

# HOLocaust



## Distortion of history

Continued from page 24.

European fascism were used by the bourgeoisie (including that of the U.S.) to halt the growing strength of the left amidst capitalist crisis. But the TV viewer of *Holocaust* is given no inkling of this.

In the portrayal of the resistance, again, distortions abound.

We see not a single left partisan, though in fact the socialist and communist groups constituted a majority of the underground. The Soviet Union's incredible war effort is glossed over. In one of the series' most obscene moments, the Czech-Jewish refugee Helena must invent a communist past and seductively kiss the Russian commissar in order to be allowed passage to Kiev.

Jews are shown without exception as passively meeting death in the camps. In reality, undergrounds existed even within the concentration camps; there were escapes, revolts and sabotage. The single small band of Jewish partisans in *Holocaust* is seen as totally on its own. "The Ukrainians are as bad as the Nazis" is repeated several times.

We are led to believe that the Warsaw Ghetto fighters are similarly isolated. In fact, they had organic connections with the Pol-

ish left underground outside the walls. The latter rose up in solidarity in 1943. Nor is any mention made of similar revolts in ghettos throughout Europe.

The nature of the revolt itself is also gravely misrepresented in the docu-drama. Mordechai Anielewicz, commander of the Jewish Fighting Organization, is portrayed as representing "the Zionists," who favor resistance while other Jews supposedly do not. In real life, Anielewicz was the leader of *Hashomer Hatzair*, a mass, Marxist-Zionist organization, strongly pro-Soviet and coordinated with other parties of the Jewish and non-Jewish Polish left. There were Zionists who favored cooperation, just as there were non-Zionist Jews in both camps. Class divisions among the Jews provide a rough but much more accurate key to their response than does the Zionist/non-Zionist categorization.

(Parts of the German Jewish bourgeois were at first sympathetic to the Nazis' anti-left rhetoric. Some, like the Weiss family of *Holocaust*, remained passive for much too long, believing that they were too important a sector of German society to be seriously persecuted. Many Zionists, also refusing to believe in the real threat of Nazism and fixated on bringing as many young Jews—and as much capital—as possible to Palestine—and only Palestine—were also less than enthusiastic in organizing active resistance.

(The vast majority of Jews murdered by the Nazis were Eastern European working class and poor *petit bourgeois*—very different from the "typical Berlin family" presented on NBC. These Jewish masses were generally sympathetic to—and overrepresented in—the many socialist and communist parties that existed at the time. This fact helped the fascists use anti-Semitism to attack the left.)

But even the young radical Zionist Anielewicz fades into the background as NBC's version of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt unfolds. The active leaders we see are members of the officially-sanctioned Jewish Council. These bodies, which became known as the *Judenrat*, were manipulated into collaborating with the Nazis—keeping order, selecting laborers and organizing deportations. The real Jewish resistance in Warsaw assassinated these "leaders." (cf. *ITT*, April 19, "Interview with a Survivor.")

Finally, those Warsaw rebels who survived did not passively surrender as they do on TV. Many escaped to join their urban guerilla comrades on the other side of the wall or the partisans in the forests. Knowing the truth, one might suspect the producers of preferring to show the resistance as a noble but futile act of a few isolated Jews, rather than a remarkably well-organized (considering the circumstances) anti-fascist movement dedicated to building socialism after the war and containing many similarities to guerilla groups in some parts of the world today.

I do not recall hearing the word "fascism" once in the 9½-hour drama. If it did occur, it was well-hidden. American viewers were presented with a picture of evil vs. good; sick Nazis and other anti-Semites vs. Jews and their friends.

The crime against the Jewish people would be no less monstrous if seen, not as the outcome of a sick obsession, but as a crucial tool used to distract and morally disarm sufficiently large sectors of the European middle and lumpen classes. On the contrary, the holocaust becomes much more believable if we understand the powerful social forces that made it possible. By ignoring these forces, NBC is contributing to a new myth—that World War II was *only* a "war against the Jews." The absurdity of this new myth potentially adds ammunition to anti-Semites' stores.

It continues to provide credibility for their "hoax" theory and assumes moral repugnance, not true self-interest, as the only reason for non-Jews to oppose Nazism.

The TV film includes many long minutes of anti-Semitic Nazi ideology, *with no intellectual refutation*. The writers apparently considered it unnecessary. I am not so sure that they are right.

Why is the holocaust being taught in this distorted way, and perhaps more importantly, why now? Anyone with some conception of the ideological function of the mass media must look beyond the goal of high profits through high ratings.

American "Nazis," swastikas and all, have begun to reappear with alarming frequency. They have provoked an angry and sometimes violent response by Jews, blacks and the left, three sectors of the population that have lately been effectively divided by emotional issues such as Israel, community control and affirmative action. Programs like NBC's *Holocaust* might be interpreted as a way of co-opting the anti-Nazi feelings, discrediting and isolating *this* particular brand of neo-Nazism by telling at least part of the truth about its "heroes'" crime.

