

**LEO HURWITZ**  
**DIALOGUE WITH A WOMAN DEPARTED 1972-1980**  
**A Poem Of Love To A Wife - Who Lived In Protest Against Hate**

**By Sandra E. Cohen**

*Shoot Film, Not People*: this is the demonstration sign filmmaker Peggy Lawson, Leo Hurwitz's wife, carried during a march against the Vietnam War. As we watch *Dialogue With A Woman Departed*, Leo's 4-hour love poem to Peggy, we come back to this sign again and again. We come back to Peggy: marching in protest, hair tied back with bandana, face determined, alert, and wise – a kind of wisdom not so easily won.

Peggy's Texas childhood was difficult. Part Native American, she experienced poverty and discrimination. Her sensitive, intelligent, aware nature detected even then the unfairness of poverty, the struggles of those in minority, the ways she and those she loved were treated. From childhood, questions about the forces of hate haunted Peggy.

Peggy and Leo fought these forces with their films and their activism. When Peggy died in 1971, Leo fought a different kind of war – one of loss and grief. To do so, he shot this film:

“This is the film I must make for you, Peggy ... the film I had to make. Otherwise, how would you continue? Continue in tears; in loss ... continue in the black hole inside me ... I must make this film of you to continue you, now in me; to move you into the world we touched heavily, lightly, apart, delicately, passionately apart ... the image is on film.”

The images in *Dialogue With A Woman Departed* are images of a life they shared. They are images of Peggy as child and adult; of Peggy who continued to live inside Leo and who now lives inside each of us as we witness her through Leo's eyes. This film, this dialogue with the woman he loved, is a poem of remembrance. This film is Leo's way of working through his grief.

### **Making Dialogue With A Woman Departed**

*Dialogue With A Woman Departed* was written, photographed, edited, and directed by Leo Hurwitz. The film took about 9 years to make and weaves together earlier films and earlier life. Leo and Kaiulani Lee (for Peggy) narrated the film. Tom Hurwitz (Leo's son), Nelly Burlingham (Leo's third wife), and William Kruzykowski assisted. The film was partially funded by The National

Endowment of the Arts and the New York Council on the Arts. The film won the International Film Critics Award at the Berlin Film Festival in 1981 and it is regarded as one of the great documentary films of our time.

### **Grieving: The Woman I Love Is In Me**

Images. The film begins with a tree trunk, surrounded by snow. A dog barks, a violin plays, and the camera pans upwards into the tree's branches. We hear Leo's voice grieving and remembering: "The memories of flesh, of laughter, of eyes that reach, I pay my respects to you sweet woman of the earth; woman of the landscape, of the autumn, of the water, of the grass." Snow creates designs in the bark of the tree.

It is winter. Leo's voice introduces us first to Peggy's death and, then, to her life: "Peggy lived 'til September, to the turn of the season, her ashes are here, at the roots of the tree. In another season, her eyes traveled into its branches, dwelt on its leaves ... the tree holds its design of life channeling the flow of energies from earth and sky into one living thing ... life dead, terribly dead, transforms itself to life again ... thus the essence of a person has lived itself into me ..."

In *Dialogue With A Woman Departed*, we come to know Peggy through Leo's eyes—the ways she lived in him; the child she was and the woman she became.

### **Peggy: "The Child I Was Is In Me"**

A close up of Peggy's face comes onto the screen. We hear the voice that would be Peggy's if she were alive: "The child I was is in me." We see Peggy as an adult, in protest, carrying her sign: "*Shoot Film, Not People.*" The child Peggy was had her reasons to protest.

Peggy's voice: "What I remember of the trail of tears, I have taken with me in all my wanderings to many places, many tribes ... what I remember of the trail of joy, I have taken with me in all my wanderings. I have wandered into my own past, moving back and forth in memory and time ... I've wandered into terror, into strength ... with submission and love ...with anger and shouting against war and Presidents ... wandered into comrades with whom I shared a world, private and open."

Leo's voice: "She talked little of her childhood, yet I know she was always aware of that special fold in the corner of each eye, a fold examined often in her childhood; a symbol of her Indian past, the image is on film." We see Peggy as

a child, on a train. We see Peggy's face, sipping from a glass, talking on the telephone, a woman in ordinary life. We see a collage of Peggy as a child.

