

“Film Diplomacy”: The Controversy about *Night and Fog* (1956)

Abstract

The request to withdraw the documentary *Night and Fog* from the Cannes Film Festival made by diplomats at the West German embassy in France created a massive scandal. The West German representatives argued that it could damage Germany’s international relationships and inflame hatred against Germans, though this article in the West German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* argued that the film expressly avoided blaming all Germans for the horrors of the Holocaust, and instead attempted to make the point that humanity in general has a shocking capacity for evil, and that because of this, an event like the Holocaust could occur again. The Federal Republic eventually relented, but the film was only shown out of competition in small theaters. This undermined the purpose of the film: the filmmakers believed that to prevent an atrocity like the Holocaust from happening again, the event had to be memorialized through visual and textual testimony and shown widely. The film has been used as a teaching tool in France since 1991, after a Jewish cemetery in France was desecrated; it was also shown on all three of the French national television channels simultaneously shortly after the desecration. The use of the film as a teaching tool, along with the film’s enduring cultural legacy (it was voted the fourth best documentary film of all time in a 2014 poll conducted by the British Film Institute), has ensured that despite the Cannes scandal, the film has achieved (and continues to achieve) its original purpose.

Source

***Night and Fog*. Some Notes on Film Diplomacy**

The Parisian newspaper *Le Monde* treats what is, for us, quite an embarrassing matter in three successive numbers. Among the short films named by a French selection committee for the upcoming Cannes Film Festival was a documentary entitled *Night and Fog*. The film deals with the evolution and collapse of the Nazi concentration camps based on the writings of the respected author Jean Cayrol. According to press reports from Paris, the embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany intervened with the organizing committee of the Cannes Film Festival to prevent the screening of this film by Alain Resnais, and had the film removed from the list. It is not difficult to guess what motivated our foreign service to take this step. They probably told themselves that the sudden appearance of a documentary about the concentration camps among the overdressed euphoria of the film festivities would lead to discord, with psychologically undesirable consequences for the Germans. It seems doubtful, however, whether they considered the consequences of the French withdrawing the film. Just a few days after the film was “disavowed,” an accusation the French levied at their own state secretary at the ministry of trade and industry, a wave of outrage began to emerge in intellectual circles. Three respected French authors declared that the film was completely clean and made without transgressing any political boundaries. Jean Cayrol, himself once interned at Mauthausen, calls the film a kind of “acta sanctorum” and directly asks the German author Heinrich Böll, apparently a friend of his, what he thought of the measure that “robs us of our shared protest against the extermination of human beings.” Senator Michelet addressed a query to the state secretary, bringing forward almost the same argument as Cayrol, and, like the critic Henry Mangan, stating that they could not reconcile the German protest with the categorical declarations that official West Germany wants nothing to do with Nazi crimes.

Even assuming that the French public, which pays great attention to diplomatic conventions and taboos, continues to direct its accusations exclusively to the French authorities, even if the matter were to be

passed over in silence in the future, we would be very wrong to underestimate the psychological repercussions of the affair. The French offer quite a simple argument. They say that most of the victims of the concentration camps were Germans, after all. What are we to make of it if German officialdom admits to being unable to bear a film about the camps? Such a film nowadays, the French say, even has very particular effects beyond the temporal and geographical limits of the time. This film approaches an international evil (*le monde concentrationnaire*) without demagogy, objectively and with devastating veracity.

Officially, the French have given in. At the same time, they have all the moral arguments on their side. That is the tactical side of the matter, which incidentally acquires a piquant aftertaste from the fact that the film we are sending to Cannes, *Sky Without Stars*, irritated certain Russian sensitivities and, taken as a whole, certainly places some demands on the empathy of an international audience.

But diplomatic tactics are not the main issue here. When will we finally understand that the world will have no spiritual, moral solidarity with us unless we are in solidarity with the justified moral pathos of this world, which refuses to forgive one thing: opportunism in the cardinal questions of humanity. One of the commentaries to *Night and Fog* states that there is no intention to identify an entire nation with the criminals of the concentration camps. This sentence contains an unspoken appeal to us. We need at last to be decisive and clear!

Source of original German text: Karl Korn, "Nacht und Nebel. Etwas über Filmdiplomatie," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 1956, p. 8.

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