

LEO HURWITZ
HEART OF SPAIN 1937
In A Dictatorship Human Hearts Don't Matter

By Sandra E. Cohen

Spain's heart was breaking. It was 1936 and the telephone woke Leo Hurwitz from a deep sleep. He heard a friend's voice on the other end of the receiver asking for help making a film with footage he'd just brought back from Spain. The Spanish Civil War was in full swing. As Leo tells it, the footage was jerky and primitive, with short shots. His friend was a still photographer with an idea: making a film about the blood transfusion institute providing blood for the wounded. To Leo, that wasn't enough.

There was no question that his friend's suggestion would show a touching and special bond between the givers and the receivers. But, it wouldn't reveal the dark underbelly of a dictator like Franco's use of human lives as a commodity for his power. Leo knew as clearly as Ernest Hemingway's Robert Jordan in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*: fascism was the real enemy eating away at Spain's heart and that side of the story had to be told.

Prelude To The Film

Leo Hurwitz was not only an artist and one of the most important documentary filmmakers of our time. He also had a deep and lifelong commitment to politics and human rights. Here was his challenge: how to make a film about a complex situation with rough footage and a limited idea? He knew that the only way for the film to work was by developing the raw footage into a larger and poetically strong statement about the violent political situation in Spain.

The Spanish Civil War was a war against oppression; something Leo's family had been fighting his whole life. Leo knew that the Republican front facing off against Franco's fascist Nationalist forces must be the center of the film. Only then could there be a powerful account of the bond between wounded soldiers and civilians donating blood, men and women bound together by their battle for human liberty.

This, Leo felt, was a workable idea. Yet, he was faced with two major problems. First, there wasn't enough footage to make a complete film. So Leo and Paul Strand, his partner at Frontier Films, drew material from newsreels as well as from other cameramen, the likes of Russian photographer Roman Carmen, to

add to the existing footage. They, then, “scenarized” it — making sure the film spoke to the living realities surrounding the war.

The second problem, the shakiness of the original footage, was even more difficult. But, Leo considered this problem an artistic challenge — and the solution had far-reaching implications for the development of documentary film. What Leo accomplished, with the help of Paul Strand, was a huge leap in filmmaking in the United States.

Leo told Ingela Romare about how he solved this problem, in a 1990 interview: “It was an extraordinary problem. How do you handle material that is shaky and prevent it from feeling shaky on the screen? This involved very delicate cutting, using a shake to translate into another shot. This was the first sound film anyway in which I was able to focus the film, to be able to shape it in a way I felt was necessary. That was the real beginning, and it was a very stimulating and marvelous experience; very intense.”

The Film’s Origins And Reviews

Documented in Spain by Herbert Kline and Geza Karpathi; **Material Scenarized and edited** by Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz; **Commentary** by David Wolff and Herbert Kline; **Narrated** by John O’Shaughnessy; **Music arranged** by Alex North; and **Photography** by Geza Karpathi.

Heart of Spain began as a collaborative project between American Herbert Kline and Hungarian photographer Geza Karpathi during their stay in Spain as the Spanish Civil War was underway. There they met Dr. Norman Bethune, a Canadian physician who gave up his practice to join the loyalists in Madrid and help create a much-needed blood bank.

Kline practically lived with Bethune's unit capturing footage of transfusions and other medical services. Returning with the footage to the U.S. and needing help to form his footage into a film, Kline called upon editors Paul Strand and Leo Hurwitz who shaped it into "a broadly-based study of the struggle against fascism." (Campbell, Russell. *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in The United States 1930-1942*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1978, p. 167).

Writing in the *Village Voice* on March 9, 2010 about the *Leo Hurwitz Retro* at Anthology, Nicolas Rapold states: “*Heart of Spain* (1937) rallies proper loyalist outrage but its vivid, bodily sense of the sacrifices of war shows promise ...” Rapold regales Leo as one of the New York School’s lefty filmmakers, but more importantly as “the forefather of cinema vérité and TV news broadcasting, forger of a soulful yet rigorous style of film essay.”

Soulful, *Heart of Spain* definitely is. It is also filmmaking as truth about real life.

The Film

Watching *Heart of Spain* began for me in an unexpected way: I put my copy into the DVD player, pushed “Play” on my remote, and sat down to view the film. As the recorded images appeared on the screen, I suddenly saw Leo, my uncle, sitting down at his Manhattan dining room table to talk to Ingela Romare about making *Heart of Spain*. Seeing his face, hearing his voice, and remembering how much he reminded me of my grandfather Bill, his oldest brother, brought home to me a blood tie.

The film begins: “Silence. Blood has been spilled here.”

We see: bombed out buildings. **We hear:** “This is Madrid. One-third of the city is in ruins.” We know we are in the midst of a war. In Leo’s film images, we witness the incongruities of people trying to live their lives in spite of dangers and destruction around them.

