

# Miss Marx: Eleanor Marx in the filmmaker's own image

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*Written and directed by Susanna Nicchiarelli*

*Miss Marx*, an Italian-Belgian production written and directed by actress-filmmaker Susanna Nicchiarelli, concerns itself with the latter part of Eleanor Marx's life—from the death of her famous father, Karl Marx, in March 1883 to her own suicide in March 1898.

The film covers certain aspects of Eleanor's political and public activity, but it leans heavily toward an interest in her emotional life. *Miss Marx* is strongly colored by the writer/director's feminist outlook and tends to project that into (and impose it onto) the past.

Nicchiarelli's work opens in 1883. Eleanor Marx (Romola Garai), known to her family as Tussy, eulogizes her father ("He died in harness, his intellect untouched") at her parents' shared grave in London. Eleanor soon meets playwright Edward Aveling (Patrick Kennedy) at a lecture he is delivering on the poet Percy Shelley (she and Aveling will later co-author a pamphlet on the subject, *Shelley's Socialism*, 1888). Their relationship kindled, Aveling joins her on a trip to America where they learn that even cowboys are exploited by their bosses.

Eleanor Marx has come down in history as a socialist fighter, a thoroughgoing internationalist and, concretely, a significant and determined participant in the development of "New unionism" in Britain, the organization of highly exploited, unskilled workers (dockers, seamen, gasworkers, general laborers and others). She was in the thick of the explosive class battles that erupted in the country from the late 1880s.

While the makers of *Miss Marx* have included a few factory scenes and several brief discussions on workers' conditions, its dramatic heart clearly lies in the small change of Eleanor's life, at least as envisioned by Nicchiarelli. That includes Eleanor's turbulent relationship with Aveling—a womanizer, profligate and opium smoker—and her real or alleged frustrations with her father, who "wanted everything for me except for my freedom."

In one especially disagreeable sequence, Eleanor and Aveling spend an evening in the company of Havelock Ellis (Freddy Drabble), the social reformer and sex researcher, and Olive Schreiner (Karina Fernandez), the South African author, suffragette and anti-war campaigner, indulging in trite

conversation and drugs.

In a further indication of *Miss Marx*'s general orientation and interests, Nicchiarelli has included a pivotal, prolonged scene in which a dying Friedrich Engels (John Gordon Sinclair) whispers to Eleanor that her father Karl, and not he, sired Freddy (Oliver Chris), the son of the Marx family housekeeper Helene Demuth (Felicity Montagu). Eleanor's shrieking, hysterical reaction to this revelation is only matched by the periodic ear-bending insertions of "post-rock" band Gatto Ciliegia contro il Grando Freddo.

One's reaction to the Demuth revelation, true or not, is, first of all, who could possibly concern him or herself with such a matter at this point in history? It is predictable that Nicchiarelli should engage in such pointless gossip-mongering. On the one hand, the revelation is intended to diminish Marx, making him out, after all, to be nothing more than another unreliable "womanizer"; and, on the other, more generally, the supposed scandal confirms the director and her social ilk in their conviction that, in truth, everybody has always been "just like them."

In the film, Freddy and Eleanor visit her parent's grave where the latter asks incredulously: "How did they [her parents] go on after the affair?" Nicchiarelli would like to have it both ways. She wants to create Eleanor in her own image, as a "free-thinking" Bohemian—but then, to make points against Karl Marx and "knock him off his pedestal," the director portrays his daughter as a conventionally outraged Victorian.

Toward the end of the movie, Nicchiarelli steps up her ideological sleight-of-hand, putting words in Eleanor's mouth, whether invented or merely taken out of context, that would transform her into a 21st century feminist.

All in all, *Miss Marx* does not make a big or favorable impression. It is not especially malicious, but it badly misses the mark on Marx. Why? Nicchiarelli and company come from a sharply different milieu, with an opposed social and political orientation, than that to which Eleanor Marx belonged. It is a little bit like a quack attempting to portray a great, pioneering physician. Director Nicchiarelli, unfortunately, has little notion of what it entails to dedicate oneself to the emancipation of the working class: sacrifice, selflessness, patience and principles.