Leo's voice: "I loved her ... and it was special in the way that true things are special ... which means that the real child was a stranger to me ... the child of Texas dust and Los Angeles concrete and palms."

Peggy's voice: "Where is the past? ... The child I was, was there ... seeing into the faces of grown ups, feeling nuances, anxieties, sensing something from the shape of the shoulders ... I knew there were people who did not see... I knew there were poor people and rich ones; for the rich ones what happened to others did not matter, a child wearing a sack was simply that kind of child; a mom with staring eyes and gaunt cheeks was simply that kind of mom."

Images. We see poverty and depression; photos of the Dust Bowl; a young man with a sign: "Want a job, not charity, who will help me?"

The child Peggy was became the activist she was: *Shoot Film, Not People*. In her husband Leo Hurwitz's film remembrance, we see photos of Peggy as a child in different poses and settings. The first is of Peggy as a small girl on a train going somewhere perhaps to the adult woman she became with her sign of protest against murder, against disregard for the humanity of others; against hate.

### **The Child I Was: Speaking Through Film**

"The child I was is in me." Images. A sliver of a moon; a boy sleeping; a baby moving its legs; lights at night in New York City. The sun rises over the water. The boy's sleeping face begins to change. One eye opens and closes again. The child Peggy was kept her eyes open.

Leo's voice: "Passerby ... don't go away. If you stay, *if you allow your eyes to caress, then we'll live into the tree* ... thus life once dead transforms itself ... thus the essence of a person has lived itself into me ... this film approaches with love and anger a portion of the world she is part of and is part of her; a world whose bonds are forged either from empathy or from art, from oppression, or love..."

Peggy's voice: "What are the hidden forces that move into open murder again and again and still unseen ... But it was felt by the child ... the child somehow became filmmaker. I saw films that made me want to make film. I saw some films that translated themselves back to my childhood, connected me to inner meanings. One of them was *Native Land* when she was twenty. What took place in *Native Land* happened when Peggy was nine.

*Native Land* is Leo's film. Murder was a part of it. Images. Two sharecroppers, one white one black, run from deputized men who broke up their union meeting and are now shooting. Both men are killed in cold blood on a deserted road in the backcountry where they tried to make a meager living. Paul Robeson's voice narrates: "The south in July. Cotton country ... two men dead on a road in Arkansas."

Their interest in showing the world unseen with its destructive forces brought Leo and Peggy together. *Dialogue With A Woman Departed* takes us back through footage of Leo's early films about war and hate (*Native Land, Heart of Spain, Strange Victory, and The Museum and the Fury*). These: the oppressive forces Peggy lived with as a child; forces she fought and protested as an adult:

"Those long years, two to eight, nine, ten, a strange world lived around me. I kept reaching back into that world of the '30's for a long time. All my life, those years ... never became the dead past ... how do you grasp fascism on an ordinary day? How do you hold onto the known? The deep cry moves into memory. The ordinary day moves into memory."

## Remembering

Images. From *The Museum And The Fury*: "This too the Museum remembers ... we hit hard, fighting for four Freedoms. Remember? Remember how it was?" Remember the forces of hate: World War II. Hiroshima. Nagasaki. Joseph McCarthy.

Peggy's voice: "I came to know I was not alone in an alien world ... I was political. The struggle continues ... with the images on film." Peggy became a filmmaker. *Shoot film, Not People*. Images. Peggy's face in protest: "Try to remember. Try now to understand."

Martin Luther King. Vietnam. New wars, but the wars are the same: "... if we did not leave behind what we knew, if we did not lose ourselves in the particulars of each day, we could dig out something of what was happening beneath the surface of events."

Remember. Ask the questions Peggy asked: "What does the American government want? Whose interests do they serve? What blind alleys of death are we being led into? What lies have made us passive?"

