

THE SILENT SCREAM

The Silent Scream is a 28-minute documentary film produced in 1984 by American Portrait Films, located in Anaheim, California. The film presented the abortion of a 13-week fetus, as visualized on an ultrasound screen. The film was scripted and directed by Executive Producer Donald S. Smith, the owner of the firm. Working closely with Smith was Jack Duane Dabner, a free-lance film director-producer.

Development

The main character in the film was ex-abortionist Dr. Bernard N. Nathanson, a board-certified obstetrician and gynecologist. He also owned and provided the ultrasound videotape featured in the film. In his presentation, Nathanson covered human gestation generally, then gave a step-by-step description of the suction aspiration abortion being shown on the ultrasound screen.

Production of the Silent Scream came about because of another documentary pro-life film Smith was producing in 1984. Titled *Conceived in Liberty*, Smith wanted to include in the film the ultrasound videotape that Nathanson had acquired from an abortionist friend. Smith hurried to New York City, and met with Nathanson at his Lexington Avenue office. There Nathanson narrated the abortion tape, which Smith added to *Conceived in Liberty*. Thus *Conceived in Liberty* basically had the content of *The Silent Scream* in it, although that name was not used. *Conceived in Liberty* was premiered at the annual convention of the National Right to Life Committee in September, 1984. Nathanson was present at this meeting, and personally presented his ultrasound videotape.

In October, 1984, Nathanson from his office in New York City, called Smith in Los Angeles. Nathanson stated that he was getting so much response to his episode in *Conceived in Liberty* that a film dealing just with this episode was indicated, Smith quickly scripted a screenplay, and sought funds for the production of a 28-minute full-color film.

Early in November Nathanson went to Whittier, California, where on the sound-stage of Moody Institute of Science the new film was shot. At this point the title "The Silent Scream" was assigned to the film. After three days of shooting the film was "in the can." Nathanson returned to New York, and editing of the film began in Whittier, California. Before the end of the year *The Silent Scream* film was completed. Both high-quality videotapes and 16-mm prints were produced. *The Silent Scream* was immediately popular in the pro-life movement, and it came to the attention of President Ronald Reagan.

In the 1985 March for Life in Washington, DC, on the anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, President Reagan spoke to the crowd through loud speakers. He referred to *The Silent Scream* film, and said that he hoped and prayed that it would be watched by every federal legislator. Several days later a White House public relations manager, Bob Reilly, contacted Smith by phone. He wanted Smith to assist him in arranging a press conference releasing *The Silent Scream* to the American public. Together they settled on February 12, Lincoln's Birthday, as the date for the conference. American Portrait Films provided the master film copy to be projected.

The press conference was held in the Executive Office Building, which was considered to be a part of the White House. The press room was set up for showing The Silent Scream film'. About 50 press people were present, including Network TV with their cameras, radio reps with their recorders, and reporters from numerous newspapers and magazines. The conference was introduced by a White House Public Affairs representative, the lights were lowered, and the film was projected..

Smith and Nathanson were seated together on the stage, and a period for questioning commenced, Nathanson was addressed by the reporters, who wanted to know his professional motives and financial involvement in the film, Before the close of the conference, Smith gave to President Reagan, through a representative, a copy of The Silent Scream film wound on a gold-plated reel. He also gave to the congress 550 VHS video cassettes of the film, one for each senator, representative, and U.S. Supreme Court Justices.

That evening on network television clips from The Silent Scream were shown throughout the country, Newspapers like the Los Angeles Times also carried the complete story. This, in turn, resulted in conflict between the pro-life movement and the pro-abortion constituency. The pro-life community felt that for the first time the truth was being shown.

The Silent Scream film became so well known in pro-life circles that Nathanson was invited to visit and speak in several countries. The first place he planned to go was South America. where he would be speaking to either a Spanish or a Portuguese audience. After that he wanted to go to Europe. To assist him with these professional visits, American Portrait films produced lip-sync translations of The Silent Scream in Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, German, Japanese, and Korean. In addition, a translation kit was created which allowed countries to make their own translations. By virtue of these translations, The Silent Scream became the most viewed piece of pro-life information in the world.

