

The “forces in power” are sensitive “to art and ideas”

A conversation with award-winning cinematographer Tom Hurwitz

David Walsh
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On Monday, we commented on the documentary *The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith*, directed by Sara Fishko, which is a fascinating look at jazz, photography and life generally in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s.

Today we post a conversation with Tom Hurwitz, the cinematographer on that film. The discussion begins with Fishko’s film, but turns to a number of broader questions.

Born in 1947, Hurwitz is the son of Leo Hurwitz (1909-91), the documentary filmmaker who was blacklisted during the anti-communist purges of the 1950s. Leo Hurwitz participated in left-wing artistic circles in the 1930s, including the Workers Film and Photo League, Nykino and, ultimately, Frontier Films. He worked with major figures such as Paul Strand, Ralph Steiner, Willard Van Dyke and others. Hurwitz and Strand co-directed *Native Land* (1942), a series of vignettes concerned primarily with political reaction. In April 1952, director Elia Kazan, a former colleague, named Leo Hurwitz along with several others in his infamous testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC).

Tom Hurwitz is one of the most honored documentary cinematographers in the US. He has won two Emmy Awards, the Sundance and Jerusalem Film Festival Awards for Best Cinematography, and photographed films that have won four Academy Awards and several more that have been nominated. His television programs have won dozens of awards, including Emmy, Dupont, Peabody, Directors Guild and film festival awards for Best Documentary, over the last 25 years.

The lengthy list of films and television programs on which Tom Hurwitz has worked over the past four decades includes *Harlan County, USA* (1976), *Down and Out in America* (1986), *Wild Man Blues* (1997), *Dancemaker* (1998), *The Turandot Project* (2000), *My Generation* (2000), *Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero* (2002), *God’s Next Army* (2006), *Killing in the Name* (2010) and *The Queen of Versailles* (2012).

We spoke recently.

David Walsh: At what point did you become involved with *The Jazz Loft According to W. Eugene Smith*?

Tom Hurwitz: Sara Fishko had started with another producer, who wasn’t really a producer. She had shot perhaps two interviews, which were not well shot. A lot of thought had not been given to the visuals. It is actually very hard to shoot something simple like an interview. It’s a bit like a haiku.

DW: Could you elaborate on that point?

TH: Lighting an interview is like lighting a portrait. Composing an interview is like composing a portrait. It would seem that a portrait is the simple painting of a face, or photograph of a face. But, in fact, it’s not. Getting into that face, lighting that face in a manner that is both revealing

and beautiful, placing that face in relation to a background that says something but doesn’t say too much, that appears subliminally but does not appear obviously, that doesn’t detract from the person—all of that requires some thought and artistry.

Making you look interesting in the way the film needs you to look is really a very subtle, complex process. People are often amazed at how many lights I use. I can sometimes do it with two lights, but sometimes it takes six or seven. It has to do with the entire approach and what is wanted out of an interview. Anyway, starting out in feature and fiction films, then moving to documentaries, I took with me a lot of what it takes to light a close-up.

DW: I don’t have to tell you that a lot of “talking heads” sequences in documentaries are extremely boring.

TH: In many cases, that has to do with the content of the films obviously, but there is a visual element as well. Some of the ones that drive me the craziest are in the Ken Burns films. There is this sort of orangish light from the side, falsely dramatic.

So the few interviews that had been done for the *Jazz Loft* film did not truly speak to it, and Sara felt that. She’s very visually sensitive. There were also some other problems. So Sara went to Calvin Skaggs at Lumiere Productions, for whom she had worked as an editor in years past. This was very early in the process. Cal and I had worked together for at least 15 years before this. Cal asked me to come on the project and then he told me who was directing it ... Sara—whom I had known since high school, though we hadn’t seen each other very often. I was really excited to work with her.

DW: The film is a challenge because there are some many still photographs. Yet in one’s memory one recalls movement.

TH: That’s the work of Sara and the editors. That style is completely unique. There are all kinds of ways of treating stills, of animating stills, programs to animate stills, but this is not that. This is really a unique vision of what to do with still photography.

They had some help from the fact there were so many photos. Gene Smith would have a contact sheet and it would have four or five stills of essentially the same thing, So you could animate them and make it feel like they were moving. But also you could move inside of stills and cut from one still to another with a certain amount of continuity. They were given a terrific gift in terms of his photographic work.

