

Julia Reichert, Documentarian of the Working Class, Dies at 76

By [J. Hoberman](#)

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She took home, to Ohio, a 2019 Oscar for “American Factory,” and in a long career teaching and making films, she paid special attention to working women.



Julia Reichert with her husband and co-director Steven Bogнар in Los Angeles after their film “An American Factory” won the 2019 Academy Award for best documentary feature. Credit...Kevork Djansezian/Getty Images

Julia Reichert, a filmmaker and educator who made a pioneering feminist documentary, “Growing Up Female,” as an undergraduate student and almost a half-century later won an Academy Award for “American Factory,” a documentary feature about the Chinese takeover of a shuttered automobile plant in Dayton, Ohio, died on Thursday at her home in nearby Yellow Springs, Ohio. She was 76.

Steven Bogнар, her husband and filmmaking partner, confirmed the death. The cause, diagnosed in 2018, was urothelial cancer, which affects the urethra, bladder and other organs. She learned she had non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma in 2006.

Ms. Reichert, a longtime professor of motion pictures at Wright State University in Dayton, was in the forefront of a new generation of social documentarians who came out of the New Left and feminist movements of the early 1970s with a belief in film as an organizing tool with a social mission. Her films were close to oral history: Eschewing voice-over narration, they were predicated on interviews in which her mainly working-class subjects spoke for themselves.

“Growing Up Female” (1971), which she made with her future husband, James Klein, a classmate at Antioch College in Ohio, was selected by the Library of Congress for the National Film Registry in 2011.

Her documentaries “Union Maids” (1976), made with Mr. Klein and Miles Mogelescu, and “Seeing Red” (1983), also made with Mr. Klein, were both nominated for Academy Awards.

Both movies mix archival footage with interviews. “Union Maids” profiles three women active in the Chicago labor movement during the Great Depression. “Seeing Red” portrays rank-and-file members of the Communist Party during the 1930s and ’40s.

Ms. Reichert was again nominated, in 2010, for the short documentary “The Last Truck: Closing of a GM Plant,” which she directed with Mr. Bognar, her second husband.

“The Last Truck” documented the closing of a an automobile assembly plant in Moraine, Ohio, some of it clandestinely filmed by workers inside the plant. The movie served as a prologue to “American Factory,” which Netflix released in conjunction with Barack and Michelle Obama’s fledgling company Higher Ground Productions, and which won the 2019 documentary-feature Oscar.

Reviewing the film in The New York Times, Manohla Dargis [called](#) it “complex, stirring, timely and beautifully shaped, spanning continents as it surveys the past, present and possible future of American labor.”

The movie is suffused in ambivalence. Having purchased the same plant documented in “The Last Truck,” a Chinese billionaire converts it into an automobile-glass factory and restores lost jobs while confounding American workers with a new set of attitudes.

In 2020, Ms. Reichert and Mr. Bognar were invited by the comedian Dave Chappelle to document one of the outdoor stand-up shows he hosted during the Covid pandemic from a cornfield near his home in Yellow Springs. The two-hour feature “Dave Chappelle: Live in Real Life” had its premiere at Radio City Music Hall as part of the 2021 Tribeca Film Festival.

Although Ms. Reichert addressed a variety of social issues in the documentaries she directed and produced, her enduring interests were labor history and the lives of working women. Her last film, “9to5: The Story of a Movement,” directed with Mr. Bognar, brought those two concerns together, focusing on the organizing of female office workers beginning in the 1970s.



Ms. Reichert with Mr. Bogнар and Chad Cannon, who composed the score for “American Factory,” at a screening of the film in Los Angeles in 2019. Credit... Araya Diaz/Getty Images

Julia Bell Reichert was born on June 16, 1946, in Bordentown, N.J., a city on the Delaware River about eight miles southeast of Trenton. She was the second of four children of Louis and Dorothy (Bell) Reichert. Her father was a butcher in a neighborhood supermarket, her mother a homemaker who became a nurse.

One of the few students from her high school to go to college, Ms. Reichert was attracted to Antioch because of its cooperative work-study program. Her parents were conservative Republicans, but once she was at Antioch Ms. Reichert’s political orientation shifted left. She canvassed for the Democratic president, Lyndon B. Johnson, during the 1964 election and hosted a feminist program, “The Single Girl,” on the campus radio station. She later credited her radio experience with honing her documentary skills.

“I came out of radio,” she said in an interview with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Scientists before winning the 2019 Oscar. “So without having to spend any money, I learned a lot about interviewing and editing and mixing music and how to talk — how to tell a story in a time frame.”