Overview

Nathanson, an obstetrician, serves as both the medical expert and narrator of the film, describing the events of the abortion as they unfold. He begins by stating the viewer is about to witness the "dazzling" new "science of fetology" and to witness an abortion in real time "from the victim's vantage point." [5] The film compiled a series of still ultrasound images of the abortion of a twelve-week-old fetus, which Nathanson describes as a child, spliced together to create the video.

Prior to presenting the ultrasound images, Nathanson displays the instruments employed in a typical suction aspiration abortion. He describes how each instrument is inserted into the pregnant woman's body in the course of performing an abortion. Nathanson points out that the head of a 12-week-old fetus is too large to be removed by the suction apparatus, and must be first crushed with a special forceps before being taken out of the woman's body. Nathanson observes that the fetus at this age has had measurable brain waves for six weeks.

As a specialist in the abortion procedure, Nathanson narrates what is taking place in the film, describing the steps of the abortion procedure as they occur. He begins by stating that the viewer of the film is about to witness "the dazzling new science of Fetology," and to "view an abortion in real time from the victim's vantage point " The film comprised a continuous series of moving ultrasound images of the abortion of a 12-week-old fetus. In his description, Nathanson refers to the fetus as a "child."

In continuing his presentation, Nathanson then sits by a television screen showing an ultrasound sector scan image of a fetus in a woman's womb. Images of an abortion appear on the screen, and Nathanson explains what is happening as the canola continues to evacuate the womb. This suction canola is referred to as a lethal weapon that will "dismember, crush, and destroy" a living human being.

Nathanson proceeds to observe that the fetus is reacting to the invasion of the womb and attempts to escape the canola, describing it as a "child being torn apart by the unfeeling steel instruments of the abortionist." [6] He notes how the fetus' heartbeat speeds up and how it seems to open its mouth in a "chilling silent scream." [6] The film culminates in the now-famous "silent scream" which is accompanied with shrill musical accompaniment. [5] Nathanson concludes the film by discussing the implications behind hiding this material from women. He believes the film is necessary in keeping women informed on matters concerning abortion. This was the first time the images of an aborted fetus were given an electronic platform, as opposed to the printed form of the imagery used in prior years. [2]

Reception

The Silent Scream was viewed by its producer and by the pro-life lobby as a tool capable of swaying public opinion against abortion. [4] The film premiered on televangelist Jerry Farwell's program, [2] and aired five times over the span of a month on major television networks. [5] The film was later distributed widely to high schools and colleges and, according to TIME, "embraced as an effective propaganda weapon by right-to-life organizations." The film was popular among people who opposed abortion, even being shown at the White House by then-President Ronald Reagan. [7] Reagan said that "if every member of Congress could see that film, they would move quickly to end the tragedy of abortion." [6] The film's producers reportedly planned to send copies to every member of the United States Congress and to the Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States upon its release. [4] Some opponents of abortion touted the film as proof that their opposition was science-based. [2]

Medical community

Many members of the medical community were critical of the film, describing it as misleading and deceptive. To deal with this controversy, Smith published a book in 1985 titled *The Silent Scream*. It included the complete text of the film, and the position of 14 medical doctors and scientists attesting to the accuracy of *The Silent Scream* film.

Included was an affidavit by Ian Donald, M.D. ³¹, the undersigned, Ian Donald, formerly Regis Professor of

Midwifery at Glasgow University from 1954 until 1976 and thereafter Honorary Obstetrician at the Western General Hospital Edinburgh until 1981 and Honorary Research Consultant at the National Maternity Hospital Dublin, having had experience in the development and exploitation of Diagnostic Ultrasound, particularly in Obstetrics from 1955 onwards until 1981, the last four years of which were much taken up with filming fetal activity at various stages of pregnancy, particularly the first half thereof, have now studied Dr. Nathanson's video-tape film entitled "The Silent Scream" not less than four times and affirm that I am of the opinion that the fetal activities depicted by ultrasonic real-time scanning in this film are not faked nor the result of artifact intentional or otherwise.²

Signed by Ian Donald, M.D., C.B.E., D.Sc., F.R.C.O.G., F.R.C.S. (Glasgow), Hon. F.A.C.O.G.

