

**LEO HURWITZ**  
**THE MUSEUM AND THE FURY 1956**  
**Remembering The Dangers Of Fascism**

**By Sandra E. Cohen**

Forgetting is a dangerous thing. Yet, we sometimes forget when remembering is too painful. Because we can't, or don't want to, remember, history repeats itself. Freud knew this well when he discovered the repetition compulsion. But, I think the endnote of Leo Hurwitz's *The Museum and The Fury* is the best reason for remembering. If we forget: "History is the echo of an angry scream."

Leo Hurwitz was meticulous about truth. He never forgot, even when the immediacy of the horrors of WWII were behind us. He knew (and he would see the dangers now in 2017) that many in our country needed something to remind them of the risks of complacency and denial.

In 1955, a man in Poland, associated with the Polish Information Center, contacted Leo and asked if he wanted to make a film about fascism and Nazism. Leo was ready: "It seemed to me it was necessary because there was a forgetting ... we'd won the war. The Cold War had come into being, and the meaning of fascism had begun to dissolve away." He decided the theme of *The Museum and the Fury* had to be about memory.

### **Museums As Memory**

Museums are places to remember history, to see history in a new way and not to forget. For Leo, it made sense that the nucleus of this new film would be the Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, a memorial and museum in Oświęcim, Poland. This museum includes the German concentration camps, Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau, which the German's called simply Auschwitz.

Contained within *The Museum and The Fury* are many different images of Eyes. We see them again and again. This too makes sense. Seeing is a critical part of the capacity to remember and Eyes are a repeated image in many of Leo's films.

As Leo began his work on *The Museum and The Fury*, he mused: "The event had passed ... [but] what was the reality of those events.... how do you hold memory as real? From that idea came the idea of the museum as literally a form of memory; an objective form of memory; the idea of museums and art as remembering the life of man; the experience of Nazism as an experience of memory. Memory is affected by all kinds of things ... by what you have in your

brain, by dreams, by talk, by poetry, by painting, by a vase that is broken, a shard. Anything can be a form of memory so long as it has truth in it.”

## The Film

When *The Museum and The Fury* had its first showing in 1956, the audience sat unmoving and silent after the credits. Murmurs arose out of that silence and people began to talk about the film’s importance. Yet, Leo couldn’t get the film distributed. Some people don’t want to see the truth and they use their powers to block it. We need to build monuments of memory to a history whose shadow falls over us, even now, in the hate-speak of our new American president. We need to memorialize the past so it does not happen again.

## Seeing

*The Museum and The Fury* opens with hymnal singing. We see the credits: Script written by Leo Hurwitz. Narration written by Thomas McGrath, a politically left poet whose compelling 405 - page poem, *Letter To An Imaginary Friend*, I recently read. Not surprisingly, Leo and Tom McGrath were friends and, in this film, we have Leo’s poetic vision and a poet’s words.

McGrath’s narration begins: “Now as in the green and legendary past, man builds monuments to himself. Here a dream went by and its stone shadow remains.” We see statues in stone and faces in drawings.

McGrath’s poetic voice speaks to us: “All people have done this ... *introducing ourselves to each other*. All people, all ages, have done this, for we are all travelers together through the stations of time and the world. *Different, we are alike. Humanity is not a category in a textbook but a kinship of shared experiences.*”

We need to know our shared experience: “This the museum remembers.” Images. Faces in mosaics, children’s art; faces, human faces; different and, at once, the same: “*We are all one family under the skin of our names ... across the bridge of the eyes we see each others’ strangeness which is then no longer strange.*” Images: here in the museum of memory. Eyes. Leo’s films always focus on Eyes. He knew that we must see - to remember our commonality.

## Remembering

Artists help us remember how we are the same: “It is a kinship we have revealed to ourselves through the ... hand and visionary eye of our artists, for *art is man’s way of remembering his experiences and his dreams ...* It is this common

humanity we remember in our museums ... [artists] are silent witnesses of our labor, our hardship, our victories, our defeats.”

*The Museum and the Fury* takes us back to the most extreme and bitter desecration: “This, the museum remembers.” And, we enter the Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, once a concentration camp.

McGrath’s words act as docent: “We come to this museum to remember that man the creator can also be man the destroyer. In that *kingdom of terror, ovens and chimneys discovered a different potential*. Barbed wire changed the language of meaning. The guards ... demons of this particular circle of the Nazi inferno.”

We tour the museum with Leo’s camera. We see the faces of guards and prisoners in actual photos and in art; the prisoners, “for whom the small principles of daily life were redesigned.” These prisoners; imprisoned because of their differences not their similarities.

We tour the museum. We see prisoners depicted in a painting skeletal, emaciated, starved. We see the faces of museum-goers, looking through cell bars, now part of the horror. We, the audience, are in those cells with emaciated, naked prisoners (depicted in photos). These are the prisoners who had their dignity; their hope, their lives - everything - stripped away.

Images come on the screen. News footage. Nazis march through the city with their swastikas. McGrath’s words remind us of the ways that Hitler’s doctrine of hate caused divisions and dehumanization. With his words, McGrath narrates what happened and what we must not forget:

“It began with a doctrine of pure people and mongrel people ... in 1939, the German’s came to Poland and the long hunt was on. It began with searches and islands of resistance. They arrested union members because they were organized. They arrested intellectuals because they had the power of the word. They used terror to create terror. An intricate system began to appear. *People were divided from people and the Jews were herded to new ghettos and branded with stars*. A new order arose, a system of forced labor. This, too, the museum remembers ...”

