

Sasha on an iPhone

Abigail Child's New Emma Goldman Film Merges Anarchist History with Present Struggles

Bill Meyer

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a review of

"Acts and Intermissions: Emma Goldman in America." 2017. USA. Directed by Abigail Child; 57 min.
abigailchild.com

Abigail Child is a prolific and active visual artist whose works have appeared in prestigious international galleries; an author of five poetry books, including a book of critical writings on film; and a professor of video/film production and history.

She is a recipient of several awards including the Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellowships, and a creator of dozens of films, with her latest being a short narrative about anarchist Emma Goldman.

For Acts and Intermissions: Emma Goldman in America," she serves as director, camera person and editor. This semi-experimental production is more grounded in traditional film structure compared to Child's previous free-form experimental projects.

Starting with a title card that states "as far as consciousness is concerned, reality is determinant," the film immediately juxtaposes contemporary scenes of protests in vivid color with 19th Century black and white images of Emma in her youth (played by a haunting Miriam Rocek), implying that the realities of both disparate times are not really that different.

The intermixing of past and present protest footage is used to not only show that the struggles of the past still exist, but to draw a new audience to the life and teachings of America's most well known anarchist.

Emma's voiceover laments, "It's impossible to fully live the life of an anarchist in the present conditions," referencing her times in America from the years 1885 up to 1919 when she was deported to Russia after two years in prison for opposing the World War I draft. These are the years covered in this visually creative history lesson.

Born in Lithuania, Emma's father wanted to marry her off at the age of 16. She preferred to leave for the shores of America, to "dance herself to death," after an experience of unrequited love. She landed in New York in 1885 quickly immersing herself in the struggles of the working class, brought to life in carefully selected archival footage of yarn mills, street markets and political protests accompanied by contemporary music, once again drawing attention to the parallels of the two epochs.

It was the 1886 Haymarket Affair in Chicago that politicized the already engaged activist. Eight policemen were killed and eight anarchist leaders arrested without evidence.

She proclaims, "I was cooked in the heat of injustice. I had found my life task." She begins her life as a fiery speaker repelled by injustice and the quest for freedom. "What I had instead of talent was a quiet frenzy that could not be accommodated."

But it was the 1892 Homestead Strike that brought Goldman and her lover Alexander "Sasha" Berkman closer together. Without the help of an organized group, they plan an "action" to assassinate oppressive factory manager, Henry Clay Frick, and start a workers revolution.

Emma writes, “Love is a play with short acts and long intermissions,” obviously referring to the years of separation from her imprisoned lover, Berkman, who was sentenced to 22 years for the failed assassination attempt. Goldman also had sessions of imprisonment over the years, for inciting riots, and for her vocal disbelief in god and government, further disrupting her love life.

The police force her out of her apartment and workers denounce her violent and non-collective approach to social change. Among the odd jobs she acquires while on the run is seamstress at a brothel, where she advances her theories on sexuality and free love.

She proclaims “the institution of marriage makes a parasite of woman,” although troubled by her lovers’ escapades with other women. At 26, Emma travels to Europe to meet with leading anarchists. She studies midwifery, sits in on Freud’s lectures, and attends the theater of Ibsen and Chekhov, and has an unfulfilling lesbian affair in Paris.

Upon return to the US, she proclaims, “love was like anarchism—a compelling yet ultimately distant promise.” So, she dives back into political action, lives through President McKinley’s 1901 assassination, and is stopped from speaking 11 times in one year following the act by a self-proclaimed anarchist.

But it was the uncontrollable parts of her personal life she kept secret. Tied up with free speech, birth control, and the free love movement that was an essential part of every radical social movement, she was, like many, conflicted by the use of violence, and by free love vs. monogamy. Publicly she was active and moving, but privately she was often in despair.

By 1916 war fever is everywhere. Anarchists are rounded up for their opposition to enlistment and violent anti-war tactics. “Power is crap, that’s why I’m an anarchist,” she writes.

After 34 years in the country, Emma and Sasha, charged under the 1917 Espionage Act, are among the first to be raided, rounded up and deported from the land they had hoped would be a model of freedom and justice. Continuing the connection to the present, the film notes it’s the same law used against whistleblowers Ellsberg, Manning, and Snowden.

The film is kept interesting not only by Emma’s fascinating life, but by the unpredictable filmic techniques utilized by the creative direction of an artist trained in many disciplines—cinema verité, archival footage juxtaposed with contemporary scenes (rallies, protests); hypnotic slow pans, multi-screen, split screen, color and b&w, varied aspect ratio, negative images, and superimposition.

At times it felt like an assault of images with technique overpowering the story. At one exhausting point, while Emma languishes in prison, there’s a Brechtian pause as the title states: “Stay put, story—while I go get some other images.” Emma eventually returns refortified with a renewed interest and celebratory status as the “Queen” of anarchists as demonstrated in visuals of current anti-capitalist protests.

Child offers a personalized semi-experimental treatment with sound editing utilizing a kaleidoscope of varied musical styles intermixed with street and sound effects.

Although the fake Russian accent of Emma’s voiceovers is somewhat annoying, you should enjoy this creative storytelling about the “World’s Most Dangerous Anarchist.” Especially if you’re an anarchist!

Bill Meyer is a cultural activist living in Hamtramck, Mich. He has written his Progressive Cinema column for over 30 years.

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