

the United States at the headquarters of Mobutu before the coup is noted by a tight shot of a diplomatic license plate with an American flag. While Lumumba's actual death at the hands of his African enemies gave the United States what would later be termed plausible deniability, the 1975 release of the Church Committee's investigation into the activities of the CIA revealed that the agency's director Allen Dulles termed Lumumba another Castro. And as with Castro, the CIA formulated plots to kill the Congolese leader, dispatching one agent to Leopoldville with poison that could be placed in Lumumba's toothpaste.

The rage of Africans against the forces of colonization and how the colonizers were often able to divide the Congolese is apparent in the film. And this rage is captured in the film's violence, which is reminiscent of the ideas put forward by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. A regeneration through violence is suggested in the film's opening credits and in its concluding scene. Still photographs of Western colonizers exploiting Africa's resources and brutalizing its people provide a graphic background for the opening credits, while the film concludes with two Europeans dismembering the corpse of Lumumba and burning his remains. As the fire destroys what is left of Lumumba's body, the screen is soon engulfed by the fire, evoking the idea that the flames ignited by Lumumba and other third world patriots will someday burn brightly and lead us into a better world. Yet, whether we are approaching this brave new world in sub-Saharan Africa remains most problematic today. Although Mobutu has been toppled, genocide, political instability, AIDS, and continuing economic exploitation remain the legacies of colonialism.

Westerners and particularly Americans need to better understand how the Cold War and policies of interventionism have antagonized and subjugated many people in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The life and death of Patrice Lumumba is an important part of this story and deserves to be told. Though well-intentioned, Peck's political film fails to provide this understanding. While viewers of Lumumba are left with a sense of anger and betrayal, this emotional response is divorced from any clear comprehension or explanation of the political and economic motives for Lumumba's murder. Lumumba is portrayed as a martyr in the film, but a martyr to what cause is less than clear.

In a world that seems increasingly driven by emotional responses, an understanding of root causes is essential. Rather than simply waving the flag, we need to consider why so many in the world perceive the United States as a power thwarting political, economic, and cultural independence. Unfortunately, filmmaker Raoul Peck has missed an opportunity to better educate the American public and the West as to these root causes and perceptions.—**Ron Briley**

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# SHORT TAKES

## **Advertising and the End of the World**

This lively, provocative video takes the form of a richly illustrated lecture on the ideology of advertising, particularly American television commercials. The man in the foreground is Sut Jhally, Professor of Communication at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and director of *Dreamworlds*, a celebrated critique of MTV. For approximately forty minutes, Jhally presents a precise, perceptive analysis of advertising's impact on culture, explicating the ways in which its narratives and values define our ideas about happiness, society, and the future. His rush of insight is fascinating: advertising is a passport to a magical world in which products perform miracles and fulfill human desires; advertising colonizes new spaces every day (print media, feature films, sports events, the Internet, elementary schools); advertising corrupts society's values by marginalizing social issues and celebrating narcissism; in its insistence on the consumption of vast numbers of objects, the effects of advertising threaten to deplete the world's natural resources and precipitate a global crisis of apocalyptic proportions by the year 2070. The video is especially compelling when Jhally describes the captivating aspects of advertising, its ability to conjure up worlds in which 'winter becomes summer, a simple shampoo brings intense sexual pleasure, and all women become young, offering beer and sex to young men.' While somewhat more forced when asserting advertising's debilitating long-term ramifications and our generation's responsibility for the future ('What stands are we willing to take?' he asks rhetorically over famous footage of a lone protestor confronting a tank in Tiananmen Square), it makes a powerful appeal for resistance to a pervasive assault that has become increasingly violent and sexual in order to compete in an overcrowded marketplace. Seldom clichéd in its arguments, it turns a cold eye on the rhetoric of commercials that, at its best, can help fuel a shift in social consciousness. (Distributed by The Media Education Foundation, 26 Center Street, Northampton, Massachusetts 01060, phone 1 (800) 897-0089)—**Janet Cutler**

## **Children Underground**

Edet Belzberg's documentary is a harrowing portrait of Romania's street children. Shot on video, its bleak aesthetic and unsparring camera recall the intimate, almost voyeuristic, approach found in the work of Albert and David Maysles. *Children Underground* begins with a prologue offering a brief historical framework for the current tragedy. In an effort to increase the nation's workforce, Nicolai Ceausescu, Romania's longtime Communist leader, outlawed contraception and abortion—a devastating social policy that resulted in 20,000 homeless children. Five are profiled here. Sixteen-year-old Christina, a hardened street kid, is a product of the State's ill-funded orphanage system. Macarena, at fourteen, already a destitute addict, was abandoned as a child. Twelve-year-old Mihai, a remarkably astute youngster, is a runaway from an abusive home. And ten-year-old Ana and brother Marian, eight, are victims of impoverished and negligent parents. They all live

in Bucharest's Piata Victoriei subway station, an underground sanctuary for the city's homeless youth. Malnourished and bereft of hope, their only visible means of escape is Auroloc, a toxic metal paint, inhaled through plastic bags, that induces euphoria and suppresses hunger. Readily available from local hardware stores, they beg, steal, and lie to obtain it. What ultimately distinguishes this film from similar fare is Belzberg's refusal to sentimentalize or estheticize the children's condition. Ostensibly a humanitarian effort to bring their immediate situation to public consciousness, the film clearly acknowledges the failed policies of Ceausescu and the hasty transition to a free-market economy while suggesting a deeper, more entrenched malaise that implicates the entire nation—from subway riders who hurriedly brush past the kids to shopkeepers who wittingly dispense the Auroloc, from social workers mired in lethargy and bureaucracy to parents whose apathy is simply heart wrenching. (Distributed by Belzberg Films, 169 West 73rd St., New York, New York 10023, phone (212) 579-6988)—**Ryan Krivoshey**

