

LEO HURWITZ THE ART OF SEEING SERIES 3
THE ISLAND 1968-1970
Seeing With Our Hearts

By Sandra E. Cohen

The Island, the third film in Leo Hurwitz and Peggy Lawson's series, *The Art of Seeing* (1968- 1970), is a film about a museum, The Detroit Institute of Art. But, this film isn't just about a museum. It's about discovering the meaning in art; and that requires looking deeply and openly to see what is there. If we let him, Leo Hurwitz has a few things to teach us about seeing. We are witnesses to that fact as we watch all his films, no less *The Art of Seeing* series. He also has much to show us about love, acceptance, and truth.

Swedish filmmaker and cinematographer Ingela Romare introduces us to Leo and Peggy's reason for making this film: "They wanted to pull down the barriers which prevent an immediate and spontaneous meeting with a work of art ... they take us carefully into this island of collective human experiences."

Openly receiving what museums have to offer isn't always easy. When The Detroit Institute of Art asked Leo to make this film, he said to them: "let me make it about what's in the museum, what the content is. Let's use it to discover the meanings, the experience of art let's use it to reach people with things they might not have felt. A lot of people are closed off to museums. They are a far off place, they push you away, many people feel that way."

I know that feeling. When I walk into a museum, I'm overwhelmed. Where do I start? Do I take in everything in one visit? Leo says, "No." I guess it's not so different from my work as a psychoanalyst. I take one step at a time when trying to reach people in places they haven't been able to go. There's no "right" way to begin.

Leo had his own particular method for starting this project when he began to write a script: "Once I got them to agree to the idea, I sat down to write notes to myself; [this is] my way of getting to a script for a film and contemplating what the boundaries of the film will be ... first to be free in my mind." Leo tells Ingela Romare where his musing took him:

Relevance

"These notes ... are a kind of inner self-to-self-dialogue in which I am asking myself questions. One of the questions I have is the word "relevance," meaning

‘what is the relevance of the art, that is, the art in the museum and the people around it?’

For Leo, finding this relevance is rooted in each person’s feelings and emotional histories: “If there’s someone you hate, you love, or something you enjoy, you’ll find that hate, love, joy, in the museum. The museum is an encyclopedia of feeling, of perception, of particularized knowledge. In a sense, the nub of the universe of life.” These realizations led Leo to several questions:

“What is art? What is relevant in art, and why lead people to it? [Viewing art] is a process of great enjoyment because I don’t have any boundaries; I don’t have to make a script. I just have to discover what’s inside myself on the subject. Then, I came to the theme of what is the working energy of paintings?”

As he dialogued with himself, on November 20, 1968, Leo decided that the central energy in art is - Love.

Love

Love is a complicated thing. We all know that. Those we love need our interest and desire to know them, our curiosity, our patience with the difficulties, and time. Art is no different. To Leo, this is what it takes for an artist to create:

“The working energy in all the paintings, good and poor is ... some form of love. There are other energies, but ... the art of painting is love because the painting of a subject, the canvas, must be loved. Otherwise, it would not be done. It’s too intricate, too demanding, too involved, in its creation. In order to get by all those difficulties, you have to love it...”

An artist brings to his work, Leo tells us: “the attention, the intimate search; the caress of the eyes. The process itself is ... the love of the real, the truth, of what he sees and knows ... love in good art is not a romantic thing that eliminates insight, criticism, and hate. On the contrary, [the artist] creates this content, energized by the love of truth.” As an artist himself, Leo was familiar with what it takes to create.

Truth

An artist finds his truth by reaching deep inside for a feeling or belief, perhaps not even conscious. Art lovingly, creatively, and honestly expresses what emerges. If we take the time to look, we know that artist’s truth when we see it.

This is the kind of truth Leo Hurwitz brings to his films. It's the kind of truth he invites us to bring to our own experience of art.

Any creative impulse emerges out of deep, personal feeling. Such inner reaching is also the source for our own feeling into art and, if we are open, allowing art to bring us new realizations. Yet, this isn't the way many of us were taught art in school or the way museums are set up - to make us feel rushed and without room to stand still, pause, take in, and feel. In *The Island* and with his words, Leo calls on us to do something quite different:

“Stand in front of the painting, and what do you experience? Go away and come back, you experience something different ... this is a painting the artist took months, maybe years, to complete. There's a complexity of life that went into it and unless you give it the time to come out, it isn't going to come out ... if it's going to be an experience that has any enjoyment, any feeling, any growth of knowledge and so forth, then you're just going to have to give yourself to it.”