Richard Berkowitz, professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Mount Sinai Medical Center, described the film as "factually misleading and unfair".[4] John Hobbins of the Yale School of Medicine called the film's use of special effects deceptive, a form of "technical flimflam." He pointed out that the film of the ultrasound is initially run at slow speed, but that it is sped up when surgical instruments are introduced to give the impression that "the fetus is thrashing about in alarm." about in alarm." Hobbins questioned the titular "scream", noting that "the fetus spends lots of time with its mouth open", that the "scream" may have been a yawn, and also that "mouth" identified on the blurry ultrasound in the film may in fact have been the space between the fetal chin and chest.[4] Edward Myer, chairman of pediatrics at the University of Virginia stated that, at twelve weeks, the brain is not sufficiently developed for a fetus to be able to feel pain.[8]

Fetal development experts argued that, contrary to Nathan son's assertion in the film, a fetus cannot perceive danger or make purposeful movements. David Bodian, a neurobiologist at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, stated that doctors had no evidence that a twelve-week-old fetus could feel pain, but noted the possibility of a reflex movement by a fetus in response to external stimuli such as surgical instruments.

The size of the ultrasound image and of the fetus model used was also misleading, Appearing to show a fetus the size of a full-term baby, while in actuality a twelve-week-old fetus is under two inches long.[4]

Pro-choice community

Ron Fitzsimmons, of the National Abortion Rights Action League, stated that "it has forced us to respond." [4] In 1985, Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA) produced a brochure in response, titled The Facts Speak Louder than "The Silent Scream", which described the video as "riddled with scientific, medical, and legal inaccuracies as well as misleading statements and exaggerations".[9][10][11] PPFA convened what it described as "a panel of internationally known and respected physicians" to review and critique the film, and issue a rebuttal of the claims made, including fetal pain, purposeful movement, and the titular "scream." [7][11] PPFA also produced its own film, in which women, doctors, and other experts responded to the claims made in The Silent Scream, [12] and which criticized it as portraying pregnant women as childlike and unfit to hold reproductive rights. [13]

Author and journalist Katie Roiphe described the video as "extremely suspect propaganda" and "essentially a horror movie that used frank distortions." [3]

Political scientist and pro-choice activist Rosalind P. Petchesky described "its visual distortions and verbal fraud" and said it "belongs in the realm of cultural representation rather than... medical evidence." [2]

Nathanson accused his critics of making excuses. On Nightline, Nathanson responded to a doctor from Cornell Medical College with the comment, "If pro-choice advocates think that they're going to see the fetus happily sliding down the suction tube waving and smiling as it goes by, they're in for a truly paralyzing shock." [14] Nathanson later called pro-choice activists' response to the film "clever," in that he said they focused on whether the fetus feels pain during an abortion. Nathanson observed that the film had made no claims about fetal pain, so "the transmogrification of the brutality depicted in the video into a rather jejune argument about the ability of the fetus to feel pain was a remarkably astute pro-choice strategy." [15]

The film *Silent Scream* was not made to support a particular political or economic strategy. The purpose of the film was to display scientifically what occurs during an abortion of a 12 week old child. Biologically the 12 week old child's body is known to have every organ system present in the adult human body including the nervous system. In the absence of actual auditory evidence, we may logically assume that the 12 week old child's nervous system is capable of experiencing pain.

Legacy

The *Silent Scream* has been credited with winning "many converts to the pro-life cause" by its graphic scenes that shocked many viewers. [16] The film helped "to shift the public focus from the horror stories of women who had suffered back-alley abortions to the horror movie of a fetus undergoing one." [17] The film has been very important for the pro-life movement and is widely available for purchase or download. [18]

Nathanson later produced a follow-up film, *Eclipse of Reason*, depicting a late-term abortion procedure known as dilation and evacuation (D&E).

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Original 1984 VHS cover

Directed by Jack Duane Dabner

Produced by Jack Duane Dabner, executive producer: Donald S. Smith

Written by Donald S. Smith, founder of Crusade for Life[1]

Narrated by Bernard N. Nathanson

Music by James Gabriel Stipech

Cinematography Roger Boller

Edited by Dan R. Fouts

Distributed by American Portrait Films

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*1984

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