DW: You have a number of extraordinary artists, musicians and photographers in this film. It seems at times a rebuke to the present situation where celebrity, instant fame and box office success seem to mean everything. Eugene Smith, despite all his ups and downs, believed, or hoped, that art could change the world for the better. Is that an idea that appeals to you?

TH: If I’ve learned one thing over my career in filmmaking, it’s not to

be grandiose about art and the role of art.

However, leave it to the forces in power to tell us how important art is. Art is the first thing that gets attacked. Put someone dressed as Donald Trump on stage in Central Park, and all of a sudden they're pulling the money out. The right-wing blogosphere goes crazy about a play, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, written 400 years ago, that says that political violence and disorder are the wrong thing to do. So *they're* telling us, you do make a difference.

I'm doing a web site on my dad, Leo Hurwitz. This is his FBI file. [Holds it up.] A telephone book. They have materials here from the 1930s. They were filing them, but I'm not sure they were watching him yet. They were watching him seriously from probably somewhere in the middle of the war, because he was a "premature antifascist."

Can you imagine how many FBI hours were spent amassing a thing like that? And not watching Vito Genovese and the crime families? It's stunning. Leo never did anything but make films and write.

This is ridiculous, but it has to do with their sensitivity to art and ideas.

DW: You said in passing before that you had started in feature films, fiction films, and later gone into documentaries.

TH: It's not that simple. I was doing political organizing in California and it became clear to me that I wanted to do something with my life that involved giving as opposed to taking, this is 1973 or so, and that I had some artistic stuff in me and it would be a shame not to nurture that.

I finished up what I was doing in Riverside, California, which was defending a guy, Gary Lawton, who was accused of killing two cops. We were ultimately successful, in that he was found not guilty. The media work I'd been doing was still photography. I came back to New York to get involved in film, because my dad was making what was to become his last film. I felt that perhaps I was strong enough now to be able to work with him. He was a very strong personality, and as his son it was hard for me to find out who I was in such close proximity to him.

So I worked with him for about six months on his film, and I found that I actually wasn't old enough to do that. We parted amicably and I went off to begin freelance work in New York. I worked in documentaries, but I moved into commercials and narrative because that was the trajectory that a cameraman always wanted to take. I wanted to become a skillful cameraman and have control over my work, and where you have most control is in narrative work. I did that while still working on documentaries every once in a while, like Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County, USA* [1976], for example.

At a certain point—I think it was during my divorce, when I had to make a lot of money, and I had two kids in school—I moved almost completely into commercials and narrative work because the pay was much better. I did that for 15 years or so, again with the occasional documentary. I went back and forth between places in New York and Los Angeles.

Some time in the early 1990s there was a boycott of New York by the producers. So production in New York fell to almost zero. Almost every cameraman that I knew moved to Los Angeles. I was about to go. I just had had another child; if we were going to move, this would be the time.

But I looked around, I thought about things, and I realized this was not going to make me happy, this was not what I really wanted to do, what I wanted to do was make documentaries. We stayed in New York, got rid of the place in LA, I cut my income in half. I've been shooting documentaries ever since, and I've never regretted the choice.

Films are always hugely expensive, but I'm not in love with films where there are gigantic sums of money riding on every decision, so that paper trails are made and there is a terrific amount of tension with every choice. I'm not in love with the world where everybody only knows film and film gossip, where the crew only talks about film and nothing else. Because that's not how my mind works. I am fascinated by film, by technology and the design of film, but I'm even more fascinated by every other aspect of life. Documentaries suit my disposition more.

I love improvisation and the improvisational aspect of documentary, working with chance, and making order out of the random or the apparently random. That piece of it I find much more exciting than scripted filmmaking.

DW: If one looks at your 140 or so credits, and one tries to figure out which films were your choice and which were imposed on you by necessity, it's a bit tricky.

TH: It's always a mix. In recent years, I've been lucky. More feature documentaries have been made, so I haven't had to shoot the standard fare as much. Who knows what's going to happen? I have expenses, I have a life, I have to shoot what I shoot. I try to turn down work that I'm completely opposed to, morally. I was asked to shoot the film that would be in the Nixon Library ...

DW: Did you feel at various points that you were being invited to join the Hollywood world?

TH: No... Yes... I could have joined that world. At one point I was shooting series and movies of the week. And features. The next step would have been to cut my ties to New York and only shoot in the Hollywood world. I still have an agent in Los Angeles.

