



An Encounter with Simone Weil

A film by Julia Haslett

Short Synopsis:

What response does seeing human suffering demand of us? Filmmaker Julia Haslett seeks an answer in the life and work of controversial French thinker, activist, and mystic, Simone Weil (1909-1943)—a woman Albert Camus described as “the only great spirit of our time.”

Publicity Contact:

Anne Borin
annefilm@aol.com
917-328-8534

Filmmaker:

Julia Haslett
Line Street Productions
juliahaslett@gmail.com
www.simoneweilmovie.com
917-674-1741

About the Film

An Encounter with Simone Weil 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, Haslett creates a moving portrait of an extraordinary young woman whose decision to act on her convictions proved that the quest to live a principled life is a journey we should all consider taking.

The film's dramatic story is revealed through contemporary footage of places Weil lived and worked, interviews with key people in Weil's life and legacy, and intimate vérité footage of the filmmaker's family. Haslett's father committed suicide when she was 17 and her older brother suffers from depression. Intercut with this material is 1930s archival footage, previously unseen photos of Weil, and excerpts of her writings. Still not satisfied, Haslett finds an actress to quite literally conjure Weil up. Drawing on current news and observational footage, Haslett's narration draws provocative comparisons between Weil's insight and the world today. The result is an unforgettable journey into the heart of what it means to be a compassionate human being.

Director's Statement

You may love this film or you may hate it, but what you won't feel is nothing. The questions it poses are fundamental and the stakes it raises are quite literally, life or death. And for that reason, the film can take a while to sink in. My idealistic hope is that once it does, it will bring a little more compassion into the world.

I made this film for personal and political reasons. On the one hand, I was struggling to respond to the suffering within my own family. On the other, I was perpetually alarmed by the political and economic conditions of millions of people on this earth, and how my country was increasingly responsible for their misery. And this was all in the context of the rise of the Internet, the pervasiveness of personal digital devices, and a celebration of multi-tasking. In other words, a culture characterized by endless sources of distraction, by an infinite number of ways to avoid paying sustained attention to our fellow human beings.

So when I read Simone Weil's line, "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity," it resonated deeply. And when I discovered what an extraordinary person she was, and how relatively few people knew about her, I decided I had to make this film. Over the six years it took to make it, she became an inspiration and a source of strength. But at the same time she couldn't be a role model. Her

drive to self-destruction, whether seen in personal or political terms, was not something I could romanticize, especially given my own family history. What she did though is help me grapple with the scope of my responsibility to others. And for that I will be forever grateful.

Background on Simone Weil

In her short life, Simone Weil (1909-1943) fought in the Spanish Civil War, worked as a machine operator and farm laborer, debated Trotsky, taught high school students and union members, and was part of the French Resistance. The daughter of affluent Jewish parents, she spent her life advocating for the poor and disenfranchised in France and for colonized people around the world, bravely organizing and writing on their behalf. A consummate outsider, who distrusted ideologies of any kind, at 34, Simone Weil left behind a body of work that fills fifteen volumes and establishes her as a brilliant political, social, and spiritual thinker.

In her writings, she analyzed power and its dehumanizing effects, outlined a doctrine of attention and empathy for human suffering, and critiqued Stalinism long before most of the French left-wing. She believed intellectual work should be combined with physical work, and that theories should evolve from close observation and direct experience. And, after three Christian mystical experiences, she began grappling with religious faith, its role in human history, and the shortcomings of organized religion. Her best-known works, all published posthumously, are *Gravity & Grace*, *Oppression & Liberty*, *Waiting for God*, and *The Need for Roots*.

Her ideas have influenced countless people, including Susan Sontag, Graham Greene, and T.S. Eliot. The *New York Times* described her as “one of the most brilliant and original minds of twentieth-century France.” But by far her biggest advocate was the existentialist philosopher Albert Camus who played a major role in getting her work published after her death. He even made a pilgrimage to her writing room before leaving for Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize in 1957. Yet, despite these luminary supporters, Simone Weil is a little-known figure, practically forgotten in her native France, and rarely taught in universities or secondary schools. Slowly that is starting to change. Our goal is for *An Encounter with Simone Weil* to fuel a growing interest in Weil at a time when her ideas and her example are uncannily relevant to the world today.

