

LEO HURWITZ
STRANGE VICTORY 1948
Hate: Its Tenacity and Its Purpose

By Sandra E. Cohen

Leo Hurwitz's powerful 1948 WWII documentary with its ironic title *Strange Victory* explores this question: "If we won, why do we look as if we lost? And, if Hitler died, why does his voice still pursue us through the spaces of America's life?" It is a very strange victory to be sure – when we successfully fight the violent effects of discrimination and persecution in Germany but come home to open expressions of hate in our own country. Why can't we seem to solve it? Leo's film gives us vital clues to hate's tenacity as well as what purpose hating people who seem different than us can serve.

Love For The Rights Of Our Fellow Man?

Love for our fellow man is a human thing. According to Ingela Romare, Swedish cinematographer, filmmaker, and actress: "Leo Hurwitz makes us aware of our common humanity and our responsibility for what happens to our fellow beings in this world."

This responsibility we shouldn't forget, yet sometimes we do. *Strange Victory* reminds us. The film begins with Joe, a WWII veteran, looking through an album where he's put his memories of war: "a memory of danger in sunlight, a memory of not enough sleep; of not enough replacement ... a memory of not enough and too much."

Suddenly, we are with Joe, in the midst of war - in a flashback.

Joe crawls on his belly holding a gun with grenades exploding around him. We see a fallen man tended by a medic; soldiers do their work; the sky is filled with parachutes. A plane crashes. A man kisses a crying woman's face; an old woman, shivers, trudging through snow; four women hold each other as they walk through a war-torn, bombed out city.

These are the faces of war.

We see soldiers running across fields; explosions; the black cloud of a bomb that has just gone off, buildings in flames; and more - a multitude of bombs falling through air to destruction – and a building, many buildings; a bridge; coming apart and collapsing into pieces.

As brutal and traumatic as war always is, it isn't completely senseless. WWII had its reasons:

"We attacked. This country and its allies attacked in the name of four freedoms: freedom from want; freedom from fear; freedom to speak; freedom to believe. We hit hard ... In the name of four freedoms, we scourged the enemy in his homeland with more fire and fury than the world had ever seen. We closed in until we ringed him in his last fortress."

Fighting Against Hate

Hate. That's why we closed in on Hitler and his Nazism. But, exactly what hate did we fight in 1945 Berlin? *Strange Victory*'s narrator tells us. Berlin was:

"The heart of the idea that all men are created *unequal*."

Hate makes people feel superior. We fought this hate in Germany; and we fought it in Europe. (We forgot it still existed in America)

We invaded Berlin in 1945. We see Leo's film images. American and allied soldiers run through the destroyed city with guns, dodging explosions. An old woman, dressed in black coat, is frantic, surrounded by the rubble of a falling city. She runs in terror. These soldiers are after Hitler; the enemy of human freedom; the enemy of differences in religion and race.

Our narrator's voice continues to speak: "Remember those games you played as a kid? Treasure Hunt? Button, Button, who's got the button? A game of clues, they are playing it for real this time, looking for one man; *that* man. They moved from house to house, getting hotter; getting closer; the biggest manhunt in history."

An American soldier holds a line-up of captured Nazi soldiers at gunpoint; hands in the air. We are in the Chancellery. We see remnants of Hitler's plotting, an office with a very large globe. Hitler's megalomaniac plan to take over the world:

"But we never found him; probably dead; he disappeared from the eyes of the world as he'd entered it in smoke and fire like a magician ... like the devil. No eclipse of the sun ever made the earth darker than he made it."

We see an image of the face of Hitler superimposed on a backdrop of a city; a harbor; Hitler's face haunting the screen: "In the Chancellery of the Reich in

the spring of 1945, he disappeared. That was yesterday. But why does yesterday wander through today like a ghost?"

The Shadow Of Hate

Yesterday's ghost, *Strange Victory* shows us, exists in a hypocrisy living on American soil. We will soon see that hypocrisy in the not so subtle nooks and cranny's of American life, when we return home, in film images, after WWII has been won.

First, though, we see worried, war weary faces. A young mother carries a naked baby as she emerges up the steps of a bomb shelter, weighed down by the horror of war; her slow steps much older than her years.

The narrator's voice tells us a living truth: "A fear runs through this country, a worrying ... it spreads from face to face, a sickness of fear ... we live like a man holding his breath against what may happen tomorrow. We feel haunted in broad daylight, sure of nothing but trouble."

War is traumatic and terrifying. It creates all around insecurities. But, there is a different, just as real and persistent trouble outside of war in America. *Strange Victory* soon shows us that trouble: the persistence of racism and anti-Semitism in everyday American life. We fought it abroad, but we live with it at home, hidden from those who choose not to see. We see it, though, in Leo Hurwitz's powerful images.

Sure, there were victory celebrations after we won WWII; happy reunions, and people waving the American flag; there was even dancing in the streets. Our narrator asks: "Think back, was there ever a hope that flared higher than mid-summer 1945?" Yet, this hope was, in large part, illusory.

If we look more closely through Leo's humane eyes, we see "Nigger" written in chalk across a wall; a bloodied and beaten Black man held hostage by a smiling white man; we see shadows of the Klu Klux Klan. At the end of World War II, we still had Lawrence Dennis advocating fascism in America; Gerald L. K. Smith of the pro-Nazi Silver Shirts; Homer Loomis and Emory Burke of the pro-Nazi group named Columbians, in Atlanta, Georgia. We still had stickers pasted on walls: "Help Save America: Don't Buy From Jews."