Images. We see Jews herded into cattle cars; old women threatened and mistreated: “Trains [pull] into stations; midnight arrivals of the walking dead; the destruction of families; noon day terror and midnight unrest.” Images. Men lined up; their mouths taped, waiting to be shot: “lucky is the hero whose death came quick in the dark cellars.”

Some survived.

## Surviving

McGrath's words speak as those that wouldn't give up: "*Now in the awful cold of that country, our common humanity driven out of us, we began to forget we were people.* So we labored and labored to survive ... against the Nazi's, against their cold system of terror; something was being born. We fought with what arms we had stolen, with our hands, with our blood, we fought in the streets, in the houses, in the incandescent rooms where we had loved. We were shot down, burned out ... and in the economics of terror, nothing was without value; hair of women; toys; wooden legs ... the oppressor was a thrifty people."

Some refused to be their victims: "To survive was a victory and some of us survived." American Armed Forces released the prisoners in 1945. Some went home. Yet, for those who fought to survive, what was the cost? Leo's camera shows us. Images. Footage.

We see prisoners walking out of the camps: children, frozen, moving stiffly out into the snow. A woman in black is crying. There are the dead, everywhere: "a whole continent with a floor of corpses under it. In the end, the oppressor ... left ten million shoes with no place to go; and he left the gas chambers, the terrible tool of his craft." We took them to trial for their monstrous crimes.

## Trials And Denials

McGrath's words continue to speak in the voice of those oppressed: "We tried the guards because we must remember the nightmare of our experience as we remember our long dream towards freedom. *We couldn't understand them. They looked human like us. But these had accepted themselves as part of the elect; denied the humanity and made man into a thing, an object for use.*"

"This too the museum remembers." Images. The laughing faces of murderers; the arrogant belief they did the right thing. At the Nuremberg trials, we hear over and over: "I consider myself not guilty." We hear it from Rudolf Hess, from Wilhelm Keitel, from others. "In the end, no one it seemed was guilty. Accidentally, forty million were dead. No one remembered his guilt."

McGrath's powerful voice goes on: "We buried our dead in the last of our weeping in the remembering earth, turned to the alien streets of our broken cities, wreckage of memories where nightmare had passed and his shadow was

burned on the stone. How do you start to build a city out of broken stone – a wreckage of what you knew? Plan the impossible.”

How do we reconcile ourselves with the Truth: the impossible already happened.

### **Re-claiming Life**

Each move of restoration is a remembering: “ ... at last reclaiming our history, building with our own hands, we saw our human potential. We found again the continuity the artists had told us before of creative labor ... freed our powers and drew us once more to deep sources of life.” Leo’s camera shows us hopeful images in the midst of the remains of a defiling war.

Images. We see a bird soaring. Smiling men with hammers and tools rebuild the city. Under sunny skies, children smile, men carve a stone gargoyle; mothers walk contentedly with their babies. There is school for children who have never known terror. Medical and nursing students learn “the old art of healing where before there had been only wounds.”

There is no longer the terror or oppression of war; no more soldiers in the streets; no more shelters to retreat from bombs. This is a time for dancing. Men and women, dancers and dancing troops – dance in the freedom to move their bodies without fear.

Javelin throwing, swimming, and track are the dance of sports. Children hold hands in a circle with their teacher; other children wave from trains on the way to summer camp “where happiness is circular and repeatable ... there is time now for the young; for sea charmed sailors (and young lovers); time for the flying man in his high and lonely joy.”

This is the celebration of victory. Yet, darkness and danger is not as far behind us as we wish. It lives in the survivors. It lurks in the hearts of would-be oppressors. We see a sign: “Arbeit Mache Frei - work sets you free.” This was the slogan used for Auschwitz, a part of the trickery. So: “in the time of peace and long forgetting, it is necessary to remember, to go back....”

### **Crying With Open Eyes**

*The Museum and The Fury* takes us back to what the Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau remembers: “Tears for the weeping of nations and times. War ... the maker of orphans.” We see images: of a naked woman, left, emaciated,

abandoned, dead in the snow; of children holding out empty plates: Vigil candles are lit with tears.

Leo Hurwitz knew we must grieve - if what happened is not to happen again. And to grieve, we must remember: “Stations of the nightmare, endless Auschwitz, tears for the hungry, tears for all enslaved or in exile ... tears for the innocent and injured in courtrooms of the mighty ... Litany of pain and struggle against the makers of evil; captive of ice and fire under the Eye of time.”

We see images of eyes - OPEN eyes - eyes that see and do not forget.

*The Museum and The Fury* ends with the mushroom clouds of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and these words: “No, we will not endure it ... plain people, giants, this is our challenge. Must we finish in fire? In one hundred centuries of struggle? We will not endure it again. Consider, as you go out in your many distractions. Remember: the past still lives in our hands. And the world is reborn each day in the shape of our love.”

Love means never forgetting the horrors and tyrannies of fascism. Leo’s voice is the voice of now: “We need to hold onto the evanescent disappearing past.”