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NATIVE LAND

An Interview with Leo Hurwitz

Leo Hurwitz is possibly the only American independent radical film-maker to have produced a sustained body of work over the last four decades, although he has received inadequate recognition. Coming from a socialist background and influenced by the avant-garde culture of the 1920's, Hurwitz set out during the Depression years to make films that fused political commitment and aesthetic concern in the documentary and narrative modes of presentation.

In the 1930's Hurwitz was in contact with a group of writers, actors and artists that included Paul Strand, Paul Robeson, Woody Guthrie, Hans Eisler, Joris Ivens and Marc Blitzstein. In the early part of the decade, Hurwitz obtained his first film experience by working with other members of the Film and Photo League in the production of newsreels and short documentaries on the labor movement and political events of the time. This experience later led to the formation of the Frontier Films collective and his co-direction, with Paul Strand, of *NATIVE LAND*, America's first feature-length labor film, with Paul Robeson as narrator. In addition to *NATIVE LAND*, Frontier Films also produced *HEART OF SPAIN*, *CHINA STRIKES BACK*, *PEOPLE OF THE CUMBERLAND*, *WHITE FLOOD*, and aided in the production of *UNITED ACTION* (on the organization of the UAW)—the rise of the trade union movement in the U.S., the Spanish Civil War, and revolution in China were the major progressive events of the time.

In the 1940's, Hurwitz was an instrumental figure in the development of television newsbroadcasting and attempted to raise funds for two major film projects—Woody Guthrie's autobiography, *Bound for Glory*, and Howard Fast's novel, *Freedom Road* (to star Paul Robeson)—neither of which, unfortunately, was ever funded.

Although Hurwitz faced repression throughout his career and mostly filmed outside the industry, he was blacklisted during the Cold War period, both before and after being named by Elia Kazan during the HUAC hearings in 1952. When he could obtain work at the networks (for example on *OMNIBUS*), it was short-term and often without the knowledge of the producers.

In this period he nevertheless made a number of documentary films, including *STRANGE VICTORY* (on racism and the dangers of fascism in post-war America), *MUSEUM AND THE FURY* (about Nazi barbarism and post-war socialist reconstruction). He was an advisor on *SALT OF THE EARTH*. He is now at work on a long film, in part about his late wife, Peggy Lawson's, life, and its meaning in the context of the historical period. The working title of the film is: *SHOOT FILM NOT PEOPLE*.

Michael and Jill Klein interviewed Leo Hurwitz shortly before the recent re-release of *NATIVE LAND*. These are extracts from the tape of a longer interview.

Q: Can you tell us something about your artistic beginnings in the 1920's?

A: The essential thing about art for me at that time was that it contain human experience. A work of art transforms experience into an object, which at best is organic like a Tolstoi novel or a Rembrandt portrait. Such an idea was common in the '20's or '30's when you had people like Mike Gold, William Gropper, Isidor Schneider, Ben Shahn, Clifford Odets, Waldo Frank, a community of artists who may have fallen short in some ways, but who didn't divorce the problem of the creation of a work of art from what you say.

I guess as a kid then in the '20's I would have said that the real artist is the person who faces the essential aspects of the life of his time, finds out what is the truth, and fights for it with his skills and a fierce independence.

Q: What films or film-makers had an influence on you?

A: I thought Chaplin was great, I still do. One of the reasons I felt Chaplin was good was because his fantasy, which

was marvelous, reflected real personal and social relationships even as they were lifted to a fantasy level. From 1927 on we began to see avant-garde films—Cavalcanti, Bunuel, Rene Clair, Cocteau. These were OK as ground-breakers. Also Grierson's and Rotha's films, which turned the camera on life, were well made but without a fundamental passion. I felt the English documentaries were pale, avoided a central statement.

Soviet films were important, especially documentary films by Esther Shub and Dziga Vertov. When I saw Eisenstein's *TEN DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD*, Pudovkin's *THE END OF ST. PETERSBURG*, and especially Dovzhenko's *ARSENAL* and *EARTH*, I began to see what you could do with the image, the image guided by passion and intelligence. I felt that Dovzhenko was using film as poetry, an experiment with a solid human basis in contrast to the meager 'experimentation' of the 'avant-garde.' Pudovkin's book on film technique came at me as an illumination into the inner language of film. The idea that film images could act on each other to create new ideas and emotions not present in the images was an eye-opener.