Others On Weil

“...one of the most uncompromising and troubling witnesses to the modern travail of the spirit.” ~ Susan Sontag

“The best spiritual writer of this century...she said it was her vocation to stand at the intersection of Christians and non-Christians. She thus becomes the patron saint of all outsiders.” ~ André Gide

“What she sought more than anything else was a loving attentiveness to the living world that would lift man above the natural loneliness of existence.”
~ Alfred Kazin

“We must simply expose ourselves to the personality of a woman of genius, of a kind of genius akin to that of the saints.” ~ T. S. Eliot

“...her intelligence, the precision of her style, were nothing but a very high degree of attention given to the sufferings of mankind.” ~ Czeslaw Milosz

Advance Praise for *An Encounter with Simone Weil*

"Julia Haslett has made a profound and moving film on a woman who continues to speak to all of us. Few Americans know of Simone Weil, but this deeply affecting documentary will make you want to know more. 'An Encounter with Simone Weil' challenges all of us not to look the other way when we see the suffering of others. Julia's personal journey through the film is both heartbreaking and inspiring."

~ Michael Moore, Filmmaker

"...an astonishing and revelatory piece of work."
~ Siân Miles, author of *Simone Weil: An Anthology*

“Six Indie Films You Won’t Want to Miss,” Christianity Today

"...the film invites serious reflection on some of the most important and intractable elements of the human condition. I recommend it highly."

~ Vance G. Morgan, Professor of Philosophy, Providence College

"...Haunting..." ~ Jesse Paddock, Slant Magazine

"More than just a documentary...this is a film for all those who question deeply and who realize that life, especially when perplexing, demands attention and generosity."

~ The Rev. Eric O. Springsted, President of the American Weil Society

"...an intellectual odyssey..."

~ Alexander Carnera, Editor's Pick – DOX Magazine, Copenhagen

"Essential viewing...I was haunted by the philosophical and moral questions Julia Haslett so beautifully raises and struggles with in her film."

~ Julia Bacha, Director, Budrus

"Haslett offers a provocative and deeply personal meditation on a genius whose incandescence illuminated some of the darkest moments of the 20th Century, even as it consumed her to the wick." ~ Joslyn Barnes, Louverture Films, USA

Screenings to Date

- IDFA, World Premiere in competition for First Appearance, November 2010
- Michael Moore's Traverse City Film Festival, Special Founder's Prize, 2011
- Sarasota Film Festival, U.S. Premiere, 2011
- Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, 2011
- Dokufest Kosovo, Human Rights Competition, 2011
- San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, 2011
- DMZ DOCS, South Korea, Asian Premiere, 2011
- Washington Jewish Film Festival, Italian Embassy, Washington, DC, 2011
- International television premiere in 33 countries in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Republics, including Russia, on Viasat History channel, October 2011
- Sneak Preview screening sponsored by Peoples Production House and Newsmotion, Jerry H. Labowitz Theatre, New York University, Nov 2011
- Space Gallery, USM Philosophy Symposium Film Series, Maine, 2011
- Annual Conference – American Academy of Religion, CA, 2011
- Annual Meeting - American Weil Society, Berkeley, CA 2011
- Northwestern University, Chicago, 2011
- North Park University, Chicago, 2011
- University of San Francisco, 2011
- San Jose State University, 2011
- University of Central Florida, 2011
- Stetson University, Florida, 2011
- St Leo University, Florida
- Carleton University, Ottawa, 2011
- Center for Documentary Arts, Albany, NY, 2011

Upcoming Screenings 2012:

- Austin Film Society
- Sedona International Film Festival
- Swarthmore College
- Brandeis University
- Duke University

- Wake Forest University
- Guilford College
- Neumann University
- University of Houston
- DOXA Documentary Film Festival
- University of Western Ontario
- University of Waterloo
- London International Documentary Film Festival
- Theatrical Premiere, March 23, Quad Cinema, NYC

People in the Film

Anna Brown: peace activist and political science professor at St. Peter's College in Jersey City, NJ. Active member of the Catholic Worker Movement.

Sylvère Lotringer: Professor Emeritus of French literature and philosophy at Columbia University, and Jean Baudrillard Chair at the European Graduate School. As general editor of Semiotext(e) and Foreign Agents book series he has been instrumental in introducing French theory to the United States.

Sylvie Weil: Sylvie Weil is the niece of Simone Weil and the daughter of renowned mathematician André Weil. She is Prof. Emerita of French Literature at Hunter College, and has written several award-winning works of fiction for adults and young readers, including: *My Guardian Angel* and *Elvina's Mirror*. Her latest book is entitled *At Home with André and Simone Weil*.

Florence de Lussy has devoted 27 years of her life to editing *The Complete Works of Simone Weil* at the Bibliothèque Nationale.

Raymonde Weil: Simone Weil's first cousin who grew up with Weil and her brother André. She is now 102 years old.

