

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.

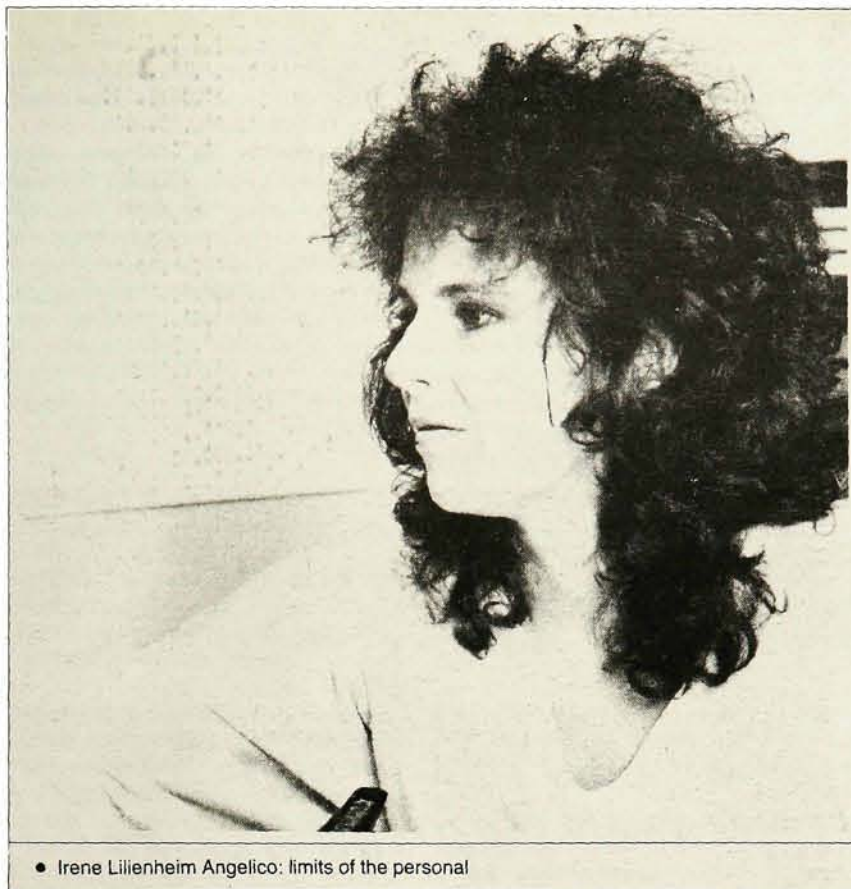
As a result, several problems develop, the most serious being — how do you show what you are attempting to understand when you haven't understood it, and when the showing is meaningless without that understanding? What do those images of skeletal survivors and bodies piled in mass-graves reveal other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



• **The Killer Instinct:** doomed by fake Dixie accents

real one, but well enough to hide the Canadian and create an ambience that no country on earth would recognize as its own. Near the beginning, there's a scene in which the head bozo tells his law professor that he can envision no circumstance which would justify the taking of a human life. There's just no way a real American would ever say that and no way a Canadian would ever have to. A real Canadian movie would probably have skipped the scene altogether to strengthen the alleged theme (bozoes can be as brutal as bumpkins) by letting us ferret it out ourselves and to win for the actor (Nicholas Campbell, I think — as usual, I'm doing this without benefit of press kit) our loyalty and gratitude by sparing us all the pain of the speech.

On the whole, though, it may be the plot that suffers most by Americanization, for it is quintessentially Canadian in its foundations and makes little sense in a foreign land. What happens is that, when bozoes and bimboes stumble into the isolated village, its religious and secular leader, Henry Chatwell, tips over into a fundamentalist frenzy of I-am-the-law and launches a campaign of torture, murder and driving his pick-up truck through walls. *And the whole village goes along with it.* No way, Jack. Not in the States. In the States, the local Woodward and Bernstein would have been on his ass in minutes. The widow-woman would have staged a sit-in. Half the town would have picked up signs and started marching. Americans are the people with the "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" constitution. Ours says, "peace, order and good government" and, up here, it all would have made perfect sense. We're the people who, when polled, endorsed the War Measures Act by 80%. We love authoritarian leaders, just love 'em.