Q: You've talked before about the effect of growing up in a period when artists were questioning in different ways the existing society—you mentioned Mencken, Eliot, Crane. Yet you did not choose their path.

A: My own point of view was linked as well to a different cultural environment. My father had been a socialist, and an anarchist before he was a socialist. I had a political upbringing—I knew who Debs was, I knew what a strike was, I knew what the problems of capitalism were. I had a background involving a working class perspective.

Shortly after I graduated from college there were 16 million people without jobs. They had been suddenly shaken loose from a much-publicized prosperity. The headlines grew day by day. An army of apple sellers—who had previously been carpenters, garment workers, storekeepers—appeared on street corners and in front of subway stations. Homeless men built shanty-towns in Central Park and on the edges of the city. When you put your hand in your pocket and you can touch your total savings, your life is revealed as not the private thing it seemed before. It becomes connected with others who share your problem.

Thousands of people, among them artists, were confronted with a clear contradiction. This America we were living in had the capacity to feed, clothe and shelter everyone with adequate security, and yet something was preventing it. The social system's sole concern was money and property, not people. At a time when all 'isms'—socialism, collectivism, communism—were suspect and un-American, one had to ask whether that other 'ism', capitalism, was a viable form of social living. Clearly it was not for huge numbers of people. Marx, Engels, Lenin, Debs, DuBois—men whose works had not been of serious social interest to scholars in the previous decade—became relevant again. To interpret what I saw and lived through day by day, it became necessary to study the reality around me as well as the ideas with which to grasp hold of this reality.

Q: How did you feel art was related to politics?

A: Well, art was not simply another form of stating a political program. Joseph Freeman writing in *New Masses* at the time reflected what a lot of us were thinking. The motivations behind a work of art have to do basically with human experiences. They don't involve the kind of summarization and generalization that can define a political program. Art and politics are two different ways of dealing with that same reality and of course there is a significant connection between them. Some of the Russian films being shown at the time reflected this.

Political art has its problems. Someone can look at a film and say that it doesn't deal with so-and-so, let's say the workers in the shops. You reply, "But this film doesn't deal

with that because it's trying to focus on something else." He might insist, "You've got to get the shops in." But the conscientious artist knows you must not destroy the unity of the work. You can't go beyond its bounds, you can't plaster onto it from the outside. You will lose belief, lose the very value you are trying to include.

A film sets boundaries of ideas and feelings within which you have to work. It's better for a film or work of art to fall short of a total statement than to be fully correct, but so patched and pieced together that it has no effect. A film or a poem tries to start something going in people's heads. You're not trying to do everything in one work. That's one of the great problems of politics and political art because everything is important. But you can't reach a human being with everything at once, political or non-political.

Agitational propaganda, say the making of a leaflet or poster, is a very specific problem. You want to get people out to a demonstration. In order to bring them out—let's say to a meeting of the unemployed in Union Square in 1932—you need to say certain things. That's a very different problem, getting action by means of direct and quick communication, than a film on unemployment whose basic purpose is to help organize the unemployed. With the film you're not trying to do a single specific thing. You don't even know where it's going to be shown or whether anything can be done at that moment. You're trying to alter people's consciousness by dramatizing real experience, clearing away distortions so that they begin to see events in a way that has some truth to it. Action may then follow in the specific contexts of people's lives.

You have to allow your artists and intellectuals to grow from within. You must have democracy as well as centralism. If you have built a real relationship of the individual artist to the movement, like the individual worker to the movement, then you can count on him to respond with a grasp of the connection between individual and class needs.

Q: What can you tell us about production at the Film and Photo League?

