

ART «» ENTERTAINMENT



TELEVISION

Speer and sentiment

By Hans Koning

A quartet of neat and sweet looking children is giving a family concert of German chamber music. Parents and grandparents are listening raptly. The telephone rings. Father answers. He puts his coat on. "It's important, I have to go," he tells his wife. "This is important too," she answers miserably, pointing at the children sawing away on their cellos and violins. The front door closes behind him all the same. She exchanges a long look of tortured understanding with her father-in-law.

What is this television cameo about? A wayward married man off once more to see his girlfriend in spite of his promises? No, it's Albert Speer answering a phone call to go and see his Fuehrer, in the middle of World

structuring of American society.

But despite his copyright on the words in the book, the ideas are not Lekachman's personal property. As he puts it himself, they are "generally accepted commonplaces of public policy ... in Scandinavia, Austria, Great Britain, France, Germany, Yugoslavia and Canada." More specifically, they express the spirit and substance of the careful reforms being attempted, with special nuances in each country, by French president Mitterrand and Prime Minister Papandreaou (a Lekachman style economist) in Greece. Lekachman would function superbly as chairperson of a Council of Social and Economic Advisers under Mitterrand, Papandreaou or—if they should ever come to power—a Berlinguer in Italy or a Carrillo in Spain. He would do still better chairing the same agency or the Federal Reserve Board in the U.S. under a President John Conyers, Ron Dellums, William Winpisinger or anyone else brought to the White House by some future program of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

Capitalism revived.

But let us be clear about the agenda. It is *not* socialism, but rather: an updated and more sophisticated version of our old friend, "Saving American capitalism." While it may embody

War II.

The scene is par for the course of the ABC-TV special *Inside the Third Reich*, screened first, in two parts, May 9 and 10 and scheduled to repeat, and advertised as "The true story of Albert Speer." Hitler's architect and later minister of munitions was condemned at Nuremberg to 20 years for his key role in the employment and extinction of slave labor in the German war industries. He spent much of his prison time and the years thereafter until his death in 1981 on writing memoirs which became, as the media lingo has it, "best-selling," and which are the basis of this series.

The series, written and produced by E. Jack Neuman, is a superb example of the trivialization and personalization of history that has become the hallmark of mass media. Great

events are forced into the pattern of pseudo-realistic, banal dramas of daily life, in which we then supposedly recognize ourselves. The rise and fall of Hitler's Germany is, so far, the great drama of this century. The media, though, persistently ignore two essential elements that make dramatization more difficult but also more interesting. First, the foreign policy of the Third Reich was not basically different from that of the Second Reich, the Empire of Kaiser Wilhelm. The *Drang nach Osten*, Germany's manifest destiny to subjugate the Slavs, was as accepted by Chancellor Von Bethmann Hollweg in 1914 as by Hitler and Heydrich in 1939. Second, anti-Semitism was not the basic, inherent crime of that empire. One can imagine a Nazism in which the Jews of the Western nations and Ger-

socialist principles, it is similar to the efforts of European socialist and social democratic parties to humanize capitalism, thereby dulling the edge of exploitation while postponing full socialization of the major means of production and worker participation in basic decision-making. Older efforts along these lines were aptly analyzed in Michael Harrington's chapter on "socialist capitalism" in Europe (*Socialism*, 1970). In third world countries, many leaders of "modernization" drives still follow Nehru's example of moving toward capitalist agriculture and industry under the banner of socialism. We may even go back to Lenin himself, who in the unique context of Russia in 1921 called for state capitalism to prepare for a transition to socialism. Mitterrand's and Papandreaou's opponents, of course, do not hesitate to brand the Lekachman program for France and Greece as a transition to totalitarianism. This reminds me of the anguish of the big business dinosaurs who in 1936 attacked FDR's social security program as the road to godless communism. The fact that dinosaurs still roam the capitalist jungle demonstrates only the longevity of this species. It does not make them any more convincing when they use similar exaggerations in attacking the socialist or social

democratic wing of the Democratic Party or the still larger number of people eager to tame the business cycle. Similarly, drug addicts and alcoholics often lash out against friends or therapists trying to save them from self-destruction. By encouraging the self-indulgent greed of the truly rich, Reaganomics encourages this tendency. It will therefore create new crises in the life not only of the poor, the unemployed, the underemployed and the huge white-and-blue working class but also of banking and industrial dinosaurs.

In Europe it takes no heroism to wrap a program of reforming capitalism in socialist clothing. Since the days when Bismarck let LaSalle out of prison and used LaSalle's socialism as the inspiration for Germany's welfare state, socialism has always been on the agenda. Above all, it has been made respectable by strong Communist parties and ultra-left revolutionaries who confer respectability on official Communist parties.