A home setting would have helped the subplot, too — they could have dropped it entirely. Chatwell's younger brother is the local law and he's completely under Chatwell's thumb, which explains why Chatwell gets away with all that stuff, and that's all it does — no development, no climax, no relation to the rest of the action. But up here, we all know we've got thousand-mile stretches, and lots of them, policed by nothing but the Mountie and his dog. One line about him being at the other end of his circuit and they'd have freed up 15 more minutes for Fruet to demonstrate

the same fine hand with action he's already shown in *Bedroom Eyes* and *Cries In The Night*.

Canadianization would also have spared us the sight of Henry Silva playing Henry Chatwell. Now, there's nothing wrong with Silva as an actor, but he's an American with an American's view of fundamentalist cranks and, so he plays Chatwell at a bellow from word one, with nothing left in reserve for the high points. A Canadian actor, say, for instance, John Vernon, would never have done that. Can you imagine Vernon playing anything at a roar all the way through? Never. No more so can you imagine him suddenly lapsing into the rhythms of soul music halfway through a speech and then visibly struggling to keep a straight face through the rest of it. John Vernon never has trouble keeping a straight face. Never! And he can sound Canadian. Those Chatwell diatribes could have benefited from the odd "ch?" or "tabernac." They'd have benefited even more if they'd been composed of the superstitious Catholicism you can still find in corners of Quebec or the corpse-rigid Calvinist offshoots that thrive in the Niagara fruit-belt. Anything would have been better than the bland thee-and-thou bullshit that suggest Beaird never even made it all the way through an episode of *100 Huntley Street*.

It wouldn't have hurt the rest of the cast, either, if they'd been freed from the doomed battle with Dixie accents that takes all their energy.

For the most part, though, Americanization just means that we lose those rich and meaningful details that give a movie life and colour and come easiest from local knowledge. You can see them being set up and struggling to come out in some places, but they're always killed off. It's very Canadian to have a travelling welfare worker caught screwing the underage-slut-wife (real Americans would have stuck with the traditional travelling salesman), but they refused to do the joke about the welfare state screwing the citizens — the one you can find in every daily paper in the country every day of the week — that's utterly foreign to Americans. They missed out, too, on the Canadian humour of having him run away through the snow clad only in his Stanfields and his snowshoes and, if they'd set it here, they would have done it, I know they would. In contrast, how much more

horrifying his capture and torture would have been if, instead of tarring-and-feathering him, they'd maple-syruped-and-feathered him, with that relentless, tooth-stabbing sweetness and well-known delicate bouquet providing a chilling counterpoint to his anguished screams. I know it sounds grotesque on paper but it would've fit perfectly.

By the same token, the death of Jeb, the number-two heavy, is a piece of standard-brand Americana: he's impaled by a falling TV antenna. But how much more meaningful it would have been if we'd known it was the CBC signal sticking into his wobbly little gut. It would only have taken a line: A villager sticks his head out a window and yells, "Hey! What happened to Knowlton?" and, bingo! an instant comment on the destruction of rural life and values by 20th-century technology, all neatly embedded in the action. It would have helped of Jeb, too. He's out there dying all alone and he's a mighty long time about it. He groans. He staggers. He rolls his eyes. He clutches his belly. He falls. He rises. He does it all again... and again... and again... and, after a while, it gets sorta hard to stay focussed on the drama of the moment.

Now, all this might sound fanciful, but it isn't. Remember, those of us who like to watch things blow up don't care where it happens, just so long as it happens *good!* and, if our filmmakers can get those vinegar-soaked bandages off their heads, they might find the strength to make things blow up good. And that has certain implications, both at home and abroad. For the foreign viewer, the United States is an overfamiliar locale and Canada an exotic one. If we do something interesting with our exotic settings, we can't help but do better with foreign sales. And, if we do, then we'll need somebody to make more

THE KILLER INSTINCT d.

