movie adds to the emotional appeal of Gerta’s story by reflecting her feelings. Both movies effectively use score to portray the message that we must never forget the Holocaust.