

**LEO HURWITZ**  
**HERE AT THE WATER'S EDGE 1961**  
**Seeing What Needs To Be Seen**

**By Sandra E. Cohen**

Leo Hurwitz's film, *Here At The Water's Edge*, features the 1960 New York City's waterfront. Made with photographer Charles Pratt, it is a cinematic poem to the people who work on the water. Leo has always been concerned with seeing what is happening in those spaces in the world where others fail to look. *Here At The Water's Edge*, a film without narration, draws our attention to the sometimes easy to miss goings on in, on, and around water – as well as what the work on the water gives us.

In one of his childhood memories (see my piece, “Leo Hurwitz, Part 2, Leo's History: Childhood Memories and Fantasies”), Leo tells of being distracted and missing his semi-final run for a potato race when he was three. “The threat of missing something by virtue of not being alert haunted me for many years.”

Ingela Romare comments on the close attention Leo Hurwitz pays to seeing in the making of *Here At The Water's Edge* and *The Sun and Richard Lippold*: “In both films ... we meet something that is very special for Leo Hurwitz, a desire to give us, the audience, an immediate experience of what he, himself, has seen and experienced – to share, in a loving way, to make us see, what is there ...”

Seeing what is there isn't easy when it comes to such atrocities as fascism and racial hatred; the consequences of which Leo brings to light in his films *Heart of Spain*, *Native Land*, *Strange Victory*, and *Museum and the Fury*. Although he takes us into nature in *Here At The Water's Edge*, the nuances of Leo's compassion and commitment to the rights of the working class, people that need to be seen and heard, are here in this film as well.

The film begins with Herman Melville's quote: “Yes, as everyone knows ... water and meditation are wedded forever.” We are taken into a meditation on the rights and needs and contributions of people who work on the water.

We hear, immediately, a symphony of ocean waves crashing against the shore. These waves move rhythmically, in and out as they meet the shore and then recede, just as we might see and then forget. Cattails line the water's edge. A lone blooming plant quivers in the wind.

It is peaceful here. Our presence, as spectators, is accompanied by Henry Cowell's orchestral music. We spot a fishing boat not far from the shore. A seagull flies above, calling out to be heard.

What is it that we might see and hear? For each of us, the message will be personal and this is what Leo intends. We'll find that message in *Here At The Water's Edge* in its five separate passages.

### **Passage 1: The Inland Waters**

Water seeps and flows between rocks. There is foam and ice, a winter's water. A tugboat whistles; other boats surround it; there are men working in the cold on the water. We are given a window - an entry into a workingman's life.

A discarded bottle floats quietly, forgotten. Perhaps that bottle is carrying our message. What will we find, *Here At The Water's Edge*?

Seagulls fly over, making their sounds; peaceful above, work below makes the waters rough. We see debris, floating away, the things people abandon; now lost, forgotten, unwanted.

What are we to remember? That life along the water is just as important as life in the city? Not to forget the meaning of those simple things in nature, or the men who perform their modest labor quietly behind the scenes of everyday life.

Day turns into night. A voice speaks out via megaphone. Dark, murky water is lapping against a wooden pier. Then night turns into day, with the pink of the sun rising. More debris of what isn't wanted floats downstream contrasted with hopefully lilting voices of children playing and singing. These are the things of life. And, in life's center is work.

The work we see is the work of common laborers, the workingman whose rights Leo has always been concerned with supporting and protecting. These workers are the ones who work on the water's edge, the port of New York City. They solder, and they use cranking, screeching pulleys; we hear the various harbor noises of men at work with their machines.

A freight train whistles from tracks close by, a tug blows its loud and demanding horn; a boat captain turns his boat's wheel; and a barge moves more quickly than we imagine it could - with a pretty, smiling woman's hair flying in the wind.

In contrast, a cruise ship waits to depart; we are given a glimpse of quiet through the petals of a flower on the water's edge, letting us know that more peaceful waters still exist not far from these busy workers lives.

### **Passage 2: The Changing River**

The river is a place of change. The river edge of New York City's busy ports starkly contrasts with the beatific painter's scenes from yesteryear. A peaceful sea town appears with people lounging on benches, windmills turning slowly; Native Americans in feathered headdresses canoeing on the water. This is a painter's image of a long ago time, and then we come back to now.

In present day 1960, we hear hammering. We see the shadows of the docks reflected in the water. A dog barks. Men's voices talk in the background. A train chugs by. A boat's horn honks. A pink tugboat moored in the harbor is ready to work. A bridge spans the water with cars moving quickly across it.