A: The League was a group of people interested in developing the use of film for the workers' movement. They were not passionately interested in film as a means of expression but primarily for its political value (of all the arts, Lenin had said, film is for us the most important). It was what was called a mass organization composed of members with varied sensibilities and skills. You sat in a meeting and somebody said—"Well, we have so much footage and three cameras and this is happening. Who wants to cover it?" In that way, I and four other people started to film the Hunger March to Washington in 1932. That's how a production was started at the Film and Photo League, by anyone interested enough to act. It was good and spontaneous but quite accidental. Important events were covered in this way—coal strikes in Appalachia, the textile strikes, the Scottsboro case. There was no attempt to be 'objective' in the way the capitalist media were supposed to be objective. It was clearly partisan. That is, in 1933 I went to the Scottsboro trial and I knew those nine youngsters were being framed. I photographed and shaped the film in relation to that clear knowledge.

Q: How was Frontier Films formed?

A: It quickly became clear to me that our haphazard method was a fine way to collect the enthusiasm of people and to bring together people interested in the relation of film to society, but it was no way to make films that really had insight into what was happening in America, certainly no way to make revolutionary films that would grow in value and effectiveness from film to film. The art itself had to be developed and people had to be trained in it. It seemed to some of us that we needed a permanent production group of able people vitally interested in both the content and aesthetics of film. When this was turned down by the

leadership of the Film and Photo League as "elitist" (which tells you something of the sectarianism of the time), we formed a group called Nykino. . . I had an idea of film as essay. For example, in our HUNGER MARCH film, we had only shot the events of the march. Now those were interesting in themselves but it was my feeling that unless we showed the reason for the march, we didn't have its meaning. I wrote an article, I believe in *New Theatre* magazine, on the necessity of expanding our ideas from simple coverage to something like an essay form that would have ideas and events, connectives and penetrations, to show what was not necessarily immediately visible or photographable.

Paul Strand came from Mexico where he had done *THE WAVE*. Willard Van Dyke came from the coast. Irving Lerner, Lionel Berman, Sidney Meyers, Ralph Steiner and Jay Leyda had been associated in some way with the League. We had very little money. We met very frequently. We talked, studied and experimented. Some of us observed Group Theater productions and took classes in acting and directing. I finished some films that Ralph Steiner had started—*PIE IN THE SKY* was one. We had in mind that this activity would be preparatory to the formation of a production company. Frontier Films was the natural outgrowth from Nykino. Lillian Hellman, John Howard Lawson, Paul Robeson, Archibald MacLeish and others were on the advisory board, excited by the idea of a truly independent film in America. Joris Ivens was in the country at that time, in '35, and was a very important stimulus and source of encouragement. We had many film projects in mind, fiction and documentary. We started with the hope of creating a workers and trade union distribution network in the neighborhood theatres. We also hoped to set up a film magazine called *The World Today*, begun during the Nykino period. The pilot issue contained a story on the *SUNNYSIDE EVICTIONS*, which involved the struggles of a tenants' union, and an episode on *THE BLACK LEGION*, a fascist group which operated in the Midwest. We also made *HEART OF SPAIN*, *PEOPLE OF THE CUMBERLAND* and *CHINA STRIKES BACK* in the early phase of Frontier Films.

Q: Was all of the film used in *CHINA STRIKES BACK* from China?

A: The core of the film material was shot by Harry Dunham in Yen-an, and for the first time intimately showed the Communist leaders, Mao and Chu Te, showed the work of the anti-Japanese University, the training of the 8th Route Army, the relationship of soldiers and peasants. This new footage was supplemented by newsreel and other stock footage.

Q: The film began in Japan, showed the invasion of China, then moved to Yen-an. Why did it conclude with an appeal for planes for China?

A: As an advisor on that film it was my feeling that the 8th Route Army of the Communists was primarily an anti-Japanese army seeking to free China from colonialism and feudalism, trying to organize the peasantry, trying to win over the Kuomintang to fight Japan. The Yen-an footage had to be set within this context. The planes at the end were symbolic of the need for American aid to defeat Japan—remember at that time the U.S. was selling its scrap steel to Japan.

