

“Ralph Waldo Emerson: Give All to Love”
Director’s Statement

Is Ralph Waldo Emerson a natural, or even likely, subject for a film?

Films require a strong storyline. Biographical films show a life as it unfolds and is filled with circumstance and event, accomplishment and recognition; joy and many times tragedy reveal their Janus faces. The subject of the film rushes towards something that we recognize as a climactic moment and the beginning of an end to a life well lived; one glistening with public achievement and adulation.

Think about Emerson for a moment. Think about what you know about his writings and his life. Think about what you may remember from some attempt to slog through one of the essays in college.

Ask yourself if he can be, even remotely, considered for cinematic treatment. Cinema art is ephemeral, plastic, and relentlessly non-static.

I asked myself this two years ago when I began to write “Give All to Love.” I quickly realized how wrong I’d been about the “Sage of Concord.” Exciting lives, lending themselves to cinematic biography, are as common as ripe apples in the fall. Emerson taught me that lives lived with excitement, passion, and depth could be lived in book-lined rooms; in Midwestern boarding houses, featuring inedible food and straw-filled mattresses; and in solitary walks where the sole object is reflection and a turning inward.

What I discovered was that the secret to making a film about a man who thought for a living is to make the film about what he was thinking about and, just as importantly, about how those thoughts grew from seeds planted in our American soil at the right time and place. For to know Emerson is to understand that he emerged one day...fully formed in 1836 at the age of 33...as the leading American thinker of his age. He emerged through a slim book with a radical premise, written in a radical style, and promoting revolution. Not the kind where people lose their heads, but the kind where people lose their fears.

That slim book was entitled “Nature.” Nothing has been the same since its publication in 1836.

“Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past?” Emerson wrote in “Nature.” With this seminal work, he was telling us to throw it all over. To trust only instinct and personal experience. To create a reliance on our own awareness. The achievement of an understanding of the world through the revelation of self.

He would write, “The reason why the world lacks unity, and is broken in heaps, is because man is disunited with himself.”

It is impossible to understand in our own jaded times how important Emerson was in his and, after his death in 1882, how still more important to us he was to become. Every time you take an hour off to walk in the woods, you pay an oblique homage Emerson, who would first ask us to turn inward for understanding, so that the fruits of radical perception could muster us back into a world where we could be of better use to each other.

Transcendentalism was then, and still is, a solitary practice; but the end result of all this turning back into oneself is to then re-emerge within the fabric of society as a stronger thread than before.

Yes, Emerson proved to be a filmmaker's dream as well as a filmmaker's challenge. The action? All of the mind. The climax? A long, quiet decade of fading away, anti-climax after anti-climax, until a sudden final long breath. The ultimate journey inward after all. The two faces of Janus with Emerson: the one on the left filled with rhapsodic joy; the other, insupportable grief...somehow supported, not through misguided stoicism, but rather through the discovery of self. The path in real life, as Emerson celebrated, available to each and every one of us.

- Michael Maglaras