In the U.S., the bastion of a purer capitalism unsullied by past centuries of feudalism, these political requirements for structural reform of the system do not—at least as yet—exist. Salvation in the future is more likely to come from the arms race (which bolsters part of the system while weakening others), ef-

orts to maintain "free world" hegemony and creeping corporatism—not from a DSA that might present serious candidates of its own in presidential or senatorial elections. Under these circumstances American socialists, knowing that they cannot talk much heroic socialism in organizing red-white-and-blue community people or workers, may some day come out in the open on their willingness to reform, even manage, capitalism. This does not require hiding behind some semantic smokescreen. Rather it requires a recognition of dialectical complexity—particularly the probability that a temporarily successful reform movement might lengthen the system's life expectancy or spark counter-reformist reaction along the lines of friendly or unfriendly authoritarianism—or help provide new sinews for whatever coalition of power is needed for the perilous transition to some new form of socialism. Lekachman, I am sure, would accept this challenge.

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many were accepted as "honorary Aryans" and the Jews of Poland and Russia were seen as Poles and Russians. Jews were number one on the extinction list in terms of proportion to total population, but Gypsies (one million of them killed) were number two. Poles (five million killed) number three. Russians were four, Czechs five and the members of such chosen races as the Dutch and the Norwegians, once they had shown themselves unwilling and unworthy, came six and seven.

The inherent crime of the Third Reich was war, a war that killed at least 35 million people and left us with rockets, atom bombs and the basic confrontation of the U.S. and the USSR.

The two points are crucial in showing a life of Speer. Point one means that the Third Reich, at least until the attack on Russia had bogged down for good and the RAF started its mass raids, was a seemingly orderly state. There was no glaring discontinuity with the past. The middle and upper classes lived well, the wartime shortages taken care of by the plunder of Europe, the concentration and extermination camps tucked out of sight. Every letter written by a German in those years was signed, "With German Greetings, Heil Hitler," although those same millions felt they showed their independence of spirit with after-dinner jokes about Goering and Goebbels. A handful of underground heroes

By ignoring history, this TV special misses the drama too.

and heroines were hunted and hanged, but there was no confrontation within.

So a realistic show of life in the Germany of that time would not be visibly all that different from life under the Kaiser or from life in other middle-European countries, and somebody who made good in it, as Speer did, would be envied and applauded rather than frowned upon by friends and parents. It is a reality very unlike our media cliché of a bunch of raving maniacs who bent millions of nice Germans to their wills, a cliché the writer-producer of this series has eagerly embraced. The second point means that the criminality of the Third Reich must be demonstrated by showing that it was aiming for war. It wasn't doing things that might make war inevitable. It wanted war. To translate this into images on a screen is more difficult than to show SA-men painting swastikas on the windows of Jewish shops. E. Jack Neuman stuck with such well-known scenes of anti-Semitism rampant. But showing us that Speer did not participate is not showing us that he was no real "Nazi" (a word that was not in German usage in those days, contrary to the film). It simply shows that he wasn't an unemployed redneck who might have enjoyed such activities. With Speer neither a raving maniac nor a nice German, Neuman had a hard time finding daily dramatic conflict. He tried to solve his problem by such phony confrontations as a nurse berating Frau Speer for not subscribing to the scurrilous weekly *Der Stuermer* (an unthinkable scene) and by making us feel that Speer, one of the most powerful men in the country, lived a threatened existence. Scowling SS-men follow him down to the very delivery room of the maternity hospital and Martin Bormann (a real Nazi, he) seems ready to send him off to Mauthausen every time he lays eyes on him. The poignancy of Speer's fate is further shown by such scenes as that interrupted chamber music concert and various interrupted lunches and dinners. Working for the Fuehrer was as bad as commuting on the Long Island Railroad. And whenever Speer (played by the striking-looking Dutch actor Rutger Hauser) meets an unpleasant situation, such as the looting after the 1938 "Kristallnacht" pogrom (The TV Speer has no idea what it is all about), he looks stage left in a kind of Paul Newman wide-eyed *Exodus* stare, in confusion it would seem rather than either approval or anger. Neuman tells us he spent "hundreds of hours" talking with Speer before doing his script. It is hard to imagine what they talked about, since not a breeze of insight stirs the clichés. Perhaps the series would have come across easier if it had been titled, "How I was Hitler's Slave Labor Minister but Saved my Marriage." Readers' Digest films might have picked up some of the tab. Why do our purveyors of mass entertainment grapple with history, if all they want from it is material for one more soap opera? Hans Koning's latest novel is *The Kleber Flight*.



Jo (Wood Moy) plays private eye, hunting for his money and his friend.

Photographer unknown

INDEPENDENT FEATURES

The mystery of the missing identity

By Pat Aufderheide

Every more-than-casual filmgoer is used to giving "first features" special dispensation. You don't look forward to a seamless hypnotic experience that will whisk you away from it all. Instead you hunt for the signs of energy, intelligence and drive (matched by reasonable indications of technical competence) that suggest a new talent.