Father Jobert is a monk and theologian at Solesmes Abbey, where Weil had the first of her three mystical experiences. He studied with the late Father Perrin, a Catholic mystic who Weil entrusted her spiritual writings to when she left France for the United States in 1942.

Jeanne Duchamp studied philosophy with Simone Weil at a girl's school in Bourges, France from 1934-1935

Actress **Soraya Broukhim** brings Simone Weil to life through her efforts to embody her in the film. Soraya is an award-winning who has worked extensively

in film and theater. Currently, she is playing Joan of Arc in Judith Malina's *History of the World* at the Living Theatre in New York City.

Filmmaker Julia Haslett's older brother, **Timothy Haslett** was a black studies scholar, activist, and music journalist who brought attention to obscure bands ignored by the mainstream. He earned his B.A. in African-American Studies at Brandeis University and his M.A. in Africana Studies at NYU. His masters thesis on slavery and trans-generational haunting can be found [here](#). In the 1990s, he co-founded the highly influential black cultural studies website used by scholars and students around the world.

The Filmmakers

Director / Editor / Producer / Writer / Narrator

Born in London, based in New York City, filmmaker **Julia Haslett** makes expressionistic documentaries about contemporary and historical subjects. She is producer/director of the highly acclaimed *Worlds Apart* (2003) series about cross-cultural medicine, and producer of the companion hour-long documentary *Hold Your Breath* (2005), which broadcast on PBS in 2007. Her documentary shorts *Hurt & Save* (2001), *Flooded* (2003), *Eclipsed* (2007), and *Pure & Simple* (2008) have screened at numerous festivals and galleries, including Full Frame, Athens, and Rooftop Films. She has worked at WGBH-Boston, the Discovery Channel, and as a Filmmaker-in-Residence at the Stanford University Center for Biomedical Ethics. Julia earned a B.A. in English Literature from Swarthmore College and an M.F.A. in Integrated Media Arts from Hunter College (CUNY). She was awarded a MacDowell Colony Fellowship and selected for IFP's 2009 Documentary Lab for *An Encounter with Simone Weil*, which is her first feature-length film.

Director of Photography

Thomas Torres Cordova is a filmmaker and installation artist. He shot the award-winning PBS-broadcast documentary *Strange Fruit* (2002) directed by Joel Katz. His films/videos have aired on the Sundance Channel and screened at numerous festivals. He was director of photography on David Zuckerman's *Phoebe Zeitgeist in the city of the white wolf*, *Untitled* by Glen Fogel, and *Whiteness* by Joel Katz. His latest film, *Everybody loves the sunshine* (2007), was featured in a solo show at the Amie and Tony James Gallery in NYC.

Editing and Story Consultant

Jonathan Oppenheim's editing credits include *Sister Helen*, which won the documentary directing award at Sundance and *Children Underground*, which was nominated for an Oscar and won the Sundance Special Jury Prize, Gotham, and IDA awards. He edited the classic documentary feature *Paris Is Burning*, awarded the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, and recipient of the New York Film Critics, Los

Angeles Film Critics and IDA Awards. Recently, Oppenheim edited and co-produced *The Oath*, a psychological portrait of Osama bin Laden's ex-bodyguard now living in Yemen, which premiered at Sundance in 2010.

Composer

Daniel Thomas Davis has enjoyed performances and commissions from the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the London Sinfonietta, Lontano at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, members of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and Carnegie Hall. Most recently, Daniel completed a cello concerto for Lynn Harrell. Recipient of multiple awards from BMI and ASCAP, Daniel has held fellowships from the British Government (Marshall Fellow), Bogliasco Foundation, Yaddo Colony, and Center for World Performance Studies.

Actress

Soraya Broukhim is a graduate of Fordham University LC, British American Academy of Dramatic Arts, National Theatre Institute, and St. Petersburg State Arts Theatre Academy. Among her theatre credits are *Fire Throw & Betrothed* (Ripe Time Co.), *Gut Girls*, *Woyzeck* (Culture Project), *Innocent Erendira* (Here), *Logic of the Birds* (Lincoln Center, Shirin Neshat), *Afghan Women* by William Mastrosimone (Passage Theatre, NJ), and *Sodom & Gomorrah* (O'Neill National Playwrights Conference) and, most recently, Judith Malina's *History of the World* at the Living Theatre.