The symbolic ending was also a reflection of the fact that a United Front against the Japanese invasion had developed between the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party, after the Sian incident. The film shows the alliance between Mao's and Chiang's forces, which is often forgotten today. The Red Army became the 8th Route Army of the Chinese Army. The nature of that alliance is very interesting and, as you know, was never fulfilled. Chiang was more interested in suppressing the Communists than in fighting Japan. The film's ending is of course naive in a way that Mao was not. For while he fought for a United Front against Japan, he did not allow the weakening of the strength, initiative and principles of the

Communist movement—which was the reason why the Communists were successful in both the war against Japan and in the Civil War provoked by Chiang.

Q: What was the political objective of HEART OF SPAIN?

A: We wanted the film to raise support and money for the Medical Bureau, to aid the Loyalists. That was the specific purpose. But I wanted to do more, to provide insight into what a people's struggle is, and not only in the Spanish Civil War against Franco, but as it might come up somewhere else. Soon after Frontier Films started, Herbert Kline and Geza Karpthy returned from Spain with footage of Dr. Norman Bethune's Blood Transfusion Institute. Dr. Bethune had developed a method for preserving whole blood and this process was used for the first time in the treatment of the wounded of Spain.

Q: The film seemed to go beyond the documentation of people giving blood, the preserving and transferring of the bottled blood to the front. There is a sense of collective effort, a social metaphor that is involved.

A: In HEART OF SPAIN I put into practice an idea I had been developing to intensify the structure of the documentary film. I wanted to go beyond exposition and declaration to create a feeling of interior dramatic growth. The metaphor you talk about begins early in the film, long before the blood transfusion sequences.

The film opens with bombed buildings, Madrid in ruins—"Blood has been spilled here." The war is treated in its effect on people, the spilling of blood. Then a sequence of normal living in the midst of war—people walking around, carts going by. This creates a need for life to go on in spite of the torn city. Then there is an explosion and the first scenes of the fascist attack on Madrid—people running through the smoke-filled streets, children dug out of bomb craters. Again you return to a scene of a "normal" city during war—recruits being trained, children playing at defense. Positive and negative needs are created in the audience. You want people to live on without threat; you don't want their lives torn apart. You want them to be able to defend themselves against attack from the sky. Such feelings derive from the actual experience of life in a city during war. In this way, as when you have a plot which actuates needs and empathy, one moves through the film identifying with the need of the Spanish people to renew life in their fight against the fascists. When the actual blood transfusion sequence begins, a thematic basis for the film has already been constructed, which weaves together the specifics of medical aid with the social struggle. From this point on, the detailed events—what happens to the blood from donor to

wounded soldier—carry with them the larger metaphor.

I used this concept of the dialectical structure of documentary film in the shooting script for THE PLOW THAT BROKE THE PLAINS. HEART OF SPAIN, on which Paul Strand collaborated with me, was the first sound film in which I could carry it through to completion. In documentary film, where you don't have a person within a plot to identify with, the problem is to evoke needs, a sense of empathy, a process of growth of feeling without these devices. Opposition, conflict and contradiction must be incorporated into your structure. You have to create the equivalent of plot—that is, the process of growth and involvement—rather than simple exposition, or declaratory statement.

Q: What about the production of NATIVE LAND?

A: NATIVE LAND was based on the little known reports of the La Follette Senate Civil Liberties Committee. Leo Huberman's book, *The Labor Spy Racket*, was also an important stimulus. At the time we were writing the script and preparing the production, the militant trade union movement had made tremendous gains, had fought its way through government and employer repression, and had succeeded in making union organization a right confirmed by law.

The many volumes of Committee testimony contained essential data on the class struggle of the '30's in its wide social aspect as well as in the individual stories of its participants. To weave together the large social design with the human details required thinking in terms of a new film form. This combined the enactment and the document, the lyrical and the statistical, the overall social pattern and real story episodes.

Q: We've heard stories of financial problems.

A: We began with \$7,000—and a feature length script. Production proceeded until we ran out of money, at which point we showed rushes and raised some more money, resumed production, stopped again—many times. This is why the film took three years to make, from 1938 to 1941. Of course, we had no commercial financing. It took collective enthusiasm for independent film-making, as well as for the film's unique content, to make a film under such conditions.

