

Nancy Naumburg: Vassar Revolutionary

Richard Koszarski

On 25 September 1934, Irving Lerner devoted an entire column in *New Masses* to "the first [film] to come out of the revolutionary movement", a "dramatic documentary" on the farm crisis which had just been screened at the headquarters of the Film & Photo League.¹ *Sheriffed* was a three-reel 16mm silent that had been written, directed and photographed by Nancy Naumburg and James Guy. Lerner was not entirely happy with the film, which lacked the technical skill of Vertov or Dovzhenko, the obvious models for this sort of thing. The farmers played themselves as best they could, while the filmmakers fought a losing battle against a series of technical deficiencies. But the "vitality, freshness, and honesty that springs from its revolutionary convictions" was undeniably impressive.²

A year later Naumburg and Guy premiered *Taxi* at the New School for Social Research. Shot once again on the amateur 16mm camera which Nancy had been given by her mother, *Taxi* combined news footage of the 1934 New York Taxi strike with dramatized recreations and *cinema verité*-style coverage of union meetings (and, in one sequence, a cabbie's wedding). "We did not even have a carefully written screenplay", Naumburg remembered in 1975. "We just blocked out the action of what we wanted and shot it".³ As with *Sheriffed*, the new film was praised for its political idealism and damned for its structural inadequacies. Somehow a film that conjured "the raw meat of social reality" had done so without a finely pointed script. "You feel the cameraman is doing the writing while shooting", wrote Robert Gessner in *New Theatre*, obviously uncomfortable with such a notion.⁴

The Film & Photo League was already splintering over issues of politics and art, and Naumburg's films proved to be targets of opportunity. "Revolutionary film making is a painful process" she told the readers of *Filmfront*, defending her "politically and

documentarily correct" content over the opposition's stylistic niceties.⁵ It was an argument she lost, or lost interest in. *Sheriffed* and *Taxi*, despite their pioneering status as independently produced political documentaries, quickly slipped into the black hole of film history. Not exactly forgotten – both Russell Campbell and William Alexander give the films their due – they are more properly described as ignored, of interest only to a handful of specialists.⁶ Political and artistic conflict on the left (including sexual politics), the vicissitudes of film preservation (Naumburg lost track of the films shortly after they were made), and the shifting cultural agenda of post-war America all conspired to bury not only the films, but the filmmaker.

Nancy Naumburg was born in New York in 1911 and died there in 1988. She attended the Ethical Culture School and Hallie Flanagan's Experimental Theatre Workshop at Vassar, graduating in 1934. I don't know how she became involved with the Film & Photo League or the nature of her relationship with the painter James Guy (letters from both of them in the Thomas Brandon Collection at MOMA indicate that she photographed the films while they shared writing and directing responsibility). She never discussed her films with her children (even with her daughter Margie, who became a novelist and filmmaker herself), but did admit with some pride to having been booted off *The Daily Worker*.⁷

In fact, Naumburg saw herself primarily as a still photographer, and in 1936 travelled through West Virginia with her friend Muriel Rukeyser, docu-

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menting the industrial disaster at Gauley Bridge (the trip became the focus of Rukeyser's second volume of poetry, *U.S. 1*). Settling in on the west coast, Naumburg edited the book *We Make the Movies* (1937), an anthology which documents the many hands required to produce a Hollywood feature.⁸ Artistic films, she notes, might be successfully produced if done on very low budgets and distributed only to a string of sympathetic urban theaters (what the Film & Photo League had once called "the sub-way circuit"). In 1939 she married Gene Goldsmith and eventually came back east, where she raised three daughters and did volunteer work for various medical charities. Although she wrote a few plays for the Greater Norwalk Mental Health Association, and exhibited her photographs at a gallery in Soho, she never returned to filmmaking.

Filmography:

Sheriffed, 1934 (Prod./dir./sc: Nancy Naumburg and James Guy; ph: Nancy Naumburg).

Taxi, 1935 (Prod./dir./sc: Nancy Naumburg and James Guy; ph: Nancy Naumburg).

Credits Note: *The American Film Institute Catalog, Feature Films, 1931–1940*, incorrectly lists these as sound films.



Fig. 1. Nancy Naumburg (1911–1988). [Courtesy of Lynne Miller.]

Notes

1. Irving Lerner [as Peter Ellis], "A Revolutionary Film", *New Masses*, 25 September 1934, 30.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Nancy Naumburg to Ruth Goldstein, 6 September 1975, Thomas Brandon Collection, Film Study Center, MOMA.
4. Robert Gessner, "Movies About Us", *New Theatre*, June 1935, 20.
5. Ed Kennedy, "Three Workers Films" *Filmfront*, 7 January 1935, 10–11.
6. William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 56, 58–60; Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States, 1930–1942* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982), 65, 84, 86–87.
7. Margie Goldsmith to author, 2004.
8. Nancy Naumburg, ed., *We Make the Movies* (NY: Norton, 1937).

Abstract: Nancy Naumburg: Vassar Revolutionary, by Richard Koszarski

In 1934 and 1935, Nancy Naumburg and James Guy independently produced two documentary films under the aegis of the Film & Photo League in New York, *Sheriffed* and *Taxi*. The films dealt with farm troubles in Pennsylvania and a taxi drivers' strike in New York, and were photographed by Naumburg, a Vassar graduate, on a 16mm camera she had been given by her mother. Praised for their political commitment, the style of these now lost films was criticized from the left for diverging from approved Soviet documentary models.

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