Maybe, as Leo suggests, we won't look at one hundred and fifty paintings; we'll only look at five.

Beginning

As we enter the gates of The Detroit Institute of Art these are the things my eyes focus on; the things I see: the Eye in a painting, a sculpture of a male face, a primitive mask; a medieval armor. I see the prehistoric figures at the museum's entrance, a fertility god or goddess, and an embryo in the womb.

This is where we all start. We begin with our pre-history. I begin with mine. This film is my great-uncle Leo's film, my grandfather's youngest brother. I see where I've come from. Where we each go is up to us. Hopefully, we go with our eyes and learn to see with our hearts.

There are many and different faces captured by each artist and by Leo's camera. These faces take us into human experience. We relate. We are not islands. We all begin not knowing differences.

People

The museum is full of people through the ages. There are lovers, Greek runners on an urn, a figure in a garden and hands. Can we reach out, reach into the experience Leo is giving us; that the artist brings through his paintings and his sculptures?

There are eyes, eyes that look out from pieces of art. These eyes are the artist's vision, the eye of Leo's camera, and our own eyes looking. What do we see when we look? Do we see differences or commonality? Are we open to seeing the truth?

We're now on a street. People walk. A taxi goes by. People wait to cross. The film superimposes photos and images of art upon this daily slice of life. This is the stuff of human experience where the inspiration for art happens, as multi-textured and multi-dimensional as life itself.

On the street, in our simple lives, we sometimes see only one dimension. Yet, human experience is as complex as the face of a woman captured by Leo's camera - short, dark hair, sunglasses, a faux fur white jacket to ward off the Detroit chill. She walks, stops; looks directly into the camera - confused, bothered; unhappy.

Here, everywhere, are nuances of human feeling. We all have these feelings, in varying personal forms. We bring them to our lives, to making art or to witnessing art after it's made. Looking and seeing, we enter into an experience that is not entirely our own.

Seeing

The camera takes us back to the face of the woman with black hair and sunglasses. She now wears an angry, perturbed look. Is she mad at being seen? Is the camera an intruder? She looks away as if saying: "You won't see me." Maybe she's the one refusing to look.

Looking isn't easy. There are difficult things to see, and art shows us exactly where human life is lived. The artist takes us to these challenging places; much trickier than the picture that now comes on the screen. Children play with hula-hoops in a park, their faces open, not yet jaded with reasons not to trust. Can we go openly too?

Art portrays human life in places that are raw. Feelings can overwhelm - as they must for the man we see in the next painting; naked, flayed backward, drowning, pushed under the water by enemies; a slave, helpless, not in control.

Now, we are again on the street. Whites and blacks picket together. Black Power is spray painted on an outdoor wall. We see a painting of hard labor, both black and white skin. In the neighborhood, children sit together on a stoop. Blacks protest with signs: "We need teacher's aides." We all need help.

Leo's camera focuses on a broken window with curtains still fluttering inside. In *The Island*, he helps us break down the barriers to our commonalities, to seeing how others feel.

Together

Human feelings are the same. Our differences shouldn't separate us; sometimes they arbitrarily do. We see it in art. We see it on the streets. Can we come together like the people who stand before a painting at the museum, taking it in, talking out what they see?

The camera takes us back to Greek runners on an urn. An ancient sculpture shows a woman's kind, but pensive, face. The stern, unrelenting face of a man is carved into a pre-Columbian figure. A Botticelli woman is sleeping. Can we be awake enough to ask: are we kind or un-giving?

In art, we see people. We see them in the paintings and sculptures at The Detroit Institute Of Art. We see people looking. We see them on the streets. We see eyes in all of Leo Hurwitz's films. If we look, we see people in pain; people powerless; people mistreated; people fighting for their rights, people needing our help.

The last image in *The Island* is Van Gogh's self-portrait. Leo Hurwitz's camera zooms onto his face, again and again. As the film comes to a close, we are left with Van Gogh's piercing eyes. In this film, we've been given a chance to turn our eyes inwards, to see clearly and to feel. There is love in creating art. There is love, too, in knowing that others are more like us than we think. With *The Island* and *The Art of Seeing* series, Leo teaches us we can see with our hearts.