

Kevin Killian on Emma's Dilemma:

The camera circles a coffee table on which the *Times* lies open to an ad for the 1997 Oscar-winning *As Good As It Gets*, a film in which harried New Yorkers attempt to deal with love, life, sexual identity, and the pressures of raising difficult kids in NYC. Filmmaker Henry Hills put his focus otherwise on young Emma Bee Bernstein, twelve when she started conducting interviews and conversations with the adult artists and writers in her family's circle. Her bratty younger brother appears now and again to try to steal the show, but Hills treats his eponymous vedette the way Louis Malle treated ten-year-old Catherine Demongeot in his 1960 film of Queneau's *Zazie dans le Metro*—like a new wave starlet, passionate, phony, gawky, alluringly beautiful, playful, and pissed in turns.

Emma's Dilemma benefits from a certain Y2K vibe; its adults seem honestly puzzled about what the cards will deal them in this end-of-times era—no wonder you'd feel anxious and depressed, if *As Good As It Gets* was the year's top movie. Poet Susan Howe appears, enunciating her vowels as though they were rubies and emeralds, to speculate how writing will mutate in the next decade with the spread of computers. She speaks of two things bound to change, privacy and control; *Emma's Dilemma* expands Howe's speculations both vertically and horizontally, confronting its heroine with a barrage of identity markers and yet seeming to fence her in visually—pushing her into a subway car, into a tiny chair, into a doorframe, so she's part analysand too—Kenneth Goldsmith asks Emma how much she thinks about sex, and she says she doesn't think about it all that very much. (Like the idol they share, Andy Warhol, another artist who understood privacy and control.)

There are so many cameos in *Emma's Dilemma* that occasionally the focus slides away from Emma. That's a good thing, lets her get a breather, just as the appearances of Karina, Godard, and Michel Legrand, in Agnes Varda's 1962 *Cléo de 5 à 7* allows Corinne Marchand to ebb as well as flow. Both films float on the silver pillow helium of their visual and verbal wit, but Hills ratchets his up with a great high style: the stuttering camera tricks or repetitions, feedback, the reduction of Emma's thoughts to a few words, sometimes just a syllable or a moue. Watching this you realize how much children are patronized, and how often and in what complicated ways. Artist Roberto Juarez shows off a gaggle of new paintings of infants, explaining he has a new subject because, "I didn't want to be just the flower boy." You can see Emma in the movie, not wanting to be just the talking head her role assigns her, and happily her director allows her the freedom of the screen where she can relax and be totally present, as Edie Sedgwick was so lusciously present in *Ciao Manhattan*, or, earlier, in *Inner and Outer Space*. Perhaps the warmest and most intimate of Hills' films, *Emma's Dilemma* is one of those documents that just spins like a top. You hate to see it come to a close.