Graffiti is chalked on a wall: "Niggers Ruin This Town." In Boston, 1948, a temple window with a Star of David is shattered. In Bayside, Long Island, 1944, an Episcopal Church is defiled. In Detroit, 1943 and Chicago, 1947, religious

cemeteries are vandalized. There is a lynching. Hate sheets such as The Gentile News promote propaganda headlines: “Jewish Plot to take over the U.S.!”

We are faced everywhere with discrimination and inequality if we only see it. Perhaps we have forgotten ... that we've pushed aside and marginalized some, beginning in the nurseries where innocent babies are born.

Discrimination: Strange “Birthright” For Some

In one powerful film sequence, Leo Hurwitz and *Strange Victory* show us more about what was still happening in America after our war overseas against hate.

We are in a hospital nursery. Innocent newborn babies; Black, white, Jewish, Catholic are being bathed and fed, moving in those peaceful new baby stretches in a not yet known space; trusting that the world is theirs.

Yet bigotry is waiting for them. We hear: Nigger, Kike, Wop ... we hear a whisper: “Some of my best friends are Jews.” We see what is stamped on their nursery cradles: WXP (White, Christian, Protestant), NXP (Negro, Christian, Protestant), WXC (White, Christian, Catholic), labeled at birth. Our narrator speaks the realities of discrimination:

“If you are WXP, all things being equal, the best breaks will come your way. Some baby's choices will be limited. If you are Jewish, you're one of them. No matter how many times you'll recite the Declaration of Independence, how many times you invoke the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, these are the facts you will live by ... in some parts of the country, they'll write it out on a sign: Colored Entrance. For Colored Only. White Only. Restricted. Restricted. Restricted. You'll get to know that separation of people is a living fact.”

I experienced this separation, myself, in 1961 when I moved to Lake Oswego, Oregon. I was fourteen and Jewish. Until then I'd lived in Vancouver, Washington, in a multi-cultural neighborhood and school system. Lake Oswego by contrast had no Blacks. I soon heard that realtors were given the unspoken message to “discourage Blacks” from buying property. The change was culture shock. And, the Country Club did not allow Jews. This was just a taste of the residues my great-uncle, Leo Hurwitz shows in *Strange Victory*.

Equal In War, Not In Life

During war, soldiers, Black, white, Jewish, are all the same - friends, comrades, working side by side. There is no inequality in war. We see Black soldiers

gently cradling an injured white comrade. White soldiers rush an injured Black friend for help. After the war, things back in America are different.

A talented Black pilot flies home in victory, a hopeful smile on his face. But, when he applies for a job as pilot at airline after airline, he is turned away because of his color. In the airlines of post-war America, there are no Black pilots, no co-pilots; no navigators: “The old job mopping the floor in the men’s room is still open, though...”

This, as Leo Hurwitz’s *Strange Victory* tells us, is a very strange victory indeed.

The film ends with a call to remember the horrors of hate. *Strange Victory* leaves us with images of the starved and emaciated bodies of Jews in concentration camps; of Jewish mothers and children herded into a train or camp; a Jewish father and a Black mother greeting their newborn babies after the war.

Leo reminds us with *Strange Victory*’s oratory irony: “Rest now ... you’ve been born into the land of the winner... rest now baby, because nobody knows the trouble you’ll see.”

Remember. Remember then. Remember now, in 2017.

Self-Lies: The Purpose of Hate

Strange Victory’s message leads us to Hitler’s hateful lie: “We had a new crime: the crime of killing a whole people by your own idea that you were better than they are.” We see the image of a beaming Hitler, riding through the streets in a convertible, raising his hand in a Heil salute. We see Hitler’s face. We hear our narrator’s voice: “In the beginning is the word.” And, that word is: “A lie.”

The lie: that some are created lesser than others.

Why do some people need such lies? And, how do they get away with them?

Our narrator tells us: “Before the lie is believed, there must be hopelessness and hunger ... Find an easy target and blame him. Create a bogeyman. Make him big ... and you’ve got something ... the lie goes out in a one-way conversation and the voice has authority ... the lie spreads and builds organizations and terror in the streets ... hopelessness is good for it; because hopelessness is next to hysteria.”

This was Hitler's power. He blamed the Jews for all his problems. He promoted Aryan (really, his) superiority. He made Jews the inferior ones, the helpless ones. As a dictator, his subjects were dependent on his whims, and his whim was to get rid of the Jews and all they represented.

In the hated Jews, Hitler deposited what was hated and rejected within Hitler himself. That is: anything that threatened his inflated "confidence," his need to be the best. If the Jews were smart, if they were industrious, if they were supposed to be chosen by God this threatened Hitler at the roots of his personal insecurity: his fear of feeling inferior or small.

To "protect" himself, Hitler's had to be a powerful defense against any such awareness. In *Strange Victory*, we see images of this defense: his manic grandiosity, his overly buoyant smiles, his almost trancelike seduction of his equally jubilant comrades and soldiers.

We see a well-fed and self-satisfied Hitler the man with everything; in stark contrast with his terrified prisoners, behind wire fences, naked and starving; people who had been robbed of everything; reduced to nothing.

This is the purpose of hate.

When they exterminated millions of Jews, Hitler and his willing comrades unconsciously believed they were reducing to nothing; making non-existent - anything they might hate in themselves. It was as if, in this brutal and irrevocable way, they could be rid of their own feelings of smallness, helplessness, hopelessness, and inferiority.

This is the lie. We see variations of that same lie today in 2017. What happens to those who are hated is the lie's most dire consequence.