

in the history of Russian power, whether in its Czarist or Soviet variant.

And as exiled Soviet dissident Boris Shragin reminds us in *The Challenge of the Spirit* (1978), his excellent study of the continuities in Russian nationalism: "For centuries, the government's main function was war: all its strength and resources were spent first in warding off surrounding enemies and later in territorial expansion. Little was spent for administration, which was always a weak point of the Russian system." In other words, Russia and its successor state, the USSR, have been engaged in a "centuries-long arms race."

In view of these constants, the three recent studies of Andropov should therefore be judged as much for their insights into the nature of the Soviet

system as for their insights into Andropov. For this reason, Beichman and Bernstam's clear understanding of the nature of Soviet totalitarianism makes their book exceedingly valuable. More uneven is the Solovyov-Klepikova volume which is most useful for illuminating the Russian nationalist dimension of Soviet rule. And Zhores Medvedev's study, despite its leftish, unilateralist stance, provides an expert account of personal rivalries in Soviet ruling circles while emphasizing the sources of the changing *équipe's* fundamental conservatism.

In different ways, these books avoid the pitfalls into which many leading U.S. Sovietologists have fallen in recent years. Indeed, it is a most interesting phenomenon—in this day of sociologically grounded political analysis—to witness leading analysts, whose work is wedded to the

paradigms of class interests, interest group politics, cultural traditions, historical continuities, and the like, abandoning many of these fundamental factors whenever the USSR faces the possibility of a succession crisis. It seems that at such moments all the lessons of Weber or Marx are conveniently forgotten and Freud (personality) comes to the fore. The attempts to paint Andropov as a liberal-minded reformer were wrong not only because they failed to correspond to his record in the Party-state apparatus; they were wrong because in a state such as the USSR there is no possibility for a reformer to emerge, barring some major, palpable crisis. Such a crisis erupted in the aftermath of Stalin's death, when Party functionaries acted to avert another dark age of terror. Since the Khrushchev years there had been continuity and consensus within

Soviet ruling circles. Those few leaders who have strayed from the pillars of Party primacy, Russification, or militarism have been demoted or purged. Andropov may die before this reaches you, yet the continuities in Soviet rule and the imperatives of Soviet power will remain unchanged. The only mystery is who will succeed him, and on this Beichman and Bernstam leave us with an intriguing parting thought:

If the KGB is not enough, then the military will have to step in. Just as it was a Polish general, Jaruzelski, who saved the Communist Party in his country, so could it be a Soviet marshal with a baton in his knapsack who could represent the "Bonapartist" solution to the Soviet crisis.

For Lenin, imperialism represented the highest stage of capitalism. We can perhaps paraphrase Lenin and say that military governance may one day be the highest stage of Communism—and its last. □

THE TALKIES



SILKWOOD VAGUE

by Martha Bayles

At the very least, the original producers of *Silkwood* deserve credit for sheer perseverance. Larry Cano and Buzz Hirsch were film students at UCLA when they first read about Karen Silkwood, a worker in an Oklahoma plutonium recycling plant who became a union activist concerned with safety issues. In the course of her efforts to gather evidence against Kerr-McGee Corporation, Silkwood was badly contaminated, then killed in an auto accident while driving to meet a reporter from the *New York Times*.

The year was 1974, when, as Cano and Hirsch put it, "No one had ever done a film about radiation leaks in a factory." Any hope of a scoop, however, was thwarted when the neophyte producers had to spend two years acquiring the rights to Silkwood's story; three years locating and interviewing her friends and co-workers; several months litigating with Kerr-McGee (who in 1977 subpoenaed the filmmakers' accumulated materials); and finally the past six years navigating the ups and downs of Hollywood. It all adds up to almost a

decade—during which there have been endless court cases, books and plays, *The China Syndrome* starring Jane Fonda, *Three Mile Island* starring Jimmy Carter, and a burgeoning antinuclear movement which has all but stopped the industry in its tracks.

So who wants to hear about Karen Silkwood now? Meryl Streep, for one. And her agent, Sam Cohen, who is responsible for drawing in such luminaries as director Mike Nichols, writer Nora Ephron, and co-star Cher. Evidently all these people, and a great many critics, not to mention moviegoers, feel that the story is worth retelling.