Ms. Reichert also took a film course at Antioch with the avant-garde filmmaker [David Brooks](#) and organized a documentary workshop with Mr. Klein. After making “Growing Up Female,” which was originally intended for consciousness-raising groups, she and Mr. Klein founded a distribution cooperative, New Day Films, which focused on bringing new documentary films to schools, unions and community groups.

The couple also collaborated on the documentary “Methadone: An American Way of Dealing,” in addition to “Union Maids” and “Seeing Reds.”

Vincent Canby of The Times, who discovered “Union Maids” in early 1977 on a double bill in a limited run at a downtown Manhattan theater, [called it](#) “one of the more moving, more cheering theatrical experiences available in New York this weekend.”

He was similarly supportive of “Seeing Red,” which was first shown at the 1983 New York Film Festival, and which is arguably the most sympathetic portrayal of American Communists ever put onscreen. Mr. Canby [considered it](#) “a fine, tough companion piece to ‘Union Maids.’” Rather than dogma, he wrote, the subject was “American idealism.”

Ms. Reichert started a filmmaking program at Wright State University with Mr. Klein. She also directed a quasi-autobiographical feature film, “Emma and Elvis” (1992), written with Mr. Bognar, about a married documentary filmmaker who becomes involved with a young video artist. Although the film received only limited distribution, the critic Jonathan Rosenbaum praised it in The Chicago Reader for “making a filmmaker’s creative/midlife crisis meaningful, engaging and interesting.”



Mr. Reichert and Mr. Bognar during the filming of “American Factory.”Credit...Netflix

Ms. Reichert’s most personal film — the first she directed with Mr. Bognar — was “A Lion in the House,” a documentary about children with cancer completed in 2006 after having been in production for close to a decade. It was inspired in part by her adolescent daughter’s struggle with Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Her daughter recovered, but after the film was completed Ms. Reichert was herself diagnosed with cancer.

“A Lion in the House” won multiple awards, including a Primetime Emmy, the 2006 Sundance Film Festival grand jury documentary award and the 2008 Independent Spirit Award for best documentary.

Ms. Reichert's marriage to Mr. Klein ended in divorce in 1986. She married Mr. Bogner, who survives her, in 1987. She is also survived by her daughter, Lela Klein; three brothers, Louis, Craig and Joseph Reichert; and two grandchildren.

Ms. Reichert was very much a regional filmmaker. After graduating from Antioch, she remained in the Dayton area and became a source of inspiration for other Midwestern documentarians, including Michael Moore and Steve James. She also produced a number of films.

In an appreciation written for a 2019 retrospective of her work at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, the journalist and author Barbara Ehrenreich recalled that Ms. Reichert had "defied every stereotype I'd had of independent filmmakers."

"She wasn't rich, and she wasn't arrogant or egotistical," wrote Ms. Ehrenreich, the author, of "Nickel and Dimed" (2001), about the working poor in America. (She [died in September.](#)) "The daughter of a butcher and a house cleaner turned registered nurse, she dressed and spoke plainly, usually beaming with enthusiasm, and never abandoned her Midwestern roots."

She might have added that virtually all of Ms. Reichert's films were explicitly collective enterprises.



A scene from "American Factory," depicting workers at an auto-glass factory in Ohio. Credit...Netflix, via Everett Collection

In an email, Mr. Klein wrote that he and Ms. Reichert "came of age with a sense that it was only through community that the type of work we wanted to see being made could happen."

"And Julia really lived her beliefs," he added.

Despite her politics, Ms. Reichert was by her account less interested in ideology than she was in people. In an interview with Cineaste magazine, she called the subjects of "Seeing Red" "some of the most wonderful people you'll ever want to meet."

“They made a very positive life choice, despite everything they went through,” she said.

“American Factory,” which deals with the mutual culture shock experienced by Chinese and American workers and their reconciliation, was Ms. Reichert’s most ethnically and racially diverse film. The movie, she told an interviewer, “tries to be very fair by listening to everyone’s point of view — that of the chairman” — Cao Dewang, the billionaire Chinese entrepreneur who purchased and reopened the factory — “union people, anti-union people, and workers.”

Indeed, Mr. Cao, a product of Communist China who teaches American workers the hard realities of global capitalism, is in many respects the film’s protagonist.

Although a fully committed artist, Ms. Reichert wore her politics so lightly that almost no one seemed to notice when she concluded her Oscar acceptance speech for “American Factory” by cheerfully citing the best-known phrase from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s “Communist Manifesto.”

“We believe that things will get better,” she said, “when the workers of the world unite.”