

Irene Angelico
& Abbey Neidik's

Dark Lullabies

The solidly entrenched reputation of the NFB's Studio D should by now be well established enough to cope with some setbacks, and *Dark Lullabies* is one. Not a major one perhaps, but definitely a case of a film whose original idea is far superior to its execution.

A documentary that attempts to grapple with the historical past and its impact — and especially one as charged with horror and complexity as the Holocaust — carries certain assumptions about the nature of that past even before a foot of film gets shot.

In making a film about the Holocaust, or more particularly about the impact of the Holocaust on the children of survivors, how much does one assume an audience will already know about that past? Depending on how you look at it, the Holocaust is either the most significant, human fact of contemporary historical existence and has been so for 40 years now, or it's a media occasion for grim footage uncovered by historical ignoramuses thanks to recent US-TV series, highly publicized Canadian courtcases like the Keegstra or Zundel trials, or the discovery of some bones in Brazil.

The main problem with *Dark Lullabies* is that it operates from this knowing perspective, and this is a difficult starting-point for a film that wants to concern itself with historical remembering.

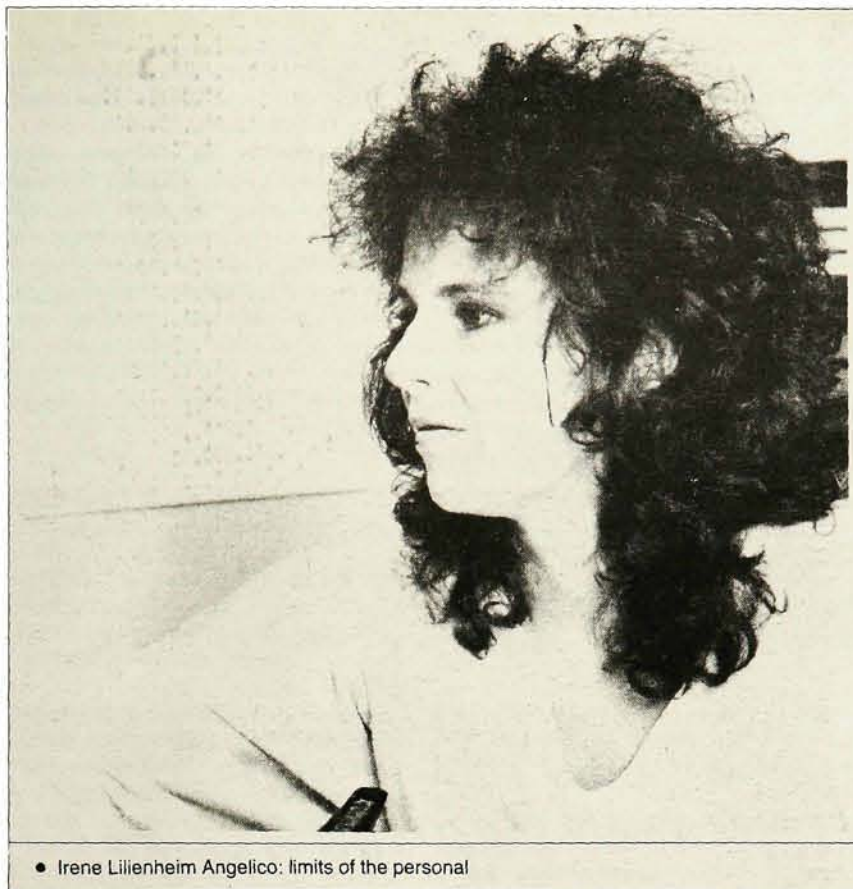
As a result, several problems develop, the most serious being — how do you show what you are attempting to understand when you haven't understood it, and when the showing is meaningless without that understanding? What do those images of skeletal survivors and bodies piled in mass-graves reveal other than the limits of cinema itself?

And yet those images, simultaneously so powerful and powerless, are at the heart of the seriousness of the idea behind *Dark Lullabies*. Like the problem faced by the children of Holocaust survivors, of which co-director Irene Lilienheim Angelico is one, the filmmaker too must attempt to come to grips with the inexpressible that her own and other parents experienced but can't or won't explain.

This particular filmmaker chooses to set off on a personal quest for understanding, hoping that her 16mm camera can explain to her what no human being will.

And along the way, there are interviews with survivors who don't understand, interviews with children of survivors who don't understand, interviews with children and grandchildren of Nazis who don't understand, and interviews with young neo-Nazis for whom it's all too simple: a Jewish conspiracy.

Lilienheim Angelico eventually reaches what remains of the Dachau



• Irene Lilienheim Angelico: limits of the personal

concentration camp where her father was a prisoner, and, against the strains of much moving music, a long slow pan of the camp bunks, and a long shot of Lilienheim Angelico herself, plunged in deep reflections, hopefully understands something there, though of what one hasn't the slightest idea, since she doesn't bother to explain it.

The problem with such a personal approach is that it's got to do something more than show the film director and other people with tears streaming down their cheeks. It's got to say something about the nature of the experience, and if it can't be done with recorded images, then it's got to be with words, and if that can't be done, then perhaps films on the Holocaust are better left to the Donald Brittain, Alain Resnais and Max Ophüls of the world who can. For, unhappily, it's a subject that calls for greater talents than those displayed in *Dark Lullabies*, despite an impressive list of consultants.