To a certain extent, they are right. It is always worthwhile re-creating the background of a news story, so that we may see what sort of people it's about. The film shows Silkwood's milieu to be vaguely countercultural, with alienated and unattached young working people drifting in and out of jobs, commitments, relationships. I have a little trouble with Cher's lesbian lover, a wisecracking blonde who works as a beautician in a funeral home—such sitcom cuteness reminds me too vividly that the producer is ABC. But otherwise the characters' sixties-style aliena-

tion seems quite believable, if only as a thin cover for their native cussedness, orneriness, and anarchic individualism. In other words, the wall hanging may come from India, but the planks underneath are pure Oklahoma.

This authenticity has a lot to do with Streep. Or rather, with Streep as directed by Nichols, who has the good sense not to fawn over her the way Alan Pakula did in *Sophie's Choice*. Here she is encouraged to be scuzzy, skinny, bitchy, and sly—all of which she does extremely well. And at the other end of the scale, she has moments of great beauty, sweetness, and something rarely seen on the screen nowadays: merriment. How many contemporary actresses, when called upon to display genuine humor and high spirits, can produce more than a plaque-free smile?

Yet before the movie has gotten very far, we realize that this nuanced performance (and that of Kurt Russell as Silkwood's boyfriend) is not going to lead anywhere. The highly textured acting arouses our curiosity, but does not satisfy it with any sort of revelation about Silkwood's reasons for making the choices she did. This might

be all right if the plot held some surprises, but after all, we already know what is going to happen. By the end of the film I began almost to resent Streep's intriguing performance, seeing it as a will-o'-the-wisp intended to lure the audience onward in the absence of any other real suspense. Silkwood's car goes off the road, and we wonder about the circumstances: Was she forced off, or did she simply pass out from all the drugs she had been taking? The film doesn't commit itself to either explanation. But neither does it offer any real insight into her deeper values and motivation, which to me is a more serious kind of waffling.

Of course, filmmakers who must spend two years negotiating with the estate of a real person are not apt to come up with boldly imaginative statements about her character—even if such statements were in cinematic fashion, which they aren't. More likely the person will be portrayed in a superficially flattering light, in a script that sticks to the agreed-upon facts while cloaking the disputed ones in silence or ambiguity. It's a safe course,

but too predictable to provide the stuff of drama.

It's surprising to me that so many critics, columnists, and letter writers have accused this movie of misrepresenting the actual evidence for the sake of a vivid story. I rather think that *Silkwood* does the opposite: It handles the crucial facts so ambiguously, it fails to establish the story's dramatic core. How can we get involved when we don't know for sure who did what, and when our minds are distracted by the clever ways the film tries to insinuate guilt without actually pointing the finger?

Like television network news observing the Fairness Doctrine, *Silkwood* presents the claims of both sides while being formally careful not to conclude anything. As Edward Jay Epstein has pointed out, the aim of the Fairness Doctrine is not to arrive at the

truth, but to achieve "balance." Taken one at a time, TV news reports appear fair because they are balanced in this way. Bias only emerges when we look at the subjects that are selected for coverage. I think this is one reason why defenders of the nuclear industry take exception to *Silkwood*: However technically evenhanded the presentation, the story the film chooses to portray is not representative.

This is not to say that the movie doesn't hint in various ways that Silkwood was right. Most salient is her discovery that one of her superiors is retouching photographs of the plant's product: fuel rods for a breeder reactor in the state of Washington. The fellow claims that he is only blacking out dust spots, but Silkwood reports to the head of her national union that the company is covering up defects. Upon hearing this, the union honcho

whispers that a single defect could lead to a chain reaction that would "wipe out millions of people, maybe even the whole state."

Yet right afterward, the film suggests another explanation for this alarmist remark. The national leadership's concern about safety issues at Kerr-McGee declines as soon as the union wins a recertification election in Silkwood's local. So it's quite possible the honcho was merely playing on Silkwood's fears to make sure she helped get out the vote. This possibility is emotionally reinforced when the honcho's young lawyer starts a love affair with Silkwood, only to drop it as quickly as his boss drops his interest in defective fuel rods, once the election has been won.