Q: How were you going to solve the problem of distribution, of getting the film out to a wide audience?

A: We intended NATIVE LAND to be a spearhead for the making and distribution of independent, progressive films. We wanted to break the monopoly of block booking. The idea was to create a distribution base from the bottom. The plan was to go into workers' communities where there was a strong union membership and tell a theatre owner: "A lot of people in your area would be interested in seeing NATIVE LAND. If



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you want to be sure, ask them, talk to the trade union people, see if they won't put out leaflets advertising the film. They'll bring the audience to your theatre and you'll make money out of it." By appealing to the neighborhood theatres in this way, we hoped to outflank the commercial restrictions of the big companies.

We aimed at building up a base like this all over the country, getting the support of progressive trade unions and other organizations. When the film was shown to union audiences before it was completed, the response was very strong, and we felt sanguine about our plans.

Q: Did you encounter problems in releasing the film during the war period?

A: We got the answer print of *NATIVE LAND* on December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor. The Soviet Union had been attacked in June, 1941. Now the U.S. was in the war, after years of government stalling in response to the aggression of Hitler and Japan. We were headed for a period of national unity. *NATIVE LAND* was finished as far as wide distribution was concerned.

In *NATIVE LAND* we had dramatized the conflict between the American ruling class and the unions in the '30's. Now, however, there was a need for unity within the country for the war against fascism. U.S. business had to be willing to join with the Soviet Union, to end its isolationism and drop its fierce enmity towards the Soviets. So a policy of national unity came into being. This was right and necessary but, to my mind, it was carried out wrongly.

Now the Party could be important in influencing trade unionists and therefore in getting the film distributed. They said, "We like the film but we can't help at this time because we're in a period of national unity." I went to see Foster and he told me he had written a book which he had to keep in his desk until the end of the war, for the same reason. Foster had seen the film and I think he liked it very much. "Don't worry", he said, "the class struggle will be back." He seemed to have a patience I didn't have. I think it was a mistaken patience. You can't have a period of national unity which forgets history. Not without eroding basic principles. I wasn't able to quote Mao on the question of independence and initiative in the united front but that's the basic argument I made.

Q: *NATIVE LAND* has what I call a political structure. It moves back and forth from crucial moments in individual lives to overviews which set the contexts of the larger analysis. In making the film did you encounter political and aesthetic decisions as distinct problems?

A: To me they're not separate. A film is built of episodes that deal with individual human responses within social forces which also act on other individuals. Now then, if one limits one's concept of an event to what happens between a small number of people, you have the story film, the Hollywood film, and the basic forces (which in truth are commanding) are not part of the event at all.

The larger event in *NATIVE LAND*, not evident in particular episodes, is not unlike a political conspiracy. There is an interlocking of interests out of which things happen: a farmer is shot down, a union organizer is killed, black and white sharecroppers are flushed out of a church, a spy is planted in a union local. The idea of the film and its dramatic growth are built on the principle that these individual events by themselves are not understandable. It therefore forces you into building up the larger event (what you call analysis I would call the larger event). That's how the social concept is arrived at and that's how the fresh structural form of the film is arrived at . . . to meet the needs of this content.

Q: What is your opinion of some recent responses to the film? One of the objections at the Radical Historians' Forum was to the reclaiming of American traditions in the film, which they identified with Browder and the Popular Front of the '30's. It seems to me that it goes back further and that in

many countries the struggle for socialism involves a struggle to reclaim the best of "our traditions."

A: The contradiction in these objections was that they viewed history not in terms of actual historical conditions but from a narrow perspective of the present. I called this "chauvinism of the present."