On the other hand, from the perspective of someone who knows nothing about the Holocaust, *Dark Lullabies* offers an introduction to the subject. The film would then present itself something like this:

An attractive filmmaker goes traipsing around the world trying to find some trace of her parents' wartime experience. Clearly, terrible things happened way over there on a galaxy far far away between the years 1939-1945: beatings, mass-murder, and general nastiness. Why is none too clear: Germans for some reason had something against Jews. But Germans don't like to be reminded of this, and that's traumatic for Jewish children whose parents were forced to go through the Nazi hell-on-earth, and lived. But, even if nothing's been understood, let's put it all down on film anyway, have a nice cry, and pray for a better world; surely some good must result. So here's a well-meaning movie for you to watch with no boring experts, just real sincere, plain folk,

some heavy footage to give it a serious look, fine music, occasionally brilliant editing, sly over-the-shoulder shooting and obtruding boom-mikes to add to the sincerity — just a friendly, pretentious little film for suburbanites with cosmopolitan aspirations.

Word has it that the Board is planning to get behind the film in a big way. If this kind of lightweight documentary reflects the NFB's current response to its mandate in the TV age, then it's worth pointing out that *Dark Lullabies* unwittingly offers a standard by which to measure the swamp Canadian documentary has sunk into. As the makers of *Dark Lullabies* know, since they used a clip from it, the NFB produced one of the handful of truly great films on the Holocaust, with Donald Brittain's 1965 *Memorandum*.

Ultimately, why *Memorandum* worked where *Dark Lullabies* doesn't is that Brittain had more respect for the dead than fear of the ignorance of a living audience. But, from that perspective, perhaps, even a weak film on the Holocaust is still better than none at all.

Michael Dorland •

Dark Lullabies

d./ed. Irene Lilienheim Angelico, Abbey Jack Neidik; cam. Susan Trow, loc. sd. Jean-Guy Normandin; narr./sc. Irene Lilienheim Angelico, Gloria Demers; ed.cons. Edward LeLorrain, loc. man./res. (Canada and Israel) Anne Dychtenberg, Rachel Rubenstein; a.d. & res. Harald Lü ders (Germany); asst. cam. Simon Leblanc, asst.ed. & arch.res. Chantal Bowen, opt.efx. Don McWilliams; orig.mus. Lauri Conger, Michael Beinhorn; mus.rec. Louis Hone; mus.ed. Diane le Floch; sd.ed. Abbey Jack Neidik, Andre Galbrand; re.rec. Jean-Pierre Joutel, Adrian Croll; p. Irene Lilienheim Angelico, Abbey Jack Neidik, Edward LeLorrain, Bonnie Sherr Klein; exec.p. Kathleen Shannon, p.c. DLI and Studio D, National Film Board of Canada; dist. National Film Board of Canada. Color, 16mm & video-cassette, running time: 81 minutes, 17 seconds.

William Fruet's

The Killer Instinct

What we have here is a particularly vicious case of a social custom that's been warping commercial Canadian cinema into some of the most bizarrely crippled postures you can find outside of Chinese foot-binding; that is, the practice of taking a Canadian production and doing everything you can to prevent it looking like a Canadian movie.

Ever since *Deliverance* and all the rest, everybody knows that backwoods America is overrun with genocidal crazies and that, if you take a quartet of college-age boozers and bimboes and pack them off for a nature weekend, they will fall afoul of those crazies and spend the rest of the picture running and dying until they discover depths of brutality in themselves that the crazies just can't match. Everybody knows that, so it's no big surprise when it happens in *The Killer Instinct* and it's no big thrill either. How can it not be when the filmmakers are faking it all the way and, in the process, denying their own deepest instincts?

Now, I don't know about writer John Beard and producer Herb Abramson, but Beard sure writes like a Canadian and, since the film was eligible for Genie nominations it's a fair guess that Abramson is one, too. But I do know about director William Fruet and cameraman Mark Irwin — they are both Canadian and it shows in their work and always has. So, to imagine them trying to make an effective action movie set in rural, southern U.S.A. is to imagine them wrapping their brains in the vinegar-soaked cheesecloth the Chinese used to use and squeezing hard — a doomed and desperate attempt to inhabit an alien consciousness (and if you need to be convinced that Americans are fundamentally different than us, check out the introductory chapter to June Callwood's *Portrait of Canada* where it's laid out with clarity, precision and wit). If they'd given up that attempt and set their movie in northern Quebec or the hoser hinterland of Ontario, they might have had something, not a pseudo-American flick at war with itself on all fronts, but an action movie with roots deeply embedded in our culture and the richer for it.

The Canadian sensibility already informs most of the movie and even comes to the surface here and there, as if Beard, try as he might, just couldn't quite strangle his national character. The opening scene, with the vigorous middle-aged man screwing the Lolita-type in the woods while a pair of idiots watch and giggle so hard they fall off a log, is purest Canadian. In a real American movie, those idiots woulda been just a-droolin' and a-jackin' and a-workin' out ways to get a taste for themselves. Hell, they probably woulda killed the guy and taken their pleasure right there on his steaming guts — it's the American way. But our idiots just run away and keep on laughing, even when the guy comes after them with his shotgun blazing. Only in Canada.

Of course, in other ways, the attempted Americanization succeeds — not so well that you'd ever mistake the product for a