

**LEO HURWITZ**  
**ESSAY ON DEATH: IN MEMORY OF JFK 1964**

**“A very dangerous and uncertain world, the President said on that last day”**

**By Sandra E. Cohen**

When JFK was killed, I was sixteen years old and his assassination was announced over the loud speaker in my high school English class. School was dismissed. I walked home along the train tracks with a close friend, both of us shaken by the suddenness of death.

Leo Hurwitz's *Essay On Death* speaks to death's randomness. Of course, JFK's murder wasn't random, but the fact that death can come out of nowhere at any time means that we live constantly with the fragility of life. At the same time, we are also surrounded by life's joys and beauty. Neither can escape us.

### **The Film's History**

Still blacklisted from the television networks, Leo Hurwitz was able to find work at National Educational Television (NET), though his friend Gilbert Seldes. Seldes advised Leo to stay away from political and public affairs and concentrate on cultural affairs programming. One of the first projects Leo was asked to write, direct, and edit for NET was *Essay on Death: A Memorial to John F. Kennedy* (1964) commemorating the first anniversary of Kennedy's assassination. Leo wrote the screenplay and the film was co-written by NET producer Brice Howard (original script), filmed by cameraman Manfred Kirchheimer, and co-edited by Peggy Lawson, who later became Leo's wife. Leo went on to write, direct, and produce the acclaimed documentaries *The Sun and Richard Lippold* and *In Search of Hart Crane* (both 1966) for the network. (from the Eastman Museum Biography of Leo Hurwitz's work)

### **Shattered Trust**

*Essay On Death* begins with Richard Lippold's Sun, spinning and glittering as vividly as the sparks of the fire that was extinguished when JFK died. We hear a Rod Sterling-esque voice (Christopher Plummer), taking us into the twilight zone of a strangely “*deep and perplexing grief.*” A grief that interrupted the hopeful emotions of that day so that “*there was no peace in us.*”

Intermixed with Lippold's Sun are images of Dallas and the motorcade JFK rode in before he was killed. We see JFK smiling, sitting casually on the top edge of the back seat of a convertible with Jackie, both waving warmly to the

admiring crowd. Trust, that's what we see. Open and exposed, on that sunny day in November, they don't question their safety. Three shots and a single bullet prove them wrong. Richard Lippold's Sun glitters, showing us the *"essence of potentiality ... shattered in an instant."*

### **Fear and Unexpected Grief**

JFK's face, masked by Richard Lippold's Sun, appears fiercely determined. Yet the glittering beams of Lippold's sculpture make that face look as splintered as the dream he stood for.

Our narrator introduces us to *Essay On Death*, as we remember that shocking day: *"Many of us felt fear, fear at what had happened; what had been let loose inside us; fear of the stroke of cessation."* We see troubled faces: a young man, his face in his hands; a young woman, African American, head bowed in sorrow.

We were all joined in that sorrow: *"The death of the man for whom this program is a memorial is a bitter one. His place among men made it a lofty one. The loss traveled far into many hearts."* We see faces in shock/disbelief/fear; men's faces; women's faces, black and white and brown: *"... all of us wore the mantle of death."* Jackie/black hair/black beret/her profile, solemn, in shock and sorrow; her face is emblematic of Loss.

Leo's poetic words speak to Loss's seeming endlessness:

*"The Sun turns black, an awful gnawing turns the hours to ragged grief and the afternoons come slowly ... we search in the air for the words for what we now can hardly feel. So the days pass, and the nights, with unsatisfied remembering ..."*

We all grieved as Jackie grieved; for her loss, for our own, for past losses, and for the unthinkable losses we fear.

### **Our Own Awful Mortality**

A car passes by on a road that weaves alongside the cemetery. Life goes on. But, as our narrator reminds us: *"never again will that one particular shape, that one possibility ... share the life remaining to us – and one by one, the deaths of others bring us to an acknowledgement of our own..."*

"This program is about death," our narrator tells us – and this we already know. The images from Dallas can't escape us; the sorrowful and grieving faces give us other clues. This program is about the death of JFK. But it is also about how

death insists itself into our everyday lives and reminds us of our own awful mortality - against which we must live, fiercely defying death.

The film weaves in and out of a cemetery with its rows of tombstones, reminding us that death lives in our presence. A tree towers and grows into the sky watching over life, green and sturdy. The camera follows its branches and trunk downward, resting on a tombstone sitting near its roots, small in comparison, but a stark reminder that death is always nearby.

*“The gate of wisdom. How many may enter it when this awful grief fulfills itself in us?”*

Images on the screen: a woodblock etching of trees’ branches, black, electric, disturbed and disturbing. A sculpture with a cracked eye almost gouged out. In grief, one eye sees life ahead, while the other is blinded to going on. An image of a troubling abstract painting of a face: teeth are clenched; eyes and nose distorted; this is a face in pieces, everything in the wrong place. And, so it is with grief.

*“What was known becomes strange. We find ourselves a spiritless presence ... when love is shocked by death, grief will not be withheld ... we must pass through the source to the other side. A cold question weighs on the heart – but in that heart, there is life.”*

Life is fragile. Luckily, our very human capacity to set such realities aside allows us, for the most part, to forget - and to live unafraid.