In the film itself and in the social thinking behind it, the historic realities are important to the present. First of all, the idea that American history reflects a continuous struggle between oppressors and oppressed, the idea that liberty has to be fought for in every generation. Social development was very uneven. You could have a slave owner who could state important democratic concepts and understand the nature of revolution (Jefferson said that the tree of liberty has to be watered with the blood of tyrants every twenty years). The complexity in a historical situation is that a given class, when it makes its revolution, has to state its own needs in much broader terms to get wide support. The American bourgeoisie interested in freeing themselves from the colonial restrictions of England couldn't say, "All people who have so much property are created equal." They had to say *everyone* is created equal, each with the right to pursue happiness. This is the way in which the class which becomes the new ruling class gives ammunition to the new oppressed class, because they can't live up to their own supposed objectives. This is a motive power in social struggle. The Radical Historians didn't grasp the contradiction, they saw the historic parallels but not the contradiction between the traditionally phrased American heritage and the actuality that has to be fought through again and again in order to realize these rights in new forms. When you are building trade unions, or have a socialist perspective, you have to fight, for example, for free speech all over again.

Q: The film takes us from the agrarian period to modern monopoly industrial capitalism. What I find impressive is the way the film, by transforming key symbols, always connects the ideals to the material social basis, and shows the American tradition as the outcome of objective changes. For example, in the industrial sequence that shows socialization of production, the idea emerges that because people have to work together they learn to think and act together. This is a new definition of the source of liberty, not individualist and agrarian but collective and working class. Now there is a new contradiction—the monopolies, not England, are the enemy. Was this sense of historical materialism consciously part of the structure of the film?

A: Remember, *NATIVE LAND* begins with a foreword that says, "This is the story of the struggle for liberty in our own time." Now that's a very daring idea. One isn't 'patriotic' if one says we have to struggle for liberty in every generation. We inherited a set of ideas and feelings which the film shatters—it shatters the idea that freedom and freedom of speech are monolithic and constant, which is the 'patrioteering' approach. Freedom of speech has to be fought for in the new context of organizing labor, in which the oppressor is fighting you by saying that you are un-American. So you are trying to reverse what is called "un-American" into American.

The Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, although they contain within them the strategy and objectives of the ruling class—of the landowners and the growing bourgeoisie of the time—contain ideas that are not restrictive. The masters weren't going to get the farmers and workers to fight for them except under the banner of liberty and equality and the pursuit of happiness. When you say that, you create a contradiction and give weapons to the oppressed class; then they can say, "We want some of what you promised." That contradiction is one of the causes of the oppressor's destruction.

NATIVE LAND takes the symbols of the old Americanism and turns them into something else. First there is a sequence that tells the history of America from the time of the

pilgrims in mythic terms, as a promise. "We built liberty into the beams of our houses." This sequence dramatizes the growth of America in terms of the basic ideas of liberty or, to put it another way, in terms of what people wanted, whether realized or not.

This promise of the American past is shattered by several sequences: a farmer who wants to speak his mind is hit over the head, a trade union organizer is killed in the rooming house, white and black sharecroppers are gunned down by vigilantes. The first sequence takes what lies under the cliché as a primary need; the following sequences show these needs are not being fulfilled.

The next sequence, "America Wakes Up to a New Day", is the first sequence transferred from the past to now. Again, it isn't so much how things are, but how people assume them to be. You wake up, you go out to work still with the historic beliefs of American liberty in your bones. The sequence moves from individual people having their breakfast, going off to work, to the nature of the day's work, which involves cooperation (work is socialized). It involves the growth of trade unions, people at a union meeting, the exercising of their primitive freedoms in a new form. Then there is a reversal of what is taken for granted: "This man's name was on file in an office building", and the labor spy sequence which follows dramatizes again the violation of the rights of free speech and assembly...

Q: When we last saw *NATIVE LAND*, there were things that made people uneasy. Some of the film's images—a crack train, workers in factories, smoke stacks—seem alien to the sensibilities of some contemporaries. There seems to be a cultural gap. Is it a question of an iconography embodying a certain attitude toward reality that is at odds with the film's attitude?

