

# Eclipse of Reason (1987)

Eclipse of Reason is a 1987 anti-abortion documentary film directed, filmed, and narrated by Bernard Nathanson, an obstetrician in the US. American Portrait Films released the film in 1987 featuring Nathanson's commentary and footage of an abortion of a four-month-old fetus. The film also featured the testimony of women who had suffered following similar procedures. In Eclipse of Reason, Nathanson equates the fetus to a person, likening abortion procedures to murder and arguing for the illegalization of abortion. This documentary was a sequel to Nathanson's first documentary film, The Silent Scream released in 1984. Both documentaries argued for illegalizing abortion, which had been decriminalized in 1973 in the United States. Eclipse of Reason was one of the most influential films that garnered public attention to the abortion debate in the US during the 1980s.

Before making the film, Nathanson specialized in gynecology and obstetrics, and he helped found and directed the National Abortion Rights Action League, then headquartered in New York City, NY, from 1970 to 1972. Nathanson self-reported performing 60,000 abortions, until later in the 1970s, when he began to argue against women's rights to have access to the procedure. In 1984, Nathanson narrated a film titled The Silent Scream, in which he discussed an abortion procedure as observed on a black and white ultrasound. While The Silent Scream focused on an abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy when the fetus was younger than thirteen weeks old, Eclipse of Reason instead focused on abortion procedures performed during the second and third trimesters of pregnancy.

Eclipse of Reason begins with a brief narration by Charlton Heston, a Hollywood actor who opposed women's rights to legal abortions. In the introduction Heston claims that there are ten times more performed abortions than open-heart surgeries, claiming that the media has failed to inform the public of the details of abortion. Heston prefaces the rest of the film, warning the viewers that they will witness death, but says that viewing such material can benefit viewers by decreasing their ignorance about the procedure. He concludes by labeling aborted fetuses as victims.

After Heston's introduction, Nathanson explains that he initially supported women's rights to abortions, and he discusses his history of performing the procedure. Nathanson says that he changed his mind when new technologies like ultrasound enabled him to see fetuses in utero. He also discusses the 1973 US Supreme Court case Roe v. Wade that ruled that women have the right to have abortions through the right to privacy under the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution.

Nathanson discusses different types of abortions and then uses an anatomical model to describe steps in a late-term abortion. The film shows the inside of an actual uterus using a fetoscope to show a developing four-month old fetus. Nathanson then uses a plastic model to introduce viewers to the dilation and evacuation technique (D&E) used before the procedure. Nathanson begins by demonstrating the first step that involves dilating the cervix and then breaking the membrane surrounding the fetus, thereby releasing the amniotic fluid surrounding the fetus. The enlargement of the cervix enables the insertion of forceps into the uterus to remove parts of the fetus. As in The Silent Scream, Nathanson claims that the fetus can feel pain, contrary to the opinion of most doctors and to medical research. Nathanson also claims that around 7,500 serious complications occur annually with second and third trimester abortions. These complications include major hemorrhages, perforated uteruses, uterus infections, and emergency hysterectomies.

The film then transitions to the testimonies of some doctors who ceased performing abortions because they said the procedure had negative moral implications. Next, an anonymous woman claims

that after her abortion, she had uterine and intestinal damage. Another woman says she suffered psychologically as a result of seeing the remains of her aborted fetus and considered suicide. Both women report feeling deceived by medical practitioners, as they did not anticipate those ramifications arising from their abortions.

The documentary concludes with a montage of photographs featuring terrorists, Ku Klux Klan members, Hiroshima victims, and starving children. Nathanson states that abortion is consistent with such imagery. The film then presents a contrasting montage of pictures that depict families. The ending of *Eclipse of Reason* generated controversy. Some critiqued Nathanson's use of photos to imply that abortion equated to genocide. Many others argued that Nathanson's rhetorical techniques drew the attentions of viewers away from facts about abortion procedures and from issues of women's privacy. Regardless, the film fueled abortion debates through the end of the century.

## Sources

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