

The Silent Scream (1984)

The Silent Scream is an anti-abortion film released in 1984 by American Portrait Films, then based in Brunswick, Ohio. The film was created and narrated by Bernard Nathanson, an obstetrician and gynecologist from New York, and it was produced by Crusade for Life, an evangelical anti-abortion organization. In the video, Nathanson narrates ultrasound footage of an abortion of a twelve-week-old fetus, claiming that the fetus opened its mouth in what Nathanson calls a silent scream during the procedure. As a result of Nathanson's anti-abortion stance in the film, The Silent Scream contributed to the abortion debate in the 1980s.

From 1970 to 1972 Nathanson had directed in New York City, New York the Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health, which he called the largest abortion facility in the western world at that time, and he claimed to help found the National Abortion Rights Action League in New York City. Though he had previously performed abortions, by 1982 Nathanson opposed the procedure, owing his changed stance to the technology of ultrasound, which allowed observation of fetuses during abortions. He created the film as a statement against abortion, stating that any form of violence should be opposed, including those against a fetus.

The Silent Scream begins in Nathanson's office, where he first informs the viewer that he is an obstetrician and a gynecologist and that he had previously performed thousands of abortions. He then discusses ultrasound technology, the development of which changed his outlook on the abortion procedure. Touting the ability of the ultrasound to show live images of the fetus while in utero, Nathanson directs the audience to a monitor on which he outlines the body of the fetus, pointing to and naming specific body parts.

Nathanson then explains how a medical abortion is performed, presenting to the audience the various surgical instruments used during the procedure. During the explanation, he focuses specifically on the tool called the suction tip, which he says vacuums the fetus out of the uterus. Nathanson then returns to the monitor, where he commences his narration of the ultrasound video of an abortion. During the procedure, Nathanson points out that as the suction tip moves toward the fetus on the screen, the fetus becomes more agitated and attempts to escape the tip. Once the amniotic sac is punctured, he claims "we can see the child's mouth wide open in a silent scream." Nathanson tells the viewer that the person who had conducted the procedure refused to perform any more abortions after watching the video and that the mother similarly reversed her position on abortion.

In the film's final minutes, Nathanson walks and talks in a park. He accuses the National Abortion Rights Action League and Planned Parenthood, both founded in New York City, in addition to their "co-conspirators in the abortion industry," of sheltering women from the realities of abortion. The Silent Scream concludes with Nathanson's statement that as a violent act, abortion must be banned, and people must "stop the killing."

Pro-choice groups deemed the film—circulated a decade after the US Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* (1973)—as propaganda, but those opposed to abortion hailed it as revealing. American Portrait Films sent a copy of the work to all members of US Congress, the nine US Supreme Court Justices, and US President Ronald Reagan; additionally, the studio sold greater than three thousand copies within two months of its release. Reagan stated "if every member of Congress could see [The Silent Scream], they would move quickly to end the tragedy of abortion."

Critics of the film argued that the fetus could not truly scream or feel pain, as its brain was not yet well developed; medical specialists distinguished between the simple muscle reflexes shown in the video and subjective cognitive behavior, which does not arise until the twenty-fourth week of devel-

opment. Robert Eiben, who was at the time president of the US National Child Neurology Society, attributed the fetus's movements during the video to reflex, not subjective experience. Similarly, other leading pediatric neurologists and specialist likened the actions of the fetus to the reflexes of brain-dead individuals, whose feet recoil when touched.

Despite overwhelming dissent from medical professionals regarding the scientific accuracy of the video and the statements made by Nathanson, anti-abortion advocates offered the work as evidence that the fetus was completely capable of feeling pain. David O'Steen, executive director of the National Right to Life's Political Action Committee, deemed the film as impacting the anti-abortion movement as much as the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had impacted the US abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century. Others argued that the film elevated the status of the fetus while simultaneously excluding women from the abortion discussion.

Using the ultrasound as a platform, Nathanson created *The Silent Scream* as a supposed scientifically based argument against abortion. Despite its varied reception, *The Silent Scream* sparked people on both sides to more closely analyze the fetus from an empirical standpoint.

Sources

1. Grimes, William. "B.N. Nathanson, 84, Dies; Changed Sides on Abortion." *The New York Times*, February 21, 2011.
2. Joffe, Carole. "Abortion and Antifeminism." *Politics Society* 15 (1987): 207-212.
3. Kleiman, Dena. "Debate on Abortion Focuses on Graphic Film." *The New York Times*, January 25, 1985, Section B, Late City Final Edition.
4. Mehren, Elizabeth and Betty Cuniberti. "He's the Force Behind 'The Silent Scream' Film: Doctor Who Performed Thousands of Abortions Narrates, Promotes Right-to-Life Sonogram Movie." *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 1985.
5. Morgan, Lynn. *Icons of Life: A Cultural History of Human Embryos*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2009.
6. Nathanson, Bernard and Donald S. Smith. 1984. *The Silent Scream*. Motion picture. Directed by Bernard Nathanson. Brunswick, OH: American Portrait Films. www.silentscream.org/video1.htm (Accessed November 29, 2012).