But there is little real danger that if fascism comes to the U.S. it will be headed by the nuts in storm trooper costumes who want to chant "Hitler was right" in Skokie streets. Nor will its chief victims necessarily be Jews. Identification of the Nazi phenomenon as unique, ahistorical and anti-Semitic in essence not only distorts its reality but mor-

ally immunizes potential American fascism from the stigma of association.

It is still too early to tell what course history will take in the U.S. A form of fascist movement is one possibility. If it occurs, we can be sure that it will exploit, one way or another, existing divisions between the various races, nationalities and sectors of the American working class.

There are important lessons to be drawn from a study of how Jews were victimized by European fascism 40 years ago. Socialists can make it their task to insure that a Pandora's box will be opened by the belated popularization of at least the half-truths present in programs like *Holocaust*. Exposure of Nazism's social content, and that of the resistance, must follow.

—David Mandel

### Further Reading:

- On the Jewish resistance:  
*They Fought Back*, edited by Yuri Suhl, Schocken, 1967.  
*Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: the Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*, Jacob Sloan, editor and translator, Schocken, 1974.  
*Not As a Lamb*, Lucien Steinberg, Saxon House, 1974.  
On the Western Allies' response:  
*Wall Street and the Rise of Hitler*, Antony Sutton, Seventy-Six, 1976.  
*While Six Million Died*, Arthur Morse, Ace, 1969.  
*The Day of the Americans*, Nerin E. Gun Fleet, 1966.  
Other:  
*Destruction of the European Jews*, Raul Hilberg, Watts, 1971.  
*The Murderers Among Us*, Simon Wiesenthal, McGraw-Hill, 1967.

David Mandel has recently returned from Israel and is living in New York City.

## High marks for Holocaust

Continued from page 24.

I cannot conclude this review without some comment on substantive weakness in the treatment. The opening incident in which the Weiss family faces the agonizing decision of whether or not to leave Germany while there is still time was dealt with much too casually.

More important was the lack of emphasis on the fact that the Nazis destroyed in their death camps not only six million Jews, but six million others—intellectuals, political opponents, Gyp-

sies, homosexuals and people who fell into no special category except opposition to the barbarism of the state.

And finally, there should have been more background information on conditions in Germany from 1916 to 1933, when inflation and depression drained the psychic reserves of the German people. If we are to avoid the mistakes of the past, we must understand the forces that shaped it.

*The Holocaust* deserves high marks for placing discussion of the Hitler era in the marketplace of ideas, which is its proper place in a democratic society.

—Stan Brody

Stan Brody is a stock broker whose avocation is historical research on the rise of Hitler.

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## MUSIC

# The new Lou Reed and a new British rocker

## STREET HASSLE

Lou Reed  
(Arista)

## NEW BOOTS &amp; PANTIES!!

Ian Dury and the Blockheads  
(Stiff)

Lou Reed is riding high these days. His new album, *Street Hassle*, is receiving praise the likes of which hasn't been heard since Bruce Springsteen was called the future of rock and roll. He's also just wrapped up a nation-wide tour, leaving a path of superlatives behind him. And deservedly so.

Since the disbanding of the legendary Velvet Underground in 1970, Reed's career has been erratic, both on wax and in person. But he alone, among all the pop, schlock, punk and junk, came close to fulfilling his own wish that "the intelligence that inhabited novels and films would one day ingest rock."

Unfortunately, Reed achieved his broadest commercial success as the "Rock and Roll Animal," a vicious self-parody that temporarily shelved his higher musical ambitions. Yet subsequent albums never failed to reveal at least one or two glimmers to indicate that Lou's brain was still in perilously high gear.

*Street Hassle* achieves success for Reed on his own terms, but his vehicle is a bitter testimony to the pains he endured to get there. As usual, Reed isn't content to be your garden-variety genius and skitters off to the far edges, challenging his audience's taste and tolerance. But he is no easier on himself.

From the opening cut where he derides his former image ("Well, if it ain't the Rock & Roll Animal hisself...you faggot junkie!") to the final song, where he pleads with someone to "Wait" while a chorus relentlessly repeats, "A disgrace...such a waste...of a pretty

face," Reed is his own fair game.

A prize example of this intriguing ambiguity is the track called "Dirt";

*Your lack of conscience  
And your lack of morality  
More and more people know all about it.*

*You're just dirt...*

*That's all you're worth*

*That's the only word that hurt*

*Cheap cheap cheap cheap up-town dirt.*

## Exit forever the Rock and Roll Animal.

At first this seems to be another typically vitriolic attack on one of Lou's "two-bit friends," but suddenly the lyrics are being used to describe himself.

Reed is one performer who's been much abused and misunderstood by critics and fans alike. The latter, let down because he failed to rise to the expected heights, became his cruellest detractors. Posturing to the contrary, even the "Celine of Rock" has feelings. "The worst thing people can find out about me is how normal I am," Lou insists.