Images. *Shoot Film, Not People*. The sad troubled face of a Vietnamese mother sitting on a street corner, child in lap. Narration from *The Museum And The Fury*

shakes our passivity: “Endless Auschwitz. Tears for the hungry, innocent, and injured ... war ... maker of orphans, widow-maker ... litany of pain and anger: History is the echo of an angry scream ...”

Grieving for the mistakes of our history or for a love lost does not have to end in anger. Grieving, at its best, is a remembering. Grieving, through this remembering, leads us on the path to a new door - with images.

### **Images Lead The Way**

Peggy’s voice: “Images ... the world inside me, the world outside me. The more I lived, the more I understood that what was around me was a part of me ... I had my lonely child struggles in Texas, anger climbing a tree. The world was separate, frequently enemy ... Later; I learned I could not be disconnected from the others. I shared feelings ...”

Images. A man struggling in the street, a demonstration: “We demand 30% for decent American Standard of Living ... we’ll strike ‘til we win.”

Peggy’s voice: “I kept reaching back into that world of the ‘30’s. Those years never became the past. A question hovered in the air, ‘did people have the right to want something more? The right to organize and strike?’” A demonstration sign from her childhood: “The Spirit of 1937.”

Leo made *Native Land* in 1943. He spoke Peggy’s language. Paul Robeson’s voice narrates: “Here’s how we fought the blacklist. We won back our rights as Americans. We re-organized. We went on the march. No more fear in the streets. No more meetings in the dark ... you can’t blacklist a whole people.”

Images: Peggy as an 8 year old; a painting of an Indian girl, the drawing of a ram. Peggy’s face in protest, her eye – the sign of her heritage, the sign of a child trying to see: the sign of a woman who knows. Seeing: “Images of the past living in the present. Images on film.”

Peggy’s voice: “There is a way to become your roots ... layers inside me, they are there, they disappear ... they arise in daily visions ... I visited New York City when I was twelve, taken to the World’s Fair, then whisked away again. I saw it out of the corner of my eyes. A set of wonders I wanted to come back to. Later, it became my home, where I lived and worked. I grew here. I became a filmmaker. I watched its changes, shifting constantly, but forever holding its shape.” New York City is the city where Leo and Peggy met.

Images: a drawing of an Indian girl in Eagle headdress. The Eagle: courage, freedom, sharp-sightedness, victory, never willing to accept the status quo. These qualities Leo and Peggy had in their filmmaking, with cameras as their wings. Breaking free of grief takes the same courage and strength.

Leo's voice: "There's something I have to tell you. I loved her ... I loved her in the way you have loved and wanted to love ... which means that the world strange and everyday is shared, touches shared, the inner spaces of unspoken thought and feelings are shared ... I loved her in a way I wish to love and be loved again."

### **A Path Through Grief**

Images. Grieving. Remembering the scenes of a life together and going through them piece by piece. Images. From *Light and The City*, a film Peggy and Leo made together: green lights and red lights flash. Go. Stop.

Grief can stop life. But, mourning openly as Leo does through *Dialogue With A Woman Departed* keeps memories and love alive. "The woman I loved lives in me." The flow of life carries on.

Images. New York City. People are walking. Yet, superimposed on this everyday life are images of war. Images - of city life and dead bodies fallen in the fields of Vietnam. Death and life, just as it is strangely juxtaposed in grief: the dead and the living.

Leo's voice: "The war was won after you died, Peggy ... the people of Indochina, a victory long in the making. You knew the war, it's source ... people against the machines of war, love against anonymous engines of hate, liberty against oppression, willingness to face death and to live ... we are the same chain of love ... Peggy, I, you ... the sons and the daughters of joy."

*Shoot Film, Not People*. Peggy and Leo faced war and protested with their film images. Leo faced Peggy's death. Neither backed down from the seemingly impossible.

Leo's voice: "You are a shadow, an echo, the reality of a photograph; a past dyed into the present ... and where is your life? In the things and people you touched with hand and eye and the essences imprinted on them now."

Loss can seem impossible. Yet, just as the endnote of *Dialogue With A Woman Departed* reminds us: "... some have hope" Remembering, as Leo does through

this film, keeps the woman he loved alive: “The woman I loved lives in me.”  
Remembering and grieving opens the door to love and be loved again.