We hear: “Sometimes, on the surface, everything seems almost normal.”

Life in Spain in 1936 is far from normal. Is it denial? Or, is it a healthy refusal to give up the belief that life can return to what it was or even something better?

Two men lounge together on a curb. A woman walks through rubble, wearing a hat and tailored suit. There are men out of work and a horse-drawn cart.

We hear: “They eat what there is to eat. They sleep where they can. They go about their daily work, trusting the men that guard their city.”

Yet, the viewer can’t help wondering: who are these guards? Are they Franco’s men? Then....

We hear an explosion and high-pitched screams getting louder and louder. The screams don’t stop. People young and old run through the streets. There are air raid sirens. Guards carry a body. People help each other as they scurry to safety. The air is full of billowing, black clouds of smoke.

We hear: “We must give them credit. This is the thing fascist dictators do very well.”

Fascist dictators know how to quash freedoms, control their people; even try to make them think they are happy. There is nothing happy here. Yet, the film's music conveys a bizarre disparity between tone and reality.

We hear - a band's trumpets and trombones loudly playing, as if this is a cheerful time and the fact of Franco's guards' "watching" over them is something to celebrate. The people are to ignore reality:

Ignore the swastika on the side of a building. **Ignore** the face of Hitler posted on a wall. **Ignore** an injured worker transferred to a bed by nurses. **Ignore** the frightening realities of dictators who would take freedoms away.

We see: men training for the front lines in empty lots after a day at work. **We hear:** "Even the children defend the city in their play."

The music is fast and scurrying. "Carpenters, storekeepers, bankers, machinists, roof makers; their sons and younger brothers help build the barricade ... Though death may come with the afternoon sky, life goes on week after week after week after ..."

This is life in the midst of war.

We see: planes overhead - people again running. The city is bombed. Madrid burns. A young man lies dead, on his back, hat by his side.

We hear: A woman's sobs.

We see: A child pulled out of the rubble. And another. There are dead bodies everywhere. Graves are being dug.

Throughout it all, a woman continues to sob. Her sobs are the heartbreak of war, the heartbreak of the struggle against fascism. Where is the hope?

Hope is in people coming together to fight.

We hear: "Men have come from all countries of the world to fight for democracy, to make Madrid the tomb of fascism." Italians, Canadians, Americans. It is an army of the people.

We hear: "Blood is precious."

Yes, blood is. Soldiers give their blood and their lives in every war. Thanks to Dr. Bethune's blood bank, there will be a new way of giving blood to replace blood in the fight for freedom against fascism.

We see: The wounded: with bandaged heads and eyes; walking with crutches; an arm in a sling; an amputated leg.

We see: Donors waiting: at Dr. Bethune's Hispano Canadian Blood Institute, to give their blood; to mix their blood with the blood of those on the front lines; to replenish the blood supply for the wounded; to save lives.

We hear: Donors asking: "Will my blood spoil? Will it be given to the wounded? Can I meet the person my blood is given to?"

We see: A special kind of choreography: Person after person; a man, a woman, lie down on a hospital bed; extend their arms. A tourniquet goes on; blood is drawn. A camouflaged blood truck pulls away from the Institute with blood labeled: Blood for ... Blood for ... Blood for ... for all the places where soldiers fight in Spain.

We hear: "The transfusions will begin ... from the heart of Spain, blood. Blood to renew life."

A new kind of human relationship is forged.

In *Heart of Spain*, the heart and the hope is in the soldier who spills his blood in war, in the people who wait to give their blood to the wounded. The heart of Spain is the conjoining of people; blood mingled with blood; the special relationship of blood lost and blood given in the fight for freedom from fascism's tyranny.

We see: Leo Hurwitz's solution to the problem of Herbert Kline and photographer Geza Karpathi's rough original footage from Spain.

In *Heart of Spain*, Leo creates both political and human centers for the film. The political center is, of course, the fight against fascism and Franco's dictatorship. To show this fight, we are drawn into a cinematic disparity that brings alive the actual gap between what is real and what a dictator wants his subjects to believe. There is no humanity in tyranny.

The Republicans lost their fight in 1939 to Franco's Nationalistic forces. Yet, within the human center of Leo Hurwitz's *Heart of Spain*, we see relationships

forming. Fights cannot be won without humanity. We are in a certain kind of déjà vu today in 2017 America. Those taking to the streets or forming political action groups are the Dr. Bethune's blood banks of today. Extending a hand (or an arm), caring about what happens to all people, is the heart and the solution of the fight for freedom against forces that threaten our human rights. With his films, Leo Hurwitz extends both an arm and a hand, and infuses blood and heart into the struggle.