

Thirty years ago today, Leo Hurwitz, who made the first major anti-racist film in the United States, died. Recently his films can also be seen online. By Stefan Ripplinger

The film "Strange Victory" is what might be called, indigestible. In a very unusual visual language for a documentary and in an equally unusual narrative style, he accuses the USA of racism with a very unusual sharpness and compares it with Nazi Germany.

Such a film would not find a commercial producer or distributor today, despite Michael Moore, and that was the case when it came out. Renting a movie theater for the premiere in New York was already difficult enough. On the first day, it was Saturday, September 25, 1948, hardly any spectators came; it was just too beautiful outside. The second day was a major baseball game, the Red Sox beating the Yankees 7-2; New Yorkers, especially with a Red Sox game, had better things to do. Eventually a few journalists from the aggressive right-wing papers trickled in. One of them wrote in the "New York Daily News" - a paper comparable to Springer's "Bild" - that "Stalin's voice" could be heard behind every shot of "Strange Victory". This sealed the fate of the film and its director, Leo T. Hurwitz. For a long time, he received no contracts in the film and television industry and was shadowed by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI for the next twenty years.

Hurwitz, born in 1909 (and died in 1991), was the last of eight children of a Russian anarchist who wrote for the Yiddish Free Workers' Voice. He named his youngest after the anarchist and great author, Leo Tolstoy. Little Leo turned out to be a talented pupil, but kept bumping into invisible walls in the middle of the land of the free. In his short story "The Imaginary Jew" (1945), John Berryman made what kind of walls tangible in a very uncanny way. Refused job or scholarship or respect because you deviate from the "white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant" scheme - this or something like it was the fate of everyone involved in "Strange Victory". The independent producer Barney Rosset was the child of a Jewish father, a Catholic mother, a double stigma, because Catholics were also persecuted in the USA for a long time. The composer David Diamond never had a doubt that his career was not going well because he was not only Jewish but also openly gay. And the leading actor, Virgil Richardson, was ultimately forced to go into exile in Mexico. But more from Richardson later. So "Strange Victory" was not the work of compassionate humanists, but of those who suffered and struggled. But it is also the work of an American communist who has taken Soviet montage to the next level in an amazing way.

The influence of Soviet montage becomes clear early on in Hurwitz's work. In the early 1930s he was a member of the Workers Film and Photo League, which created propaganda on behalf of the line of the Communist Party. Anyone who compares the League's short film about the 1931 hunger march, in the credits of which Hurwitz's name does not yet appear, with the one about the 1932 hunger march, will be amazed at the different styles. The report from 1931 is interesting enough because it shows how many women and African-Americans joined the demonstrations of the unemployed, but here it is only shown, not processed. In 1932 we suddenly have before us what Sergei M. Eisenstein called »intellectual« and Hurwitz in an article for »New Theater«

(1934) »external montage«: not only are reportage images countered with newspaper pages or Christian banners, but also, for example the food for the hungry with the garbage on the quay or the homeless crouching in the gutter with the houses in which they are no longer allowed to live.

A first high point in this contrast and combination technique is "Heart of Spain" (1937). Together with Paul Strand, one of the most important photographers of the century, Hurwitz put together a stirring film from completely disparate, partly amateurish material about the Spanish Civil War and the fascist movements of the time. The conclusion, which reports on the system of blood donations and the care of the injured Republican fighters, is a contrapuntal masterpiece: there are, sometimes in short cuts - "time means blood" -, arms of blood donors, raised fists, grenade strikes, transfusions, marching, flowing blood and dancers work together so that the viewer gets the impression that the film is not just about the heart of Spain, but is pulsed with it.

Here and all the more in the most famous collaboration between Hurwitz and Strand - "Native Land" (1942), a gloomy commitment to the USA, which can be summed up in the question: "What do our persecuted people have from the Bill of Rights?" the montage aims at the intellect and the imagination alike. In Wolf-Eckart Bühler's interview film "Leo T. Hurwitz. Films for Another America" (1980), but also in the director's long conversations with the Jungian analyst, Ingela Romare, he presents his idea of collective images that connect us with one another, but whose symbols like hieroglyphics still have to be interpreted. Hurwitz' work consists in making these latent connections manifest. This explains the sequences, condensed into clusters, even allegories, from material filmed completely independently of one another.

