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Strange Victory

Leo Hurwitz

Producer Barney Rosset. **Production company** Target Films (New York, USA). **Director** Leo Hurwitz. **Screenplay** Leo Hurwitz, Saul Levitt. **Director of photography** Peter Glushanok, George Jacobsen. **Music** David Diamond. **Editor** Leo Hurwitz, Faith Elliott (Hubley), Mavis Lyons.
Cast Virgil Richardson, Sophie Maslow, Cathy McGregor, Jack Henderson, Robert P. Donely, Alfred Drake, Muriel Smith, Gary Merrill, Saul Levitt.

DCP, black/white. 64 min. English.
Premiere 25 September 1948, New York; restored version: 9 February 2015, Berlinale Forum
World sales Milestone Films

What did the victory over Hitler mean for the social harmony of US society? America may have won the war, but "the ideas of the losers are still active in the land of the winners". A collage of documentary materials, newsreel footage, and re-enacted scenes, the film recaps the military triumph over the ideologies of ethnic superiority – and establishes that anti-Semitism and racism have survived in post-war America. Stickers saying "Save America – Don't Buy from Jews", signs stating "For Whites Only" and images showing the victims of ritual murders committed by the Ku-Klux-Klan are brought into correspondence with footage of Nazi rallies and concentration camp inmates. In 1945, enthusiasm about this "strange victory" was short-lived. The same old structures, whereby skin colour and religion determined whether the front or the back door was to be used to go to work, were still very much alive.
The film is an early polemic against racism, which holds America up to its own standards as a civil society. And at the same time it's a still highly relevant analysis of the simple, yet unfortunately powerful nature of racism.

Bernd Buder

The American decline

Strange Victory was the first solo film by Leo Hurwitz, a central character in the radical Frontier Film movement. It is both an exposé and inside view of the facts of the Cold War as experienced at the very moment of its birth. The director's vision amounts to an almost surrealist network of images and sounds about the perverse consequences of the 'strange victory' – how high hopes are destroyed, and the flowers of evil grow instead, with aggressive Capitalism and anti-Semitism taking over, vampire-like, all aspects of everyday life, probably including personalities who had natural goodness in them. It's not just a Cold War, it is also a civil war. The chilling existence of American fascism is revealed through a puzzle of collage materials. Hurwitz utilises both archival material ('found footage') and material he has shot himself – and, as with some other rare examples, the technically uneven material somehow, on a par with its splendid montage, just blossoms into visual brilliance. Tens and even hundreds of faces flash on screen, with a poignant testimony in them: there are too many terrible faces on the street. There, in the familiar circumstances of peaceful life, we can detect horror and degradation, welling deeper than that of a horror movie. These are flashes that can't be reduced to the pseudo-ideas of 'left-wing' propaganda. The dramaturgy is an open one, respecting the intelligence of the spectator, and proceeding in sharp turns: dramatic condensations, fascinatingly illusory plot turns (the search for Hitler – 'the biggest man hunt in history'), and paradoxes. V-Day is like a ghost: 'If we did win, why do we look as if we lost?' The doubts that were growing, even from 1945's summer of great hope, are delivered as a play of light and shadow, something that is profoundly connected to the very essence of cinema.

Peter von Bagh

A pathological parallel

The setup of this extraordinary documentary essay (featuring journalistic research, archival footage, and fictional reconstructions) is that of a film noir, but Hurwitz, with his audacious editing and blunt commentary, infuses it with a substance far more radical and harrowing than anything Hollywood could produce. The horrors of a world in which concentration camps functioned untouched are shown to have a pathological parallel in American prejudice – anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and especially racism in all its forms, from job and housing discrimination to lynching, the victims of which Hurwitz calls 'the casualties of a war.' Tracking Hitler's rise to power, Hurwitz is shocked to find 'the ideas of the loser still active in the land of the winner.' The film acts as a kind of collective psychoanalysis; its findings are yet to be worked through.
Richard Brody, The New Yorker, Vol. 86, Issue 4, p. 16, 15, March 2010

The hollow patriotism of the post-war years

Strange Victory was created during a time when any critique of American society was seen as bordering on treason. In many ways, the isolationism and conservatism of the post-war years was a response to the period of progressive activism that had preceded the Second World War.

In the 1930s, the poverty and mass unemployment of the Great Depression in the 1930s had created a groundswell of support for social equality. The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) and other left-leaning organisations were popular with both workers and intellectuals seeking a better society. Reflecting the 'Popular Front' policy introduced by the Comintern in 1934, the CPUSA actively worked in cooperation with other progressive organisations including the Socialist Party, and even actively supported the New Deal policies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. At its height in 1939, the CPUSA had approximately 50,000 members (a very small fraction of the US population of 130,900,000), although how many were active and how many were 'sympathetic' to the cause is unknown.

