

PAYING ATTENTION

We are invited into an existential laboratory in which the making of the film and the decision for making it are included as active momentum.
By Alexander Carnera



AN ENCOUNTER WITH SIMONE WEIL

Director Julia Haslett, USA 2011.

The film tells the story of French philosopher, activist, and mystic, Simone Weil (1909-1943) who spent most of her too-short life advocating for the rights of the socially and politically disadvantaged. On her quest to understand Simone Weil, filmmaker Julia Haslett confronts profound questions of moral responsibility both within her own family and the broader context of 21st century America – using Weil's writings and teachings as a framework for her own experience.

The French philosopher, political thinker, and mystic, Simone Weil (1909-1943) is one of the rare figures of the last century to have fully united a way of thought with a way of life. She accomplished this to such an extent that her final act of sacrifice was an affirmation of her own life.

Entering only the margins of academic circles, Weil appeared too disturbing a figure, too radical, and too out of sync with this world to ever be contained within

the insincerity of conventional thought. Weil emerged out of what was a world of profound suffering and inequality. Her chosen path was a world few of us can conceive; a life without the affirmation and security of an organized work-life, a world where few politicians envision a society based on equality and human dignity, and fewer have the courage to face their own shortcomings. In other words, she was one of the few to feel the necessary impulse of existence, an urge or compulsion towards the meaning of being human, and to embody this necessity in our mode of living, our sense of others, of thinking, of beauty. The violence of Weil's thought and her life teach us something profound about politics and human existence.

In viewing the American filmmaker Julia Haslett's unique film about Simone Weil, one senses very clearly that Simone Weil is a voice that cannot be exclusively political, since her political concepts are not simply directed at political power and ideology but, like engaged literature, are about

seriousness, the intensity of feeling, and moral sensibility. What does it mean to take life seriously? What does it mean to be human? These seem to me to be the questions with which Haslett is struggling.

The film is not only an intellectual odyssey to find Simone Weil, but simultaneously the film-maker's own personal journey, her struggle to come to grips with her own life. It is a journey to her father's suicide, her brother's permanent state of suffering, and also to her brother eventually taking his own life. The film invites us into an existential laboratory in which the making of the film and the decision for making it are included as active momentum in the film itself.

Weil's quote: "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity" is the film's starting point and the voiceover asks: "How did she pay attention?" Simone Weil is the mirror that Haslett places in front of herself to confront the unfamiliar, the excessive level required to understand other people, and as a means of finding a way to change things. What

is it Haslett sees in this mirror? The answer is the experience of suffering. This is what makes Weil, and truth, so inaccessible: to understand you have to live excessively. Paying attention ultimately requires a willingness to suffer and to die. This excessive element is exactly what became the emblematic dimension of Weil's life, and that of the film.

Weil gave up philosophical teaching to work on an automobile factory assembly line, and to experience that inflicted pain on her own body. Later in the war, while lying in an English hospital suffering from tuberculosis, her refusal to receive any more food than the amount given to her fellow French soldiers during their resistance is also well documented. One has to place oneself at the site of the oppressed in order to understand. In a touching scene, Haslett observes her brother's pain and suffering from simply being in this world. Weil and Haslett's attempt to reach an excessive level confronts us with the dead-end of

thinking life and the art of creative film-making.

The problem confronting the film-maker is raised by the French editor of Weil's collected works in a statement made in front of Haslett herself: "She (Weil) lived faster than everyone else. She rushed into socialism after philosophy, and then similarly, she landed in religion when she found no answers. She burned her bridges." Living too fast; or taking life so seriously that every move becomes an urgent call. Like all great spiritual thinkers Weil combined the sharpest intellect with that of a deep soul. She went from revolution to submission. It was following a mystical experience in 1935 that she gave up all her own passions. Christianity is the religion of slaves, and I am one of them, she seems to say, but, and this is important also for Haslett's film: Weil never joined the Church because she loved everything. She could not choose, as commented by one of the local fathers on Weil's rejection of the institution. She took life too seriously, and therefore she

was not concerned with herself, but only with truth; the other human being's suffering=God.

she went from revolution to submission

Haslett has problems in following Weil, but who doesn't? The issue is not intellectual, but in the guidance for her further decisions in life: 'If politics and religion are suspect, where is she leading me?' The mirror is clear to Weil, but not so to Haslett. This leads the film into a *cul de sac*. The question is whether Haslett becomes obsessed with the obsession. The film's conclusion with the suicide of Haslett's brother brings Haslett closer to a philosophical dead-end. Is life worth living (Camus)?

There is a way out: another answer lies waiting for us in the film's statement by the priest of the local church: "Weil loved life too much". Weil's passivity, following her politics and social activism, should not be understood in opposition to activity, but as vulnerability or the ordeal of responding to the appeal of the other, to all living creatures.

The phenomenon of suffering introduces a cut or a wound that prevents me from totalizing or rationalizing my world, and thus allows ethics to come into being. This crack or imperfection in all creatures could also be seen as the release of beauty from a glacial and stagnant state, thereby connecting the affirmation of life with the mark of the wound.

And perhaps this is the true accomplishment of Julia Haslett: the courage to affirm our living crisis and to turn crisis into an active impulse for sensitive thinking, thereby turning her personal struggle into a critical and political ethos.

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