In "Strange Victory" the procedure becomes abundantly clear. At the beginning we see random passers-by, all of them depressed, in New York buying newspapers at a kiosk. Hurwitz uses disturbing impressions of the fighting and weapons of the recently won Second World War. This is the traumatic version of external montage - the repressed returns. The ironic one goes like this: newborns reach out with their tiny sluggish hands, the camera races up a skyscraper, making the children strive for higher things. Behind collective images, says Hurwitz, there are "needs," drives. The blood in the Spanish film, the alternation of wild nature and monuments, grown and made in "Native Land" are allegories of such urges and demands of those who fight and emancipate themselves. But "needs", otherwise they would not exist, are denied.

The same children who were reaching for the stars suddenly see themselves stunted and stamped: NXP (Afro-American, Christian, Protestant), WJ (white, Jewish), WXC (white, Christian, Catholic). Anti-Semitic stickers, lynched African-Americans, slanderous graffiti, the eyes of a Ku Klux Klansman, the eyes of a racist Democrat from Congress ... Prepare for the facts, the commentator warns the newborns, because "racial segregation is a fact." Now you feel sorry for the funny, kicking, sweet things. Some will be victims; others will be perpetrators.

This reversal of hopeful babies into hopeless babies is juxtaposed with a Nazi empire that has been smashed and a still ghostly one that seems to be establishing itself in our midst. Hurwitz illustrates this very simply by having the Nazi buildings, which collapsed at the beginning, erect

again with a film running backwards. The film is not told in a linear fashion, but rather formed from blocks that are dialectically opposed to one another. Like »Native Land«, he not only uses documentary material, but also re-enacted material.

The actor Virgil Richardson, who has already been mentioned, is reenacting a bitter episode in his own life. He belonged to the Tuskegee Airmen, a force of 922 men in the end of almost exclusively African-American (and a few Latin American) pilots, which President Franklin D. Roosevelt allowed to be drafted after 1941, against the advice of his generals. The troops achieved many successes in World War II, after which they were all unemployed again. Hurwitz shows Richardson asking for a position and being ushered [hinauskomplimentiert] out. Of all civil engineers in the post-war period, 0.13 percent were Afro-Americans, today it is 6.4 percent, at that time they made up 2 percent of doctors and dentists, today just under 4, and so on, only in the low-wage groups was the proportion of African Americans enormous, and remains so. As far as that goes, the film has barely aged in over 70 years. A disclaimer seems necessary, however: the N-word appears dozen of times, so "Strange Victory" is unsuitable for the academic left and the left-wing liberal scene, but this is an urgent recommendation for all historically and aesthetically reflective materialists.

Leo T. Hurwitz directed the televising of the entire Eichmann Trial and created an award-winning summary from it. With his second wife, Peggy Lawson, to whom he dedicated his almost four-hour "Dialogue With A Woman Departed" (1972–1980), after her death, and the cameraman Manfred Kirchheimer, who fled Saarbrücken with his family in 1935, he made a number of films well worth seeing, about art, about nature, about cities and symbols, in which he weaves his allegorical montage even finer, even broader. The force of "Strange Victory", the film about the anti-fascist victory that was not one, he did not ever achieve again — and probably no longer strived for.

Hurwitz' films are being shown online at www.leohurwitz.com. "Strange Victory" is available on DVD and Blu-Ray from Milestones; the edition published by Ingela Romare is currently only available in libraries. Reference should also be made to the more recent anti-racist films available at solidaritycinema.com.

Stefan Ripplinger wrote in 11/20 about Paul Celan and the literary business

Translation by Tom Hurwitz from the original German: <https://www.konkret-magazin.de/aktuell/565-von-nun-an-bist-du-nxp>