The Second Red Scare

In 1939, when the Soviet Union and Germany signed the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Agreement (officially the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), many CPUSA members and allies saw the move as a betrayal of the ideals of the movement and of the people of Eastern Europe and Finland. The agreement was broken when German troops invaded the USSR in June 1941.
Although during the war, the United States and the Soviet Union were allies against the Axis powers of Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy, and Japan, the coalition was inherently fragile and did not last. Following V-E Day, the Soviet Union began instituting a policy preventing its republics and people from any contact with the rest of Europe and the US. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill dubbed this Soviet isolationism an 'Iron Curtain' (although he did not originate the phrase). During the war, the USSR had gained control of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, and it went on to control and annex other Eastern European countries including Poland, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Albania, and East Germany. In response, and for its own internal and international reasons, the US government (now led by President Harry S. Truman) moved away from any political engagement with the USSR and much of American society retreated into a defensive shell, where anything foreign was viewed with suspicion. One manifestation of this was the second Red Scare (the first took place following the First World War). Today, most people think of post-war anti-communism as 'McCarthyism' (named after the Republican US senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, who accused many in and out of the government of being current or former members of the CPUSA), but the paranoia and persecution both pre-dated the senator and was a nationwide phenomenon.
In March 1947, President Truman signed an executive order creating the 'Federal Employees Loyalty Program', establishing political-loyalty review boards to determine the loyalty of federal employees and to recommend termination of those who had confessed to spying for the Soviet Union, as well as some suspected of being 'Un-American'. That same year, the Taft-Hartley Act required union leaders to file affidavits declaring that they were not supporters of the Communist Party and had no relationship with any organisation seeking the 'overthrow of the United States government by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional means'. In response, the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organisations), fired union leaders and expelled several national unions.

Blacklists for artists

It was a time of loyalty oaths, naming names … and blacklists. The first systematic Hollywood blacklist was instituted on 25 November 1947, the day after ten writers and directors were cited for

contempt of Congress for refusing to testify to before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. A group of studio executives acting together fired the so-called 'Hollywood Ten'. To make blacklisting easier, in 1950 three former FBI agents and a founder of the racist John Birch society began publishing a pamphlet entitled Red Channels that identified 151 entertainment industry professionals as 'Red Fascists and their sympathisers.' Soon most of those named, along with a host of other artists, were barred from employment in most of the entertainment field. Perhaps due in part to this film, director Leo Hurwitz was named in the publication, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s he was only able to work anonymously for the television broadcaster CBS's programme *Omnibus*.

Returning to a racist environment

In this climate, Hurwitz's message in ***Strange Victory***, which compared the people of post-war America to the Fascist enemies the country had defeated, did not bode well for its critical reception or box office success. The film explores the hypocrisy of race relations in America following the country's victory over an overtly racist and genocidal enemy. Having just defeated Nazism, US soldiers come home to an all-too-similar environment at home. African-Americans were still oppressed, discriminated against, segregated into inferior housing and education, denied the right to vote, and subject to violence at the hands of both mobs and police. Black veterans who had just been in charge of piloting aircraft came home to find that they were only employable in unskilled positions. The film provides staggering statistics on African-Americans in the post-war workforce: out of the 80,000 civil engineers employed, fewer than 100 were black. Of 200,000 doctors and dentists, just two per cent were black. Sadly, comparing these statistics to the modern-day workforce, we find that inequality is still present. Today, out of 262,170 civil engineers, just six-point-four per cent are black, and out of 893,851 doctors, three-point-eight per cent are black. Out of 90,000 employed architects, two per cent are black and black lawyers account for only three per cent of lawyers at big firms.

Invisible labels

As a Jew, Hurwitz had faced injustice and discrimination. Producer Barney Rosset, although born to wealth, faced obstacles as he was half-Jewish and an avowed liberal in the military – he also struggled to find work after the war. ***Strange Victory*** attempted to convey a poignant and overtly politically message that challenged the blandly patriotic and self-congratulatory sentiment popular in post-war America.

The film called into question the prevailing ideology that celebrated the powerful post-war American republic – a democracy that reacted to victory by passing laws discriminating against its own people. While Jews in Nazi Germany had been forced to wear a yellow star to mark them, minorities in America wore invisible labels that limited their rights and governed their lives. In a country formed by immigrants, anti-immigrant messages and beliefs echoed throughout the nation. Hurwitz conveyed this irony and hypocrisy with shots of whites-only facilities and lynchings. (Even in 1946, there were six reported lynchings of African-Americans.) The film boldly proclaimed that 'the colour of your skin… the slant of your eyes… the breadth of your nostrils… the shape of your nose' determined the fate of children born into the utopia of post-war America.