City life. Lights flash upon dark waters and a deep tugboat horn blows once more, alerting us to daybreak. The camera pans across legs of many men, walking and working in the early morning dawn. The tug's horn is the signal of men laboring on the water; the hard work of a major city's port; receiving and shipping cargo every day.

### **Passage 3: The City's Edge**

Every day, there is work on the water's edge. A man, shadowed, walks across the pier with a hammer. Another man walks down the plank of a large freight ship, its name in large letters: Santa Monica. Another man's shadow is reflected against the red/pink hue of the ship's bottom. We see the black and white of the ship's deck and its beams reaching high above dark water, far into the sky.

A chain pulley lifts the boat's anchor. A man in a hard hat works. A seagull flies overhead. Another man with protective gear over his face solders something on the pier, sparks shooting out, as the ship Santa Monica pulls out into sea.

In the harbor are more working boats with other names - Dalzell and M. McAllister - highlighted against the city's skyline. The propellers of a helicopter whirl. But, the busy working harbor is not all there is on the water's edge.

Boy's play baseball in a park close by. A boy in a red shirt catches a ball; another in a black and white plaid shirt hits the same ball with a bat. We see this young batter's back through a chain link fence and, then, we're inside the

fence, a part of the game. Older men sit together on a park bench, watching children slide down a slide. These are working class people. There is play and there is work on the water's edge.

A freight train carrying stacks of lumber whistles its arrival. A pulley lowers arriving cargo onto the dock. Hands, men's hands, guide the cargo to its destination. A man hops a passing freight train to help bring in its goods. A white sign tells us where we are. This is "The United States of America." This is the workingman's life on the water's edge.

These men have serious faces, intent on their work. Hard hats hammering, guiding steel beams, repairing New York City's docks. We see dirty waters filled with the debris of busy industry, from the city's working harbor. A worker smokes his pipe. These men have weathered faces from working on the water.

In the midst of it all, as a captain guides his barge into the shore, the Statue of Liberty's hand reaches high for all she stands for.

The pinnacle of freedom, she is. But, is there liberty? It's a question Leo Hurwitz asks in many different cinematic forms. Yes, these men have work. They take their work seriously, they do not stop or lounge. But, do they have the same rights and benefits as others? Do they have fair pay, fair hours, for all the work they do on this water's edge?

The camera pans to yellow daisies with their dark black centers, in the midst of hard labor. A daisy - bright and hopeful, stands tall near the water, against the Empire State Building and the New York City sky.

#### **Passage 4: The Surrounding Shores**

Food. This is another commodity that enters the docks on the water's edge. These men help feed us.

Out of the shipyard for now, we see a workingman's hands packing up bushels of potatoes from a large cart. As he works, some of the potatoes spill into the water; an overflow of bananas float too. A poor Black man scavenges this food from the water. There is hunger near the water's edge.

The waves, pink tinged, move in and out in their unchanging rhythm. White foam caps and daisies blow hard in the wind. A freight train does its work. Schwartz Chemical Company's plant alerts us to the dangers of pollution, other kinds of spillage less innocent than food.

The daisy still stands strong along the water's edge. There is hope for humankind in Leo's films, against the dangers and loss of innocence.

We see mothers pushing prams, children and flowers, laughter and big smiles on swings that seem to fly high into the sky and back again. And, there is happy chattering: "Wait for me, wait for me." A merry-go-round spins lonely after a little girl jumps free.

We see the city, families, and commerce. Hard labor contrasts with nature, not ravaged so far - but threatened by obliviousness to what could contaminate life. A bridge - bridges people with nature, with the waters that bring to us the supplies we need to survive.

### **Passage 5: The Island City**

The Statue of Liberty raises her torch on Staten Island. Smokestacks breathe out smoke; water swirls. A boat rests quietly within the cattails near the water's edge. The moon, pink tinged, lights the sky. Waves and tides continue their rhythms, the sun sets and rises, more steady than the varied ebbs and flows of all the different parts of a major city - human, machine, and nature. And, the seagull flies free through the skies.

The city waits for its people. Will we find liberty and equality for all? That is the age-old question and it repeats in every decade and every century.

The film ends with Walt Whitman: "I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence, just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt ..."

I am just one viewer like the lone flowering plant on the water's edge in the film's beginning. I return to the discarded bottle in Passage 1. This message is mine, but maybe it resonates with you:

The tides come in and the tides go out. These are the rhythms of change. In these rhythms are questions that Leo and *Here At The Water's Edge* ask: Can we feel for each other? Can we see those who might otherwise be forgotten? Can we bring out into the light people that live in the shadows, working hard by the water's edge or anywhere else? A day ends and a new day dawns. A daisy stands tall and strong on the shore: a symbol of hope.