## **Fighter**

Amir Bar-Lev's film centers on an emotionally turbulent journey undertaken by two elderly Czech Holocaust survivors and friends—a writer, Arnost Lustig (*Diamonds of the Night*) and a professor, Jan Weiner. It retraces the perilous escape route taken by the courageous Weiner when he fled the Nazis and ultimately reached London, where he became a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force. Lustig and Weiner's personalities are utterly mismatched. Lustig, whose adolescence was spent in Auschwitz and who joined the Czech Communist Party after the war, is imaginative, impish, and accepting of the ambiguities and complexities of history, while Weiner is severe, rigid, and unable to give up his rage about past horrors. The film's depiction of their alternately humorous and angry sparring tends to be a bit self-indulgent but acutely registers the evanescent nature of memory—Weiner discovering that many of the people who helped him flee the Nazis no longer recall who he is. Profound in its representation of the two men's differing perspectives on the past, it does not take sides—viewing both Lustig's ironic, tolerant, comic vision and Weiner's unforgiving, confrontational and heroic attitude as equally valuable. *Fighter* is a surprising work, providing an original angle on a subject that at times feels overexposed on film. (Distributed by First Run Features, 153 Waverly Place, 6th Floor, New York, NY 10014, phone (212) 243-0600)—**Leonard Quart**

## **Jung: In The Land of the Mujaheddin**

'Jung' means 'war' in the Dari language—specifically the Afghan War between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance led by Rabbani, last president of the country after the fall of the pro-Soviet Najibullah in 1992, and his military commander, the recently-assassinated Ahmed Massoud. Fabrizio Lazzaretti and Alberto Vendenmiati's film follows an Italian reporter and an Italian-English-

Kurdish medical team as they rebuild a front-line hospital in Charikar and a clinic in Anobah. Utterly primitive conditions improve to very basic. Children, the most poignant victims of land mines and other war wounds, innocently describe their devastated lives; women recount the torment of begging for their families. The medical team, dedication somehow mastering fatigue, continues to recruit staff and treat the injured. Regrettably, despite wrenching scenes of operations and interviews, there is almost no suggestion of the political context surrounding this conflict. Russia and the United States are barely mentioned; the oil of Central Asia, not at all. There is no comparison of conditions under various Afghan regimes. War is horribly bad, and one has to agree. Women tell us they hate the chador, wearing it in fear of Taliban retaliation. People tell of Taliban taxes on travelers. But doctrinal differences are not explained. A Northern Alliance fighter informs us that the Taliban enemy are servants of Pakistan and the US. But why the war? This film offers no answers. With American bombs killing yet more civilians, answers are needed now more than ever. (Distributed by Facets Multimedia, 1517 Fullerton Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, phone (800) 331-6197)—**Grover Furr**

## **Live Nude Girls Unite!**

The exotic dancers of San Francisco's Lusty Lady, including codirector and stand-up comic Julia Query, grow disillusioned with poor working conditions and decide to unionize in order to be recognized as legitimate workers worthy of job stability and respect. Query and Vicky Funari's documentary recounts the women's lengthy, emotionally involving struggle that results in increased benefits, a sense of having triumphed against the odds, and against the ridicule of those unable to see beyond the spectacle of on-stage nudity. The film astutely recognizes sex work as a fault line in contemporary feminism and considers the strippers' battles for respect the equivalent of 1960s activism. In one of the best visual touches, a cartoon creates a match on action, and implicit political unity, between a scruffy bra burner and a present-day stripper. The attempt to embrace sex workers as keepers of the feminist flame, and the women of the Lusty Lady as models of the ideal of unionization, is laudable. Unfortunately, the filmmakers' simplistic, amateur-night esthetics do not help their political cause; noticeably abysmal sound and nonsensicaly bizarre camera placements detract from the larger story. The film resembles nothing so much as a distinctly second-rate episode of VH1's *Behind the Music*, complete with slow-motion pans across court papers and other visual filler. Query also uses her mother as a source of drama, cruelly exploiting her mother's ignorance of her profession as a means of advancing the plot. If one can see beyond these shortcomings, however, there is a valuable lesson about how to form a society in which all of its members, sex workers included, are treated with dignity and respect, and are paid a living wage. (Distributed by First Run Features, 153 Waverly Place, New York, New York, 10014; phone (800) 229-8575)—**Saul Austerlitz**