Producer

Italian native **Fabrizia Galvagno** is currently based in Torino. Since 2000, Fabrizia Galvagno has worked as Project Development Manager and Producer with Arte, National Geographic, PBS and TV Ontario. Amongst other films she developed *Leonardo da Vinci: the man behind the Turin Shroud?* (2002) for National Geographic; *Rice Girls* (2003, Venice Film Festival) that aired on Al Jazeera International in 2010; *"The Prime minister and the press"* (2003) for PBS and *Gelato. An endless passion* (2005) aired on Sundance Channel. After producing *An Encounter with Simone Weil*, she's currently producing *Docusound* a series of radio documentaries for the internet and the radio circuit and *the-AMP* (*The Art and Meditation Project*), a multi-platform network for art lovers.

Producer

Enrico Rossini Cullen is a director and producer. He is currently directing *Salt in the Air*, a film about salt and people—salt miners, asthmatics, and the residents of a small town deep in the Carpathian Mountains. He was an executive producer for *The Human Tower* (2011), a producer for *An Encounter with Simone Weil* (2010), co-producer for *Pushing the Elephant* (2010) and a consulting producer for *Election Day* (2008) and *Arctic Son* (2007).

Consulting Producer

Klara Grunning-Harris is an Emmy award-winning producer. Her background

includes Vice President of KUDOS Family and ten years as Coordinating Producer at ITVS International. Currently, she is Documentary and Shorts Commissioner for the Danish Film Institute in Copenhagen.

Executive Producer

David Menschel is a criminal defense lawyer and a director of the Vital Projects Fund, a charitable foundation interested in human rights and criminal justice reform. Through the Vital Projects Fund, Menschel has helped to fund several documentary films that advance progressive messages including: *No Impact Man* (2009) about a New York City family's year-long experiment in carbon neutral living; *The Oath* (2010) Laura Poitras' intimate portrait of a cab-driving Yemeni jihadist and his Guantanamo-imprisoned brother-in-law; and *War Don Don* (2010), a depiction of international efforts to punish a war criminal in Sierra Leone.

Executive Producer

Adam Haslett, brother of filmmaker Julia Haslett, is a writer and former professional fundraiser, who has worked with large non-profits as well as individuals to generate financial support for progressive causes and projects. He is the author of two books of fiction, *You Are Not a Stranger Here* and *Union Atlantic*, the first of which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. His work has been translated into twenty languages and his journalism has appeared in The Financial Times, The New Yorker, Democracy, The Nation, and Esquire.

Julia Haslett's Film / Videography

An Encounter with Simone Weil

Director, Producer, Editor, Writer
Documentary, 85-mins, HD, 2011

Personal essay film inspired by the extraordinary life and work of French thinker, activist, and mystic Simone Weil (1909-1943).

Never Enough

Co-Editor (directed by Kelly Anderson)
Documentary, 36-minutes, DV, 2010

A meditation on material culture, consumerism, mental illness, and the social fabric of our lives.

Pure & Simple

Director, Editor

Documentary, 10-mins, DV, 2008

Short film about a pizza artist and his restaurant in New York City's east village.

Eclipsed

Director, Editor, Camera

Documentary, 8-mins, DV, 2007

In an English cemetery during a solar eclipse, the filmmaker's family confronts a death that bewildered them all.

Hold Your Breath

Producer, Camera (directed by Maren Grainger-Monsen)

Documentary, 56-mins, DV, 2005

PBS broadcast film about an Afghan family's dramatic struggle with the American healthcare system.

Flooded

Director, Camera, Editor

Documentary, 8-mins, DV, 2003

Expressionistic film about a couple responding to a flash flood in their quiet London suburb.

Worlds Apart

Director, Producer, Editor, Camera

Four 10–15 minute educational documentaries, DV, 2003

Character-driven films about cross-cultural medicine and health disparities that feature Laotian, African-American, Puerto Rican, and Afghan patients.

Hurt & Save

Director, Producer, Camera, Editor

Documentary, 22-mins, DV, 2001

Tragic comic film about the working life of an adjustable-bed salesman in rural England.

An Encounter with Simone Weil

A film by Julia Haslett

Director / Producer / Editor	JULIA HASLETT
Director of Photography	THOMAS TORRES CORDOVA
Producers	FABRIZIA GALVAGNO ENRICO ROSSINI CULLEN
Editing and Story Consultant	JONATHAN OPPENHEIM
Composer	DANIEL THOMAS DAVIS
Actress	SORAYA BROUKHIM
Consulting Producer	KLARA GRUNNING-HARRIS
Outreach & Distribution Director	ALEX ENGELS
Outreach Coordinator	MAZAL BOHBOT BERRIE
Executive Producers	DAVID MENSCHEL ADAM HASLETT

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In English and French with English subtitles

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232 3rd Street • Unit A200 • Brooklyn • NY • 11215 • USA
www.linestreet.net • simoneweilmovie@gmail.com
+1 917-674-1741