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I Am Greta

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I Am Greta

Abstract

This is a film review of *I Am Greta* (2020), directed by Nathan Grossman.

Keywords

Climate Change, Greta Thunberg, Activism

Author Notes

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I Am Greta (2020), dir. Nathan Grossman

Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDdEWkA15Rg>

“Humans are pack animals. In a pack, everyone has different roles. We are dependent on each other to survive. If you see a threat, it’s your responsibility to sound the alarm. And I feel that this is somehow my responsibility.” - Greta Thunberg, *I Am Greta*

There is a moment in Nathan Grossman’s elegant documentary, *I Am Greta* (which premiered at the digital version of the 2020 Toronto International Film Festival), that seems to defy any sense of emotional narrative. Swedish climate activist and Nobel Peace Prize nominee Greta Thunberg is reading aloud some of her worst criticism: vitriolic, hateful name-calling. At first it makes her laugh, a laughter that escalates as it seems to get more outrageous. Grossman gently pans from her to Svante, Greta’s father, who is listening, and whose face is neutral. We then cut to footage of a series of leaders denouncing her, from Putin to Trump to news commentators to Brazil’s President Bolsonaro. The final voice is that of an Australian broadcaster in an especially

insulting and condescending diatribe. We then cut back to Greta, now in a large, empty library, sitting on a table, watching that video. Her eyes widen slightly but she is otherwise unresponsive. The angry man is in a tiny square in the phone at the centre of the frame, held in the hands of a child, whose worldview we are in. He has gone from our big screen to her small screen. The rant ends and the phone is laid aside. Instead of sadness, anger or resentment, Greta gets up and begins to move and sway gently to herself, passing time, swinging around and moving her arms while a gentle piano score plays.

The moment offers us a devastating contrast and a brilliant way of revealing character without saying a thing. It challenges our expectation: it defies our sense of what a ‘script’ for such a sequence should look like. Later this contrast is repeated when, after Greta breaks down a little during a speech to the EU Parliament in Strasbourg, a reporter quizzes her about it. His line of questioning then moves to quoting her critics. After her simple reply, Grossman cuts to Greta doing exercises in a hotel room, again in a balletic, dance-like way. He seems to be telling us that Greta’s way of coping with the dominantly privileged, patriarchal, and largely male voices that critique her is to retreat into the world of being a child.

Among its many insights, *I Am Greta* helps us to understand that it is that child, the one who loves to dance and laugh, and who draws a puppy on the wall of the racing sailboat that transports her across the Atlantic, that Greta means when she speaks of the future of “us children.” While some of her emotional resilience is attributed by her and the filmmaker to her Asperger’s autism, Grossman is careful to make sure we understand that what causes Greta actual pain is not the words of nasty people, but the catastrophic and near-irredeemable travesty that we have all made of our planet.

This theme is clear from the opening moments in which we see Greta's solitary campaign outside the Swedish Parliament with what would become her iconic hand-drawn sign saying "School Strike for the Climate." The footage seems staged but is not: Grossman lucked into this record of a moment in history when he began what he thought was a documentary on youth activists in Europe.¹ It didn't take long before he saw what was happening. After many people pass her by with indifference or with condescending conversation, one by one they begin to stop to talk and sit with her, reading a sheet of facts she has handed them from the small pile of foolscap she has set down on the ground with a rock. That one shot of the papers with the rock captures the simple roots of a revolution.

If the instinct of adult politicians is to denounce her, we soon see that the instinct of the youth climate movement is to wrap themselves around her in love and protection. After she appears at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Katowice, Poland, children and youth far and wide find themselves wanting to speak out. "I can't just sit there and watch her do all this for the environment and do nothing," says one girl in a social media post. "We stand with you and on Friday I will stand next to you," says a boy in another, referring to the Fridays for Future movement which Greta founded. When Belgian climate activist Anuna De Wever and a group of fellow activists² finally meet Greta on a skype call, Anuna says, "it would be really really nice to get to know you." For Anuna and her friends, their interest is not about adulation and celebrity, but friendship, justice and gratitude.

Eventually this small circle of European youth activist leaders go everywhere with her, in part because Greta has said many times that she does not want the whole focus to be on her, and mostly because their natural sense of solidarity means they always want her to feel safe. These marked contrasts between the adult and youth realities is one of the subtle undercurrents of the film and one of its greatest strengths. The movie never loses this parallel narrative between the private Greta with her family and her climate friends, and the ‘adult’ political figures whose clear desire (even as they express their admiration and want selfies) is to continue living exactly as they always have. The dissonance in these two realities living side by side is a fundamental challenge for Greta that sometimes causes her to withdraw into a separate retreated space from the swaying child, and one that is harder to penetrate.

In Paris, we see the climate activist friends surrounding her in a formidable crowd on the street, helping to protect her and trying to take care of her when they are conducting a sit-in. Like her ever-vigilant father, they (and we) have begun to tell when she is overwhelmed and shutting down. Svante tells her she must eat. Reluctantly she does so. At another moment in a private residence, she struggles to find the right French words to use. Many sites offer different translations. For someone obsessed with getting it right, she is stuck. Her father tells her she doesn’t have to speak French. She turns away from the computer and curls into a silent place on her bed while her father gives her space. Then Grossman’s camera watches as long as it takes to see Greta slowly unfold again, irresistibly reaching for the computer to try again. A few seconds later, we hear her introduce herself in voiceover to a crowd in Paris — in perfect French. Throughout the film, in the moments of indecision, we find ourselves siding with Svante: if we were the parent, we would say what he says to her. But something inside her seems to drive her

instinctively and obsessively toward the better result. And it's impossible to miss that Greta's choices are always right.