A: I'll put it rather strongly. There is a widespread contemporary response which reacts to the superficial symbol rather than to the underlying meaning. In the film you see a train giving off clouds of steam, or a smoking factory chimney, or a time clock being punched. The response is: "Oh my God!" The symbol is atrocious *per se* (not taking into account what these images meant in an era of 16 million unemployed or in a era where industrial workers have to fight their way to organization). It is a response of undifferentiated pity. Every machine, everything that has made possible the advanced production which could eliminate poverty, should not have been brought into being. This response fails to understand that ecological destruction has happened because of the exploitation of people and the environment by big business. The machine itself, as an instrument for the transformation of labor and material into what people need, is socially controllable. Those who voiced these responses fail to see the context of the images that worried them.

You cannot wish the factory or the machine away. But by social transformation you can relate them to human needs rather than to profit. The machine itself is not destructive of the quality of life. This distinction is not clearly made often enough.

Q: In your film you make this distinction by showing the bottling of milk before the breakfast scene. Or the steel worker at the furnace—this shows the worker's skills, both the danger and the productivity of his work—the iconography of socialist film.

A: Yes. It is incorrect to divorce the symbol from the fact that it signifies a capacity to produce for human needs, or from the fact that its destructiveness derives from its use for profit.

Q: Why does *NATIVE LAND* refer to revolutionary struggle in the 18th Century but not focus on the subsequent oppression of the Indians?

A: The Indians are left out of the film. Not because we didn't know of their history and didn't feel strongly about it but it became difficult to place within the specific context of

this film. Perhaps it should have been worked in. However, some people today overreact. It is important not to indict the whole white race and remove the class character of the oppression. The exploitation of the Indian or of black people should not be totally separated from other forms of exploitation—from what happened to the workers in the factories, or what happened to the shopkeepers who were being displaced by the chains, or to the farmers who were foreclosed.

Q: Do you think the way that the La Follette Committee functions in the film obscures the role of the state in capitalist society?

A: No, I don't. I think this criticism involves an oversimplification. The state is not available for dissolution except at certain key moments in history. The struggle goes on at times when the state is not available for dissolution, in forms that involve using contradictions within the ruling class and their state. The fact is that the acceptance of the trade union movement as part of the legal structure of American life was forced by American workers, and the staff of the La Follette Committee did a good job of exposure.

Q: The film puts its finger on how you work politically—the way in which you deal with the specific contradictions at a certain point and how you work within and against those contradictions, rather than coming from the outside with a slogan, which is not where people are at.

A: Yes, what we were doing, rather than defining an abstract political line, was taking a series of events that came out of experience, analyzing them and finding a line—a line of film and a line of idea.

Q: The film is unique in the way it is filled with the faces and expressions of ordinary American workers.

A: Workers and labor are at the center of the film. The concept of 'the people', that sense of a people's wisdom which in time will emerge. The people as a concept against the oppressor, as in the folk saying, "This anvil laughs at many broken hammers." That's an optimistic idea. Optimism isn't part of the current vogue...

I wrote on the flypage of my shooting script a little paragraph that was a modernization of the idea that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. I translated this idea into current terms: in contemporary working class and union struggles there are no wars won or lost, only battles.

That was a key premise behind the political and emotional development of the film. The emotional development of the film is toward the resolution of a problem; that resolution then becomes a problem itself. That's the reason the film can end with a funeral (of a worker killed by police in the Memorial Day Massacre of '37). Having come from other defeats, the speaker saying: "We don't forget that, never", is enough to indicate what the line of growth is. I saw it as dialectical—the reforms, defeats and victories are all part of one developing process, towards a radical social transformation.

Q: Often in the 1930's the socialist perspective of works of art arose out of the interconnection of the work with the context of social struggle within which the work was presented. It was conveyed by concepts that had stood for centuries as symbols of the people's desire for a new social order. This can be overlooked today when we look back at the art of the period.

A: It was understood then. For example, in Woody Guthrie's song, *This Land is Your Land*, the line, "This land is meant for you and me", meant socialism, not litter-free national parks. *NATIVE LAND* used the same idea... "This land is your land." His autobiography, *Bound for Glory*—Woody and I used to talk about making it into a film—meant "bound for socialism."

Q: There seems to be a persistent dialectic in your films—shifting struggle rather than a breakthrough to total victory, both in the structure and the content.

A: Yes, because even after you have won a victory, the forces and contradictions shape up again, on a different level.