William Fruet p. Herb Abramson sc. John Beaird p. con. Gene Slott assoc. p. Patrick Doyle mus. Eric Robertson d.o.p. Mark Irwin, csc ed. Ralph Brunjes, cfe art d. Fred Allen p.man. Patrick Doyle stunt coord. Everett Creach p.r. Blowitz & Canton Co. post. p. sup. Ralph Brunjes, cfe sd. cfx ed. Brian French dist. (Cdn) Pan-Canadian Ip. Henry Silva, Nicholas Campbell, Barbara Gordon, Gina Dick, Joy Thompson, Ralph Benmergui, Alan Royal, Sam Malkin, Stuart Culpepper, John Rutter, Danone Camden, Jeff Toole, Jere Beery, Ervin Melton, Wallace Wilkinson, Lloyd Semlar, Randall Deal, Leonard Flory.

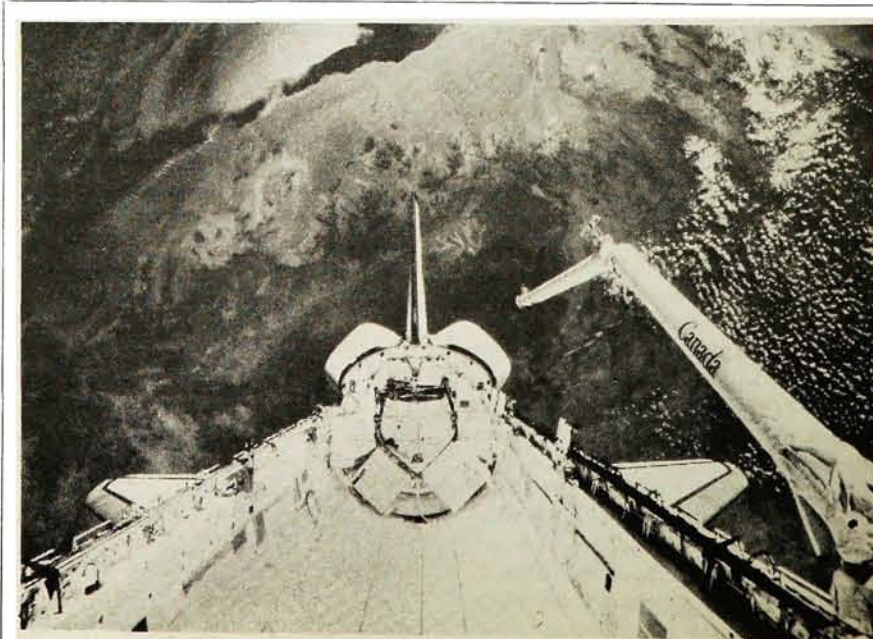
and that could point to a new commercial life for the moribund Ontario realism. More importantly, though, we could instill a certain pride and consciousness in those of our moviegoers who display little interest in the national cinema as it stands. Remember, the United States didn't become the nation it is by neglecting the patrons of even its seediest drive-ins.

Andrew Dowler •

Graeme Ferguson's
The Dream Is Alive

The latest and truly spectacular IMAX film received its Canadian premiere on Aug. 7 in the Cinesphere at Ontario Place, Toronto, with a whole lot of hoopla and an eclectic audience mix of politicians, astronauts and film people. Of course, there were speeches, mercifully short, and some containing little nuggets of interest. Graeme Ferguson, producer/director, and one of the developers of the IMAX system, commented on the "terrible experience of not being able to go where the film was made." Astronaut John McBride ("I'm the first West Virginian in space") was proud of the fact that there is more of the footage he shot in the film than that of any other person. His mission was eight and a half days in space, and went around the world 133 times. Our own Canadian astronaut, Marc Garneau, said that, apart from the weightlessness, the film really conveyed the feeling of actually being there on a space-flight.

The giant screen — six storeys high and 80 feet wide — is flooded with the light of dawn, the outline of the launching pad is visible, and the birds twitter and sing. Ironically, the Kennedy Space Centre is in the middle of a Florida wildlife reserve. The space shuttle is coming home at any moment. From this almost serene beginning, the audience is propelled into 37 minutes of overpowering images, experiences and emotions, which are literally out of this world in



• **The dream is alive:** Challenger passes over the African coast