Svante Thunberg's humour and dogged unfailing care of Greta make him an appealing and important supporting character in the film. We know from what Greta tells us that her whole family is her support system, but there's no question that Grossman is most interested in father and daughter. The portrait is therefore not well-rounded in the traditional documentary sense, in which we get a thorough picture of all of the important players in the subject's life. But it is thorough in a different way. It chooses to keep Greta squarely in the frame so that we never lose her point of view. It allows us to see that at 4' 9", most people are taller than she is. Grossman's camera never lets us lose sight of that. It not only means a constant shuffling to prevent the camera being blocked by others, it also means that we get to observe how many people feel free to physically touch and move Greta. Hands on her back, her shoulders, pushing her forward, edging her back — nearly always well-intentioned — have little sense of respectful physical space, especially for someone with Asperger's. One well-wisher says, "the whole world thinks you're wonderful," while patting her on the back. Grossman's perspective allows us to feel how intrusive that good-natured offering is. Though she is always courteous, we know that Greta would be happier if that person had said instead, "I commit to changing my life for the climate."

I Am Greta is not a film about climate change, but Grossman seems to understand that simply focusing on Greta means we will be learning about climate change at the same time. The theme reverberates in almost every frame. While waiting on a platform, we stand with Greta as she waits, while we watch a freight train filled with new cars pass behind her. As soon as we become aware of them, and their carbon-producing potential, we begin to feel self-conscious. We long for it to end, even as we know that those cars will be purchased by people like us.

Although she does not appear often in the film, Greta's mother, opera singer Malena Ernman is shown in one or two important sequences, offering us the emotion we would expect of any parent whose child has been through this odyssey and which we only glimpse in Svante. In one scene, she both laughs and cries as a cake she is making with Greta falls apart. Her emotion, she tells us, comes in thinking about how much things have changed since the three years Greta spent in deep depression, refusing to eat and not speaking to anyone but her immediate family. Then, with the same beautifully crafted sensitivity he has shown earlier, Grossman sequences Malena's emotion with Greta's. In the next scene, she boards the train to leave for her long trip across the Atlantic Ocean. Father and daughter stand in the aisle holding onto a rail, weeping quietly, while we hear Billie Eilish sing *The End of the World*.

Throughout the film, we see Greta composing some of the most memorable speeches of her activism. "Since our leaders have been acting like children, we will have to take responsibility...." she begins, speaking aloud in a hotel room and adjusting the sentence as she goes. "They have ignored us in the past and they will ignore us this time," she adds. Her father suggests it is a bit harsh. "But it's true," says Greta. "Go for it," says her father. It is a supportive surrender, not a direction. In the end, the harsh line comes out, but the line about children and responsibility stays in. There is a constant discernment in her thinking, in her rationale.

Grossman seems to know that this deeply embedded inclination toward truth telling is at the very heart of Greta's connection with the world. But he also takes very seriously the gravity of the burden that comes with it. Throughout the film, Greta writes in a journal and we hear her thoughts. On the trans-Atlantic crossing to attend the UN Climate Change Conference in New York, she has to rely on dictated notes instead, as the movement of the racing sailboat makes it too hard for her to write. This allows Grossman to capture her face as she speaks. A particularly

moving entry is recorded right before the end of the film, in which away from the crowds in the middle of the ocean, her emotion surfaces, alongside the weight of her ‘responsibility.’ It is a profound oasis in the film. A spiritual truth in the midst of a storm.

As she climbs a rally stage in New York in one of the film’s final sequences, Greta pulls American climate activist Alexandria Villasenor into an embrace before striding comfortably into the spotlight. The hug, and her confidence, are a long journey from the single girl sitting on the sidewalk outside the Swedish Parliament. Because Grossman returned to Sweden at this point, his camera does not observe Greta’s extraordinary North American tour, nor the return Atlantic crossing. This is perhaps because the media and other new people in Greta’s life have told that story for us.³

The film ends on a thread of spirituality that has been delicately laced through the year and two months we spend with Greta over the course of the film’s story. That thread is her attachment to animals. On her ever-increasing trips away from home, she tells us that she misses most her dogs Moses and Roxy. When she skypes home, it is news of them that she wants most. Three times in the film including at the very end, we see Greta visit with a horse outside of Stockholm. The eye contact between girl and horse is so electric, so vital, that you sense an almost mystical connection. Grossman holds the shot each time, allowing us to feel all of Creation urging her on, in one penetrating gaze.

1. For more on the genesis of *I Am Greta*, see “I AM GRETA Q&A with Nathan Grossman | TIFF 2020”, published on Youtube by TIFF on 16 September, 2020. Found at: <https://youtu.be/g6pXXGfqiww>

2. Although they are never named verbally or captioned on the screen, some of the most prominent Fridays for Future European and American climate activists are seen frequently throughout the film. For the record, they are: Belgian activists Anuna de Wever, Adelaïde Charlier and Kyra Gantois, German activist Luisa Neubauer, and American activists Alexandria Villasenor, Xiya Bastida and Tokata Iron Eyes.

3. The return Atlantic crossing of Greta and Svante Thunberg has been well-documented by Elayna Carausu and Riley Whitelum who provided transport on their yacht La Vagabonde. Those videos can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/dVo4cAwfZKY>