So it seems almost unfair that *Chan Is Missing* is a first feature. This modern mystery set in San Francisco's Chinatown is so intriguing and punchy that it doesn't need any favors. Nor does it call for the critical leniency that "This movie was made for \$20,000" could be expected to bring. (*Northern Lights* cost \$330,000; *Girlfriends* half a million; *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* \$67,000.)

Its unusual qualities haven't gone unnoticed. It was the hit of the Los Angeles Film Exposition (Filmex, see sidebar), and then swept audiences away at the New Directors series in New York. Suddenly the prestigious New Yorker Films picked up a black-and-white first feature by a Chinese-American film student and community organizer, and began working out a national distribution plan.

"I couldn't afford to pay the actors and other people who worked on the film," the sud-

denly successful director Wayne Wang told *In These Times*. He had financed the film with American Film Institute and National Endowment for the Arts grants. "But now, because they worked for a percentage of any profits, they all stand to make more than they would have otherwise."

Chan Is Missing is not just a good suspense film about a disappearance, and a rare success story among American independent features. It's also the first feature to make it nationally that gives an insider's perspective on Chinese-American life. And that has made a lot of people nervous, including Chinatown resi-

Racial stereotypes and gumshoe-movie cliches are played off against the realities of life in Chinatown.

dents. Some of them suspect Wang is "a communist"; and other accuse him of being a sell-out to mainstream values.

Wang denies both versions. But he knows why the film raises hackles on its home turf. "The

film was calculated to respond to stereotypes of the Chinese," he said. "You know them—passive, resourceful, hard-working, yellow peril, sly, sexless. Because the film shows the life of the community it becomes extremely

political, even for the Chinese."

Chan steers away from what Wang calls the "ugly" side of Chinese-American life—sensational headline-grabbers like the tong wars, for instance. But he can't have been much tempted to dwell on them in any case. His subject matter is the question of Chinese-American identity. Sensational events and stereotyped images are, for him, mere clues to deeper problems.

His vehicle for exploring the question of social identity is the problem that the Chinese-American hero and narrator, Jo, has. What has happened to his friend Chan Hung, recently arrived

Fest fosters the offbeat

The chance for *Chan Is Missing* to find a festival audience was no small part of its success story. As much as the New Directors series is on the east coast, Filmex is a solid launching platform for independent film work on the west coast.

The film festival began in 1971 in a virtual vacuum of film culture. At that time Los Angeles, a city where film means business, had almost no "art houses" and lacked a community of filmgoers interested in the experimental, the offbeat, the foreign or the just-plain-not-Saturday-night-

date-film fare. Founder-director Gary Essert made it a non-competitive festival for audiences—a smorgasbord of film offerings from production around the world in the previous year—more than a trade center for film buyers and sellers (like the Cannes and Berlin film festivals) or a preview of art films most likely to succeed on the national circuit (as some have characterized the sleek, highly selective New York film festival).

By this time, Filmex has established the nub of a filmgoing community in Los Angeles, and

it operates in an environment where a couple dozen theaters in the area show non-studio fare throughout the year. It has also carved out some special constituencies. It has become, among other things, a good place to see independent American filmmakers' work and for filmmakers to exchange information.

This March among the films shown were the political-subject documentaries *The Atomic Cafe* (*In These Times*, May 5); *Anarchism in America?* (see accompanying review); *American Pictures*, a four-and-a-half hour expose of poverty by a Danish visitor; and *Americas in Transition* (*In These Times*, March 31). The often-slighted social documentary genre was in evidence. *Family Business*, possibly the best of the *Middletown* series shown on PBS (*In These Times*, June 2) was shown on its own, and Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams*, about the making of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* in the midst of indigenist and oil politics in the Peruvian jungle, made it to the screen in work-

print form. Such independent features as Paul Bartel's savage comedy *Eating Raoul* also showed, as well as several musical documentaries.

For filmmakers it was more than a chance to see movies. Filmex co-sponsored, with the Independent Feature Project, an all-day how-to seminar on independent film financing. And the festival was timed to occur with the American Film Market, a separate trade festival that some independents attended, happy to save the cost of a trip to Cannes or Berlin to hawk their product.

After film showings, audiences flocked to lively discussion sessions with filmmakers. These sessions highlighted how eager audiences are to see special interest films, and to see films that don't fit a lowest-common-denominator entertainment mold. In that light it is as chilling as the next dismal piece of financial news to hear that Filmex, like many other film festivals, is going through hard times financially. Talk of a closer cooperation with the San Francisco Film Festival—timing the two together, for instance, to share such expenses as travel costs for visiting filmmakers—offers some hope. —P.A.

Sylvia

by Nicole Hollander