Listen, I love walking on set and having 55 people look to me and ask me what we do first. It's a wonderful feeling, making an image out of absolutely nothing. You walk into a studio and there's nothing but a studio there, and by the time you're done, it's a rainy street, or a rooftop, and the whole outside world is there. It's "nighttime" and it looks absolutely real. That's wonderful. It's a very exciting thing to do. But it's not exciting enough for me.

DW: What have been some of your most memorable and positive film experiences?

TH: It's hard to say. I shot a lot of war. That's memorable, although I try not to remember some of it. In documentary, positive means exposing, seeing, so in a film I shot called *Killing in the Name* [2010], I looked for a couple of hours into the eyes of a man whose job it was to recruit suicide bombers. That was memorable. Recently, I looked into the eyes of Henry Kissinger and that was memorable. An aging war criminal. I've looked into the eyes of many war criminals.

I love shooting bodies in movement, so shooting two films with choreographer Paul Taylor was an incredible gift. Every day on a documentary set is a new world, a new piece of the world to investigate.

Of course, I'm always drawn to films about art, society and social justice. I'm working on two films now, both of which I am co-directing. One is a film that lives half in the present and half in history. It's about a dance that was made by the Bill T. Jones Dance Company at the height of the AIDS crisis. It talks about historical memory and asks whether a group of young dancers today can grasp the mind-set that was behind the creation and performance of that dance.

Then there's a film we're doing in the South Bronx about a revolutionary public school. It involves a bunch of educational heroes. Coming into that school every day and being with them, filming what they do, is inspiring. It is about what it takes to make public education work. I can't think of anything more important in this climate.

DW: Your answer then is a vindication of the decision you made 25 years ago.

TH: I've been able to get to work on a lot of films that have been important in one way or another. I've been all around the world, certainly on every continent and in every major country, every state in the US. I'm about to go to Asia and then Australia. So there's a lot of that kind of experience and I feel fortunate. But the real stuff is what happens in the frame in front the camera. That can happen anywhere.

DW: How was it shooting *Creepshow 2* [1987]?

TH: Oh, it was terrible. It was originated by this group of rogue filmmakers in Pittsburgh who had produced *Creepshow* [1982], *Day of the Dead* [1985], *Dawn of the Dead* [1978] ... George Romero was the guiding

spirit, and so forth.

Creepshow was an homage to the comic books of the 1950s. They had an interesting take on horror filmmaking. But this second one was bought by a Hollywood producer. There was a lot of money behind it, but not a lot of wisdom. They made this objectionable English character the line producer. They begin to make a lot of production decisions that were mistakes and then make everyone pay for them. That was a very unpleasant experience. But I had all the toys I wanted.

DW: Could we talk about the blacklist and Elia Kazan for a minute?

TH: Coincidentally, I was at the Academy Awards when Kazan received his honorary award in 1999, because a feature documentary I worked on [*Dancemaker*, 1998] was nominated for an Oscar. It was fascinating.

A number of us, fairly left-wing film people like Haskell Wexler, decided to attend the ceremony, despite the protest. I'm happy I did. One really should walk the red carpet at least once. We sat on our hands when Marty Scorsese gave the lifetime appreciation award to Kazan. A shameful business.

Here's my story about Kazan. I shot a film for Jeanne Moreau, who directed, about Joseph Mankiewicz, the writer and director. Mankiewicz had a beautiful place in Bedford, New York, in Westchester County. There was a certain period, I guess the 1920s, when they were building French châteaux in the suburbs, and he had one of these amazing houses.

I turned around at one point and standing next to Mankiewicz was Kazan. So I went over, and he said, 'Hey, I just wanted to say hello. Your dad hates my guts.' And I said, 'I understand it's with good reason.' I walked away.

DW: It's so typical of Kazan. As though it were all your father's doing. What a swine!

TH: A total swine. In 1999 I was still in my 20-year hiatus from my dad after he died [in 1991] and I wasn't immersed in his history as I am now, when we are doing a web site about his life and work. I knew all the facts about what Kazan had done, but the acute pain of that betrayal in a time of betrayal was not as clear... I didn't feel it as keenly as I do now.

I'm sure Kazan named names before the House Committee, not because he needed to (there was no blacklist in the theater), but because he wanted to inflict punishment for various personal grievances, including on my dad. You remember the scene in *On the Waterfront* [1954] where Marlon Brando goes through a kind of gauntlet, up to Father somebody or other [played by Karl Malden]—he took it shot by shot from a scene in my father's *Native Land* [1942], the labor spy scene ...