Thus the film does its balancing act pretty well. Conflicting versions of events are given about equal time, with neither receiving independent corroboration. The crucial decisions that constitute the action of the story are not made in our purview; we see only the consequences, as when Silkwood sets off the blaring contamination alarms. We feel sorry for her during the brutal scrubdown which leaves her skin raw, and the gutting and stripping of her home. Yet the question of who did it stays unanswered. The plant manager accuses her, while she cannot decide who to accuse—the company, the union, or a fellow worker worried about losing his job. The courts haven't ruled on this one yet, and neither does the film.

The trouble is, allegation-juggling doesn't make for very compelling drama. We know that Silkwood's personal life was unstable; that she left her common-law husband and three children in Texas for the presumably greener pastures of Oklahoma, and had a reputation for drinking, popping pills, and sleeping around. Was she mentally and emotionally capable of assessing the dangers at Kerr-McGee? Or did she succumb to paranoia, exaggerating an already bad situation in order to get attention and act out her antisocial impulses? Because the film makes no effort to clarify these matters, we cannot really empathize, much less make a judgment about this particular woman's strengths and weaknesses.

Likewise Kerr-McGee. Aside from having very lax safety standards for its employees, the company is not shown to be engaged in any explicit wrongdoing. The plant manager is clearly disliked by the workers, but nowhere do we see him plotting, J.R. Ewing style, to block the union or to injure Silkwood. There is only the self-interest of the corporation, expressed

by the local union rep, who says of an early incident in which Silkwood gets blamed for a leak, "What can they do? They can't blame themselves, so they have to blame somebody." But does self-interest automatically lead to murder?

I'm afraid we are now at the heart of the real drama enacted by this film, which is not the particular one transpiring between an unhappy woman and a badly run facility. By obscuring motivation on the part of Silkwood, and action on the part of Kerr-McGee, the film removes the drama from the universe where individuals and corporations may choose between right and wrong. If Silkwood was deliberately contaminated or murdered, it was not, according to this film, a crime in the ordinary sense of the word. Rather it was a kind of fate, the inevitable outcome of any situation in which a large organization possesses power, self-interest, and nuclear technology. Note the generalized terms in which Cano and Hirsch describe their original inspiration: "Back in 1974 we didn't know anything about nuclear power. We just knew it was the stuff you made bombs out of. It opened our eyes and made us determined to tell the story of one woman waging a war against the nuclear industry."

It comes as no surprise, I'm sure, that "nuclear power," i.e., "the stuff you made bombs out of," is the villain instead of Kerr-McGee. The filmmakers may have been keeping an eye out for the corporation's lawyers, but that is not the most important reason why their film omits specific blame. Like the makers of *The Day After*, ABC's TV movie about nuclear war, the people who devised *Silkwood* don't consider specific blame to be relevant. To show a particular bad guy would be to personalize the evil, and suggest that human choice is a contributing factor. That's not the message of these films.

The Day After tells the story of World War III without bothering to depict the events that lead up to it. The makers of *Silkwood* would probably concur with ABC-TV's claim that this was the best way to deal with the subject, by being "apolitical." Which amounts to being amoral as well. By shunting aside the entire question of what decisions were actually made, both films reveal their true assumptions about the subject: that it doesn't matter how responsibly or prudently we employ nuclear technology, because nuclear technology is the Devil. The real message of *Silkwood* is that by splitting the atom, we forfeit both our moral judgment and our free will. There is no right action, once we have signed our names in blood. □

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BOOK REVIEWS

Irving Kristol, the graying guru of neoconservatives, never set foot in Washington until the late 1950s, after he had co-founded *Encounter* magazine with Stephen Spender. Reading his book of essays, *Reflections of a Neoconservative*, makes it clear that Mr. Kristol neither missed nor much liked the pre-Reagan carryings on in our nation's capital. He even finds distasteful some of the action under the current Administration.

Nonetheless, by 1981 Mr. Kristol understood, far better than most Democrats and (I like to hope) most Americans, what Ronald Reagan was up to with his massive tax cuts. In Kristol's view, the new President was determined to "put the welfare state in a moderately tight straitjacket for the rest of the decade at least." He applauds the President for "being bold enough to create a conservative deficit (one resulting from tax cuts) as a counterweight to liberal deficits (resulting from increased government expenditures)." To Mr. Kristol, Mr. Reagan is "just about the only conservative in his administration who appreciates the full ideological significance of his economic policy."