Best brand to have is WXF

In Leo Hurwitz's original script for ***Strange Victory*** (courtesy of the George Eastman House from the Hurwitz Collection), the director provides some insight into his and Rosset's theme for the film: 'Though our dead were not all buried, we had the right to celebrate. We lifted off the weight of years of war. We turned on the lights. We were happy. We smiled for every camera. We climbed telephone poles, and hung the Axis leaders in effigy. We rode on our neighbours' backs. We kissed the nearest girl. A holiday long pent-up, celebrating a freer, peaceful future – celebrating no more war – celebrating a United World. We had seen the end of Hitler and Mussolini and the might of Japan. We had seen the end of international hate and the German Aryan superman… the end of satanic anti-Semitism… We had seen the end of all the monstrous acts of man which grew from the idea that one people was worthy of the whole Earth and all others were to be crushed, enslaved, or burned into manure for the fields… But America is not a single place, a single idea, a single aim. Today – there are those among us whose first concern is: your colour – your religion – your birthplace – your beliefs. They ask whether your life is insecure, whether you are unemployed. Then they give their answers: the danger is the JEWS. Your enemy is the POPE. The NEGRO threatens white supremacy… You will have to understand this complicated civilisation. And you will be wise to accept facts as they are, adapt to them, if you want to get along. Though you all look alike and pretty anonymous, you will soon be branded. There are small variations that make all the difference… The best brand to have is W X F; that means White Christian, Protestant. You don't have any choice in the matter, but if you have this brand, you're off to a good start… Or, if you are one of three million other American, you will find many doors to clubs, jobs, and houses closed to you. Your brand will be W J – white, Jewish. As I said before, these letters are not going to be burned into you – no need to cry – these are facts that you are going to have to face as the Class of America, Twentieth Century.'

Source: Milestone Films

Two copies and the restoration of *Strange Victory*

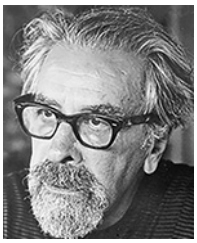
Milestone Films licensed ***Strange Victory*** directly from producer Barney Rosset and Evergreen Review in 2011. It turned out that Hurwitz's materials on ***Strange Victory*** had been donated to the George Eastman House, which claimed to have the best existing materials. Meanwhile, the Rossett Collection had been donated to Columbia University. Fortunately, Milestone had a long relationship not only with the GEH but also with the Hurwitz estate's co-trustee, Manfred Kirschheimer.

In 2014, Milestone was able to get Columbia University and the George Eastman House to send their film elements to Metropolis Post for inspection and to create a 2K test scan of the first few minutes. It turned out the GEH material included a very beautiful 35mm negative created in 1963, most likely for Hurwitz's re-release the next year. However, the big surprise was that Columbia University's 35mm 'composite print' was actually the original 35mm nitrate fine grain master from 1948! It too was in excellent condition with very little to no shrinkage. After scanning the first few minutes of each version, it was obvious that the original nitrate material was a little sharper and with slightly better contrast – as would be expected from a previous generation of material.

The first job was scanning nitrate 35mm fine grain, followed by the laborious task of digitally cleaning the dust and scratches that

had accumulated over the years. Jack Rizzo's Metropolis Post did the work, with colourist Jason Crump timing the material and Ian Bostick doing the cleaning. Rich Cutler Sound Mix and Design in New York restored the sound.

Source: Milestone Films



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Leo Hurwitz (1909–1991) was born the son of Russian immigrants in the Williamsburg neighbourhood of Brooklyn in New York City. After studying at Harvard on a scholarship, he edited the New Theater Magazine and was the cameraman and co-writer of the film *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (USA 1936, director: Pare Lorentz), before deciding on a career as documentary film director. Among his best-known films are *Native Land* and *Verdict for Tomorrow*, a documentary on the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. Leo Hurwitz was a member of the Workers Film and Photo League. In 1934, he and some other members founded Nykino, an organisation aimed at making documentary-dramatic revolutionary cinema. Later Nykino was absorbed by Hurwitz's own production company, Frontier Films, one of the first non-profit production platforms for documentary filmmakers. From 1969 to 1974, Hurwitz was a professor at the Graduate Institute of Film and Television at New York University.

Films

1942: *Native Land* (80 min.). 1956: *The Museum and the Fury* (56 min.). 1961: *Eichmann Trial* (TV). 1961: *Verdict for Tomorrow* (30 min.). 1981: *Dialogue with a Woman Departed* (225 min.). 2014: *Discovery in a Painting* (Co-director: Manfred Kirchheimer, 29 min.). 1948: ***Strange Victory***.