

Birth as We Know It

Elena Tonetti-Vladimirova.

The Sentient Circle. Educational DVDs. 24 mins.; 40 mins.

Reviewed by Dominique Russell

These are the educational versions, twenty-four and forty minutes respectively, of *Birth as We Know It*, Elena Tonetti-Vladimirova's fascinating documentary on "conscious birth." Tonetti-Vladimirova was a co-founder of this groundbreaking movement in Russia in the eighties, organizing workshops and births in the shallow waters of the Black sea, an idyllic setting where dolphins play. Conscious birth involves a process of coming to terms with one's own birth trauma, and of creating a "birthing field" of love rather than fear. In the interviews and Tonetti-Vladimirova's narration, what is emphasized is maternal responsibility and power. An expectant mother needs to be supported, but she herself must tap into her "innate intelligence and body wisdom." According to Tonetti-Vladimirova, whose spirituality seems to be pantheistic, the most important thing a woman needs to learn is the spiral, present in dancing, seashells, galaxies, and our DNA strands, because "conscious surrender to th[is] vortex of energy brings profound grace." Birth is considered a sacred, transforming moment for all involved in the process. Says Tonetti-Vladimirova, "within the sacredness of birth lies the pathway to the pure potentiality of life."

The film depicts not birth as we know it, but birth precisely as we do not know it in our culture: an ecstatic, erotic, and spiritual experience in which children come into the world, eyes wide awake and peaceful, under water. The birth segments are beautifully filmed, focusing on the moment of arrival after a glimpse of labour. Many of the women give birth in clear birthing tubs, giving the camera unencumbered access. They spiral and squat, often held by partners or friends, through contractions and, what for me was the most excruciating moment of labour, crowning—slowed down by mother's or midwives' hands to avoid tearing. The newborns stay underwater for a few moments before coming up onto their mother's belly, seeking the breast. Most do not cry. The most extraordinary sequence is a midwife who gives birth alone, smiling at her other young children as she guides her newborn's head and body through her. The soundtrack includes moaning, sounding, and shouts, but these are tempered by peaceful electronic music (available at www.birthasweknowit.com/soundtrack.html); indeed the DVD offers an "instrumental version" for those who prefer to dispense with sounds and narration entirely. Skyler Sabine's work, as cinematographer, designer, editor, and audio engineer deserves mention. She no doubt had a guiding hand in the visual beauty of the works, and her editing is crisp and rhythmically in tune with the narration (which she co-supervised).

As I viewed the forty-minute version with my husband, four months along into a “high risk” twin pregnancy, I grew doubtful of its usefulness as an educational tool since it preaches to the converted. I identify with the natural birth movement, but found myself put off somewhat by the strong statement that opens the film: “The quality of this [new] life will be defined by the quality of birth.” It comes immediately after a disclaimer that tries to temper the radicalism, reassuring us “failures,” I felt, that the effects of less than conscious birth can be healed. As a reviewer on Amazon.com notes, the film can inspire guilt in the mother “who fails to achieve nirvana while giving birth.” My husband was swept up by the film for nearly half an hour, and disconnected only after a drawn-out sequence where one of the American labouring mothers describes “a sweet, squishy kiss” from her partner that sent her into waves of ecstasy. The films are singly focused on heterosexual unions and, like the births themselves, these are idealized.

Despite these caveats, I found myself replaying the images of the calm water births over and over in my head, and ferreted out a supplier of birthing tubs, though it is highly unlikely I will choose to use them to deliver my twins. I showed the sequences to friends and will show it to my daughter, closer to my due date. My husband’s resolve to find a way for our babies to enter the world without medical interference has strengthened. Despite our resistance to some of the “New Age” speak, the film has radicalized us.

The twenty-four-minute version is, I think, more effective for education. Dispensing with the contrast with hospital births and circumcision, it focuses on the positive effects of conscious birth and, with a shortened narration and image track, it distills its principles to the essentials: that “women have access to the power of creation,” but that labour “free of drama” is part of a challenging process of self-examination and spiritual, emotion, and physical practice to overcome fear.

The real strength of the films is the indelible images of fearless, confident women giving birth autonomously. Since we are bombarded with media representations of birth as frightening and painful, the power of these profoundly different documentary images might have an effect on even the resolute adherent to the technocratic model of birthing. For women—and especially younger women—vacillating between faith in technology and the wisdom of their own bodies, the film should transform the idea of what constitutes “normal” birth. I am, in the end, grateful to have seen the forty-minute version.