*Street Hassle* also contains an ironic update of the old Velvet's show-opener, "Real Good Time Together," and a biting satirical stab at racial stereotypes, "I Wanna Be Black," (which, like Randy Newman's "Short People," is bound to be misunderstood by many).

The title work is a series of gritty verbal tableaux about sex, drugs, death, loneliness and love on the seamier side of the city, strung together by a haunting musical coda. These half-spoken/half-sung excursions are chilling little tales that might have come

from an earlier Velvet's album—or Nelson Algren.

On stage, Lou does mostly new material, dressed in surprising white, looking healthier if not happier, free of any burden of props (even his guitar is transparent), chatting occasionally with the audience. Exit forever the Rock & Roll Animal, with sighs of relief all around.

Opening the show for Lou Reed on his recent tour was Ian Dury, an eccentric little Britisher with a crazy grin, who lunges and lurches across the stage, loaded down with old shopping bags full of dime-store gadgets, ratty scarves, bent umbrellas and a wide assortment of junk which he scatters all over himself and the audience. Despite being covered with clothespins, deflated balloons, sales tags, plastic pins and funny hats, with a Union Jack decal stuck to his teeth, Dury can rock and do it well.

He performs songs from his one album, *New Boots and Panties!!* which consists largely of charmingly teasing, or self-consciously naughty tunes such as "I'm Partial to Your Abracadabra" or "Wake Up and Make Love With Me." His brand of silliness and self-deprecating humor may not be everyone's cup of tea, but he can also cut loose with songs like "Sweet Gene Vincent," a touching paean to the early rock-'n'-roller who, like Dury, had a bad leg and a pronounced limp; or sing a loving but unsentimental tribute to "My Old Man."

Unfortunately, *New Boots and Panties!!* has been watered-down in production so that even the best songs lack the power of his live renditions. But, if you have a strong sense of humor, it'd be worthwhile to give it a try.

—P. Hertel

*P. Hertel is a free-lance writer in Chicago who reviews regularly for IN THESE TIMES.*



## MOVIES

## Highly polished, but still very obscure

### THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE

Written and directed by Luis Bunuel

With Fernando Rey, Carole Bouquet and Angela Molina  
First Artists, Rated R

Off in a curio shop somewhere there's a piece of porcelain that has caught your eye. It amuses you. It sparkles. But it is gimmicky and elusive. You'll probably never buy it. Its attraction is simply a matter of form and sheen.

Luis Bunuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* resembles that artifact. Its maker has wit, refinement and mastery of the visual medium. But his elegance serves nothing more than itself. The film, for all his craftsmanship, is a perfect bauble.

Its straightforward narrative style comes as a bit of a surprise. Bunuel, after all, is supposed to be a surrealist. His films are not supposed to make sense. Here, however, he gives us a plot that (until the end) is not only familiar, but downright archaic.

A society gentleman named Farbet (Fernando Rey) becomes infatuated with a mysterious, raven-eyed beauty. Although he is nearly 60 and she is just 18, Farbet burns with the fire of an adolescent love. He is consumed by his need for Conchita, who is, of course, unattainable.

Farbet tries to win her with an old-world mix of romantic resources: his headstrong passion, his social graces and, when those fail, his money. To Conchita he swears devotion; to her mother he brings bags full of currency. Both kinds of charm prove resistible. Conchita does go to bed with him, but wearing an ingenious chastity belt.

Who is this Conchita (besides the best trick in the film)? From scene to scene she seems to vary in appearance and character. First she is slender, cold, aloof, with a crooked smile. Then she is round-

facied, talkative, voluptuous, a passionate teaser. It becomes clear eventually that there are two Conchitas, played by two different actresses (Bouquet and Molina) with voice over by a third). Conchita, the austere, is often angry at her suitor, never hot-blooded. Conchita, the seductive, plays the scenes of tenderness, violence and the dance sequences. Both say they love Farbet, but deny his amorous advances.

Taken together they barely add up to anything more than a masculine fantasy of coquettishness.

The film tells this fairy-tale through a time-tested framing device—the tale within the tale. Farbet relates the story of his love episodically to a group of traveling companions he meets by chance on the train. The story is adroitly told. The photography is artful, especially in the use of color: vivid backgrounds against which move figures dressed in black, white and gray.

Ultimately, however, neither the narrative nor the visual aspect does much for the film's theme. Neither does the comic tension seem to help. Bunuel gives us the fanciful Revolutionary Army of the Infant Jesus, but never explains why they seem to be stalking Farbet throughout the film. And he builds up the gentleman's heightening mania for the girl only to dissipate it in a hazy ending.

In *That Obscure Object of Desire* Bunuel has paid tribute to a man's desire for the unreachable woman. But one wishes he had relied less on art than on heart. The film has moments that will astonish and stimulate some in the audience, but most of its triumphs are merely stylistic. For all its polish and humor, it winds down to an impenetrable close.

For this viewer the obscure object in the theater was not so much the beautiful Conchita as the film itself.

—Donald Venes

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