DW: With Howard Da Silva and Art Smith.

TH: Right. That labor spy script was initially started in rudimentary form by Kazan and Ralph Steiner. As you know, *Native Land* is made up of a series of vignettes.

DW: It's the most memorable sequence.

TH: I think it's three times as long as any other sequence. Steiner and Kazan began to develop that sequence as the basis for another film that Frontier Films, in which they all were members, was considering. I think Steiner and Willard Van Dyke began to shoot it. Anyway, the group thought it was not well done. So it was taken away from them. And Paul Strand and Hurwitz rewrote it totally, and brought it into the *Native Land* project, which was developing at the time. I guess Kazan never forgave Leo.

DW: It's interesting that Kazan was working on a scene about treachery. Individual lives and careers were damaged or destroyed, but what do you think were some of the longer-term consequences of the purge of left-wing artists from the film industry?

TH: I think you have to look at blacklisting as part of an assault on left-wing culture in America. It goes from academia, including high schools and colleges, through the arts to the labor movement. A kind of an iron curtain, ironically, was dropped over American history before the war.

Think about Diego Rivera's mural for Rockefeller Center, for example,

erased from the wall and forgotten—or even Edward Hopper ... it took decades for him, for members of the Prairie School and for other artists of the 1930s to get on a gallery wall again. It was different in different fields, but that history or its left-wing aspects were cordoned off.

Part of that is the history of documentary film. The social documentary was invented in New York City by the group of filmmakers that included, prominently, my father. There were tributaries from Russia, France and England, but the social documentary—like abstract expressionist art—was invented in New York City between 1930 and 1942, by a bunch of left-wing guys who submerged their lives in thinking about film theory, and making documentary films, in various collaborations for 10 years.

The fact that documentary film came out of the struggle for social justice and was always connected to that struggle is hugely important in this time of reality television. The "red scare" of the 1950s has cut us off from that history.

DW: We could even be a little blunter, it started in the struggle against capitalism. A lot of interesting people made careers in the 1950s, not everyone was purged or destroyed, but something was cut out of what they could say. Films could discuss racism, mental illness, alcoholism, even militarism, all sorts of things, but they could not discuss the economic and social foundations of American society. A film could never say or imply that the whole society needed to be transformed from top to bottom.

TH: You could say that between 1967 and 1973, certain films did, but that rarely happened in the 1950s. Films that had any radical content were crushed by the "red scare" culture during the 10 to 15 years that it held sway.

DW: I think that the "new leftism" of the late 1960s left much to be desired and many questions were unanswered, about the Soviet Union, about Stalinism. In any case ...

TH: That repression has been part of American life and it's been ramped up when it needed to be. Ever since the beginning of the socialist threat. That's where J. Edgar Hoover came from.

Part of the problem is that the American dream is built into the DNA of virtually everybody who comes here and connects to it, historically. It's part of the founding myth of this country and myths are very important. Patriotism has a different meaning in America than it does in many other countries, although they're doing their best to crank up nationalism everywhere.

DW: The American dream is wearing a little thin.

TH: It is wearing a little thin. But that frightens people and fear is a bad motivator. There are a lot of sedimentary layers in the geology of American history. Layers that lie barely under the surface and one of the things that this proto-fascist campaign has done is to turn up those layers, of racism, misogyny, hatred of immigrants, that are analogous to anti-Semitism in Europe. We've only seen the beginning of this shit.

DW: I would be the last one to idealize the situation or minimize the dangers, but I don't think those elements predominate in the population at all. In general, our experience is that there is a big movement to the left, with of course all the inevitable confusion. There's enormous social anger, anger at the rich, anger at the banks, Wall Street, both parties. Fox News is not America, nor is Trump. Far from it.

TH: Trumpism is a minority, for sure. But a left without a clear program and organizing activity is not going to be able to counter the force and money behind the right wing.

DW: As a final question, what's your general feeling about the film industry today?

TH: Hollywood movies are dominated by blockbusters and are basically hopeless. Independent features are in a slump, very little is being done in the way of interesting independent features. In narrative film, the most exciting area, of course, is television.

In documentaries, we are participating in the expansion of venues and

the need for material. So there is a greater market for documentaries than there ever has been before. In that way, we're living through a golden age. But there are too many documentaries being made for the film festivals and too many for the television networks. So who knows what's going to happen—but more people are certainly more interested in documentaries than ever before.

DW: I do think there's a hunger for, an interest in something other than *Wonder Woman*.



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