



Finding Vivian Maier Discussion Guide

Directors: John Maloof, Charlie Siskel

Year: 2014

Time: 83 min

You might know this director from:

FINDING VIVIAN MAIER is the first feature-length film from these directors.

FILM SUMMARY

Mysterious, eccentric, caring, cruel, paranoid, reclusive, loner, pack rat, spinster. Viv, Vivian, Miss Maier, Mrs. Mayers. The elusive Vivian Maier went by many names. She was many things to many people. Attempting to comprehend who this prolific street photographer really was, FINDING VIVIAN MAIER reaches out to the many lives Vivian touched. Where did she come from and what drove her to create so much, and yet reveal so little?

After discovering Vivian's work at a Chicago auction house, historian and director John Maloof became determined to uncover the tale of this woman who touched so many lives but disclosed so little of her own. Through interviews with her employers and an extensive treasure hunt which took him from a tiny village in the French Alps to Southampton, New York and all across the greater Chicago area, Maloof pieces together the puzzle of Vivian's creative, solitary life. As he develops her unexposed negatives and exhibits her art, the extent of Vivian's previously unknown life unfolds in full color.

A tale of opposites, FINDING VIVIAN MAIER dares to open a Pandora's box to those who lived with her, while unveiling extensive imagery of the world between the 1950s and early 2000s. Ultimately, the film reveals the true story of one woman's quest to capture the dark side of existence and to expose the stories of the downtrodden while living under the roof of the well-to-do. The gaping holes in Vivian's story may never be filled, but a consolation prize rests in the hundreds of thousands of images she left behind.

FILM THEMES

Who was Vivian Maier? A mentally ill spinster? A misfit attempting to disquiet the privileged? A caretaker who opened the minds of those in her care? Vivian was all of these and more, her body of work testifies.

POVERTY AND WEALTH

The poor, the downtrodden, the lowest rungs of society – this is who fascinated Vivian and became her subject matter. It’s interesting to note that she supported her art through the riches of bourgeois society. Rather than laboring amongst the poor in the sweatshops, Vivian selected a line of work that put a roof over her head, food on her table, and allowed her the free time she needed to pursue her creative impulses. Living in the shadow of wealth, Vivian was able to capture the raw, unedited edges of the human experience, never hesitating to expose the affluent children in her care to the darker, dirtier world that they may never have seen otherwise.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS ANONYMITY

Vivian’s identity was continually in a state of flux. She regularly changed the way she wanted to be interpreted, spelling her name differently, asking to be called various titles, even speaking with a disputable French accent. Her relationship to the world indicated an impermanence, and yet the copious amount of photographs she took tells another story. Vivian connected to the world at its most intimate: the blood, guts, and tears, the anguish and heartache, the embraces, the death and deceptions. Photography enabled the mysterious Miss Maier to extend herself without ever touching, to connect with the world she was a part of while simultaneously remaining distinctly apart and ever anonymous.

ART AND MENTAL ILLNESS

With the recent suicide of Robin Williams, the fine line between artistic brilliance and personal anguish is once again in the spotlight. From the stories told by people who knew Vivian in her later life, it becomes clear that her struggle with mental illness grew more acute, and that the behaviors originally considered eccentric eventually became intolerable. The vast collection of work Vivian left behind serves as testimony to the brilliance of this mysterious woman, but also hints at the unchecked madness that raged through this secretive photographer’s veins.

PRIVACY = PROLIFERATION

It’s clear that Vivian did not want to be known as a photographer during her lifetime, that her art was a private expression, one that she coveted and kept behind locked doors. Critics never appraised her work, and by keeping it from the public eye, Vivian never had to compromise. Perhaps in the refuge that privacy afforded her, she felt liberated to shoot whatever touched to her heart. The limits and guidelines imposed by society never touched Vivian’s creative spirit or her output, allowing her to freely express herself without risking public judgment.

“Nothing is meant to last forever. We have to make room for other people.”

Vivian Maier

“Had she made herself known, she would have become a famous photographer.”

Mary Ellen Mark

“You’re only given a little spark of madness. You mustn’t lose it.”

Robin Williams

FILM FACTS:

- The oldest surviving permanent photograph of an image formed by a camera was created in 1826 by Nicéphore Niépce, a French inventor often credited as the inventor of photography.
- In 1884, American George Eastman developed dry gel on paper, or film, replacing the photographic plate and freeing photographers from carrying around boxes of plates and toxic chemicals. In July 1888, Eastman's Kodak camera went on the market with the slogan, "You press the button, we do the rest." Photography became available to the masses in 1900 when the Kodak Brownie was introduced.
- In November 2008, Vivian Maier slipped on ice and hit her head. After being hospitalized, she was placed in a nursing home, where she died in April 2009.
- FINDING VIVIAN MAIER has won three awards, including Best Documentary at the Traverse City Film Festival, and was nominated for two other awards, including the Audience Award at the Edinburgh International Film Festival.
- Many of the earliest female photographers were from Britain and France. In Northern Europe, women began opening photography studios in the 1840s, and wealthier British women developed photography as an art in the 1850s. The first studios run by women were opened in New York City in the 1890s.
- Since 2010, Vivian Maier's work has been exhibited in Denmark, Norway, the U.S., Germany, France, the U.K., the Netherlands, Hungary, Italy, Belgium, Russia, Canada, and Sweden.
- In their book, *A Sociology of Mental Health and Illness*, David Pilgrim and Anne Rogers state that "some mental traits or states labeled as disorders can also involve above-average creativity, non-conformity, goal-striving, meticulousness, or empathy," characteristics that Vivian appeared to possess.
- Two years before she died, Vivian Maier failed to pay the rent on her storage space. Her negatives, prints, audio recordings, and 8mms were auctioned. John Maloof purchased a box of 30,000 of her negatives, which he initially intended for a history book he was writing about the Chicago neighborhood of Portage Park.
- Co-director Charlie Siskel, nephew of film critic Gene Siskel, was a producer on both *Bowling for Columbine* and *Religulous*. Siskel worked as a lawyer before he began filmmaking.
- After moving to Chicago in 1956, Maier became a nanny to the Gensburg family who gave her access to a private darkroom, thus enabling her to print photographs. After leaving the Gensburgs in the 1970s, she no longer had access to a dark room, and her rolls of undeveloped photos began to accumulate.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Read "Bystander: A History of Photography," co-written by Joel Meyerowitz, who is interviewed in the film.
2. Consider giving to the Vivian Maier Scholarship Fund, which aims to provide opportunities and resources for female students and is managed by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC).
3. To become a street photographer, you must overcome the fear of approaching the people on the street. Speak to those you photograph in order to build confidence.
4. Street Photography Magazine offers a platform for amateur street photographers to learn and exhibit.