## **Life and Death Those Strange Companions**

*Essay On Death* is a film about death and an ode to living. The film follows a father (James Broderick) and his young son (Allen Markey) as they leave home and venture into the natural world on a camping trip with their black Labrador dog. Set against JFK’s murder, loss is in the forefront of our minds, and this everyday experience is tainted with risk and danger.

Danger is there at our first introduction. This boy is playing with his baby sister, who is lying in a playpen outside, while their mother hangs laundry. Sibling rivalry is a real thing. He’s soon under the crib, jiggling it harder and more aggressively with his feet. Is this baby going to flip over and die?

His father grabs him firmly but lovingly, just in time, to focus on the task at hand. They wave goodbye to mom as they take off for their planned adventure, backpacks and camping gear flung casually over their backs. We move away

from grief: *“an idea ran around the world screaming with the pain of the mind until it met a child who stopped it with the word ...”*

Children make us believe in a future. Still, with the backdrop of JFK’s seemingly random and sudden extinction, there is a sense of death everywhere; even as we watch this father and son take off on an ordinary day. They walk through a lumberyard. They saunter along the rails of a train track. Their black Lab trails behind them. The boy leans over a fence to watch a beautiful waterfall and the drop is long and far: *“To the young, everything is attainable.”*

The wise face of an Egyptian Goddess comes onto the screen. Wisdom says, keep living. The young remind us. We may not be gods or goddesses in our mortality, but we might take lessons. Through the camera’s eye, we see images of life:

The boy, his father, their dog, a stream, ferns growing near water, still water; a frog darting and making its sounds, a snake slithering away. We are here, grieving one, waiting for you to return. There are baby birds in their nest; new vistas for the boy and his dad to explore as they come out of a wooded area into open space. Death couldn’t seem farther away.

Flowers blow in the subtle winds of a sunny day, becoming shadows against the sky. These are the movements of life; but the boy hides and scares his dad.

### **Hide and Seek A Bit of Death**

Children don’t give mortality a second thought. The game of hide and seek scares a dad when he can’t find his son, but it’s a funny trick to a boy. Death is always nearby - in the fear of losing what’s most precious. Hide and seek only becomes a game when the dad spots the boy, and pretends he doesn’t see.

Every separation has a bit of death in it; and when the boy jumps into his father’s arms this time there’s a happy reunion.

Not always, though. A carved tombstone is on the screen: *“All you who read with little care and walk away and leave me here should not forget that you must die and be entombed as well as I.” Death’s shock is its finality... [It] consumes potentiality. It is the antithesis of that ... it is the one irrevocable act. In everything else, there is the possibility ... of one more, once again ...”*

So, we live and make real that “one more, once again,” and we live in spite of life’s risks. If we don’t, our eyes are set only on endings and not on what is alive

and possible now. Father and son hike with backpacks and dog through a beautiful landscape: *“When I go hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.”*

The boy discovers a small lizard and holds it in his hand. He undresses, leaps into the water, swims, as his father watches. They splash each other, playfully. Dad throws a stick for the dog and he leaps in to retrieve it. The boy floats; peering down into the water’s depths, discovering what is not so visible.

*“You asked me – cannot the young save the world? I said, ‘No.’ Now that you are gone, I think of all the things I should have said to you – how youth is a seed, blowing across the land, forever blowing ...”*

### **Braving Fear Being Here**

The boy is on top of a large rock, having fearlessly climbed there. His dad looks for him, frantic. Danger is all around, as it is everyday, but sometimes more present than others. The boy is careful; he finds his footing on the ledges in the rock, and soon is on the ground.

He also finds his voice; it’s echo: *“Hey pop, hey pop, Papa! Mama ... Me! Me! Me! Me! Me, Myself, and I ... and I! Inside each of us, that superhuman ‘I’ is speaking.”*

He’s finding how his being echoes everywhere and how he will always be an echo inside his dad, even when they are separated - just as his dad’s being will echo inside of him.

We see faces, sculptures; eyes. There are always eyes in Leo Hurwitz’s films; eyes that see. And, in this film, *Essay on Death*, we see two of life’s truths. There is, of course, death. But, the boy and his dad and his dog are life in its ongoingness, its innocence, its “I.” And there is the Sun, Richard Lippold’s sculpture at the MET, watching, glittering, over all.

*“If I am afraid – it is that I will not live the full span of my inner reaching – that I will be pinched off in the midst of the ‘Oh!’ that makes me afraid. Relieve me of that and I’m here... but of that fear ... there is no relief, there is no assurance.”*

We must be here - in spite of that fear. We’ve accompanied the dad, the boy, and their dog on a camping trip, and we see them running back through the trees on their way home. They’ve braved the dangers; the dog’s run in with a porcupine; the boys’ willingness to explore the precariousness of rocks and river streams. This time they have ventured into life and they have lived.

*“Who does not have the will to die, does not have the will to live. Life has been given us only under the condition of death. It is folly to be afraid of it.”* I don’t know if it’s folly. We all have our fears. Yet, in this *“very dangerous and uncertain world, the President said, on that last day ...”* we can’t let our fears stop us. *Essay On Death: In Memory of JFK* is a love poem, not to the world, not to the land, but to the landscape of our individual life, to be lived in spite of death - to it’s fullest.