It is very difficult for the contemporary filmmaker, even (or

perhaps especially) of the “left” variety, to grasp that sort of commitment and far-sightedness. Therefore, she or he searches for the personal crises, the individual foibles and often tries to cut monumental historical figures down to size, specifically to her or his size. As Nicchiarelli states in an interview: “I believe that Eleanor’s story requires delicate irony: her love life was both absurd and tragic, her plight more than familiar to women today.”

In *Miss Marx*, the brief references to Karl Marx are largely pejorative, and Engels, another intellectual giant, appears as little more than a plot device. Laura Marx (Eleanor’s older sister) and her husband Paul Lafargue, active in the French socialist movement, lead a conventional bourgeois existence—she, content to remain in the kitchen, and he, happy to raise chickens. Above all, however, Eleanor is surrounded by overbearing, oppressive and selfish men.

As part of the general ideological regression that has dominated “left” academic circles for decades and decades, the creators of *Miss Marx* reduce historical and class issues to little more than a passive background. To them, the “inner history of the individuals,” their personal passions and sorrows, constitute the “active,” intriguing side of life. What really counts, in other words, are sex, death and certain family relationships.

In the face of these conceptions, a brief biographical sketch of Eleanor Marx seems in order.

Jenny Julia Eleanor Marx was born in London on January 15, 1855, the sixth child and fourth daughter of Karl Marx and Jenny von Westphalen. Fluent in several languages, she was a prodigy who edited her father’s work, campaigned for the eight-hour working day, helped establish International May Day and translated Ibsen and Flaubert.

Her most recent biographer, Rachel Holmes, writes: “Tussy’s [Eleanor’s family nickname] childhood intimacy with [Marx] whilst he wrote the first volume of *Das Kapital* provided her with a thorough grounding in British economic, political and social history. Tussy and *Capital* grew up together.”

The first British socialist organization (called the Democratic Federation) was formed in 1881. When it was re-formed in 1884 as the Social Democratic Federation, Eleanor was among its founding members. “Until her death 17 years later, she lectured and wrote on behalf of socialism; helped organize strikes, rallies, election campaigns; and played a role in the internecine struggles that went on in every socialist group to which she belonged,” asserts one biographer.

In 1880s, Eleanor took an interest in the theater, believing that it could be an important means of propagating socialism. Additionally, she wrote numerous books and longer essays, including *The Factory Hell* (1885), *The Women Question* (1886), *The Working Class Movements in America* (1888) and *The Working Class Movement in England* (1896).

As a result principally of a personal crisis bound up with Aveling’s behavior, Eleanor Marx committed suicide on March 31, 1898. She was 43 years old.

In 1895, the German Marxist Wilhelm Liebknecht (father of Karl Liebknecht) wrote of Eleanor: “The author of the ‘Working Class Movement in England’ has accurately mastered and pictured the position of the English workers. She has written from the heart. She has lived and fought with the English workers, and learnt to love them. She is one with them, and is herself a part of the modern English workers’ movement. In eloquent words she gives us a faithful picture of men and things. And she shows us the distinguishing mark of the English workers’ movement and of all English history, the steady advance, the firm retention of what has been conquered, the earnest pressing forward in spite of everything. And always forward towards the goal; never by leaps, sometimes with swift, sometimes with slow strides, often a zig-zag, often by side paths—but always forward, always nearer to the goal.”

In Eleanor’s period, it was *elementary* to view society in class, not gender, terms. She wrote, for example: “We are not women arrayed in struggle against men but workers who are in struggle against the exploiters.” And: “The real women’s party, the socialist party...has a basic understanding of the economic causes of the present adverse position of workingwomen and...calls on the workingwomen to wage a common fight hand-in-hand with the men of their class against the common enemy, *viz.* the men and women of the capitalist class.”

Furthermore, in 1891, she argued that “‘Socialist’ and ‘Socialism,’ once terms of reproach and scorn, are becoming the best passports to the respect and trust of the working class. ... Each nation has, and must have, its own special means and methods of work. But whatever those means and methods, the end is one all the world over—the emancipation of the working class, the abolition of all class rule.

“Long live the International Solidarity of the Working Class Movement!”



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