Here, I think Kristol has scored a top-of-the-scale 10 in political perspicacity. On the other hand, too many Democrats have scored three or less for their inability to perceive Reagan's true intentions in time to thwart them.

Kristol claps his hands for Reagan's domestic ideological coup in the same essay that condemns the President's foreign policy as soft:

What single bold action has this administration taken in foreign affairs? None. What single bold ideological affirmation has this administration uttered in foreign affairs? President Reagan occasionally says something that approximates such an affirmation, but the State Department quickly blankets it with an obfuscatory "explanation." Diplomacy becomes a substitute for, rather than a tool of, foreign policy.

Therein—as throughout his later essays—Kristol reveals how misleading the title of his book is. For there is nothing "neo" about him. These

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REFLECTIONS OF A NEOCONSERVATIVE: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING AHEAD

Irving Kristol/Basic Books/\$19.95

Joseph A. Califano, Jr.

essays are the reflections of a full-blooded conservative. Fortunately for Mr. Kristol, the Reagan Administration has so defanged the Federal Trade Commission that there is little, if any, likelihood it will enforce laws against false advertising, much less invoke the Truth-in-Packaging Act of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

Kristol may lack the lifelong card-carrying status of a Richard Viguerie. He is mercifully free of the political buffoonery of Howard Phillips. And he does not subscribe to the ridiculous litmus tests of Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority. But with this book, Irving Kristol puts forth a thesis that entitles him to a doctorate in conservative letters, no "neo" about it.

Kristol's book is extraordinarily well written—a series of sprightly, provocative essays that also display a remarkable versatility of mind and matter. The Cold War, American

higher education, obscenity, foreign policy, economics, politics, art, Judaism, psychoanalysis, Christianity, NATO, Einstein, and socialism are just some of the topics covered. Most of the essays have such pace that, once begun, it's hard to put them down.

The tone of *Reflections* is relentlessly that of the convert who has become purer than the lifelong ideologue, like the born-again Christian who totally eschews things material, or the newly convinced vegetarian who considers it a moral outrage to kill cattle or chickens. Kristol is purer than Reagan, more economically pristine than Martin Feldstein.

Yet, taken with a few grains of salt, there is much for liberals to learn about their own excesses and hypocrisies from Kristol's thirty-year intellectual tour. One only wishes the author had subjected his new-found conservative faith to the same pragmatic harpoons that he so brilliantly directs at the intellectual and

political foibles of American liberals.

Item: In his 1977 essay, "Memoirs of a Trotskyist," Kristol contrasts the radicalism of the thirties, "decidedly an adult movement" in which young people participated, with the radicalism of the sixties, a childish, generational movement. The sixties were "a bewildering and self-destructive tantrum," because we adults failed to transmit adult values to our offspring. Kristol's characterization of this tumultuous period is accurate enough. But he neglects to note that the kids of the sixties got broad-based support that hardcore radicals of the thirties never could muster. Most Americans believed that the draft was forcing millions of young men to risk their lives in a war that had a seemingly insatiable appetite for American blood and gave no adequate return on the investment of our national honor and power.

Item: In his essay on "Pornography, Obscenity and the Case for Censorship," Kristol rightly notes that in order to propound seriously that "no one was ever corrupted by a book, you almost have to believe that no one was ever improved by a book (or a play, or a movie)." With characteristic wit, he notes that "no one, not even a university professor, really believes that." Every civilized society has put some limits on public amusements. I find it remarkable that many of the same liberals who so fervently seek to ban boxing as a public sporting event should place no limit on the human degradation to which they would permit men and women to sink in X-rated films and sex-oriented nightclubs.

Item: In the essay "Urban Civilization and Its Discontents," Kristol punches down the special problems, concentrated poverty, and physical deterioration of large urban centers. Rather, he almost one-dimensionally attributes the decline of the American city to the establishment in America of a moral code that asks not why, but "why not?" For Kristol, it is a "startling absence of values" that is responsible for the urban crisis of our democratic urban nation.

Again and again, Kristol punches holes in Marxist economic and historical theory. He sharply draws the lines between socialist theory and the reality of what's happening in most socialist countries in the world. In economics, Kristol puts all his faith in the capitalist system. I heartily agree.

