

interview

Guises of memory constructed and reconstructed run through Jennifer Reeves' *The Time We Killed*. The initial story is personal: Robyn, a young writer (enacted by the poet Lisa Jarnot), finds herself unable to leave her apartment. She sleeps, bathes, worries about her radiator, periodically works on a romance novel entitled *The Handsomest Man*, and, most of all, remembers, tracing new patterns of meaning from the motifs of her life. It's a home movie in several senses: proudly (and beautifully) handmade, shot largely in Reeves' own apartment, and intent on the porous spaces of urban dwellings and the paradox of attempting to remain isolated while the lives and voices of neighbours penetrate the walls, both aggressive and phantasmal.

As Robyn screens and reworks the movie of her mind to patch the holes in her history (her early years occluded following a jump from a bridge at age 17) and create workable terms for loss (her isolation is initiated by the death of a lover), the world outside is coming up with stories to explain its own traumas. The film begins in November, 2002, during the run-up to the Iraq war. That Bush production shamelessly drew on the nagging irresolution of the images of September 11—"just like a movie" was the refrain in the aftermath—to give them a blockbuster logic. Since nothing satisfies the requirements of media psychobabblers, their eternal calls for "healing" and "closure," like traditional narrative resolution, subbing Saddam Hussein for a rootless terrorist network makes structural—if not factual—sense.



The Handsomest Man

The resolutions in Reeves' film are all provisional: Robyn thinks perhaps a central event in her past—say an instance of abuse—might explain her dilemma, but she never discovers one. She says she's "afraid of catching the amnesia of the American people." It's a selective amnesia, intent on making univocal meaning and discarding any incongruent elements—call it the homeland insecurity movie. Reeves, on the contrary, opts for a montage of circulating resonances, most memorably in a series of duets with Jarnot, who wrote five poems "in character." The spoken words and the images share a set of motifs (i.e., dogs, water, sunlight, birds, beach), but far from a lockstep march, they move forward and apart in a dance of meanings in motion.

The apartment scenes are shot in black-and-white digital video. The materials of the image reveries are multiform: bits of stock footage, fragments of home movies shot by Reeves' father, and mostly high-contrast 16mm. The quality of these last images, the inky smudge of the blacks and blinding light of the whites, suggest both the decay of an nth-generation photocopy and the permanence of the fundamental forms that remain after the scouring of time. The decision to use this stock was the first she made for the film, deeming it the best receptacle for memory's texture.

With the exception of *Chronic* (1997), a 38-minute film dealing with self-mutilation which renders the celluloid surface itself multidermal through an inspired and sensitive use of the optical printer, Reeves' earlier work largely dispenses with narrative—the hand-painted films *The Girl's Nerve* (1995) and *Fear of Blushing* (2001) demonstrate in particular a deep response to Brakhage. *The Time We Killed*, a title redolent both of war and the in-between moments which make up the bulk of a life, is Reeves' 13th film and first at feature length. It has won prizes at the Berlin and Tribeca Film Festivals but has not yet found a distributor.

CINEMA SCOPE: You recently watched *The Time We Killed* all the way through with an audience for the first time. What was that experience like?

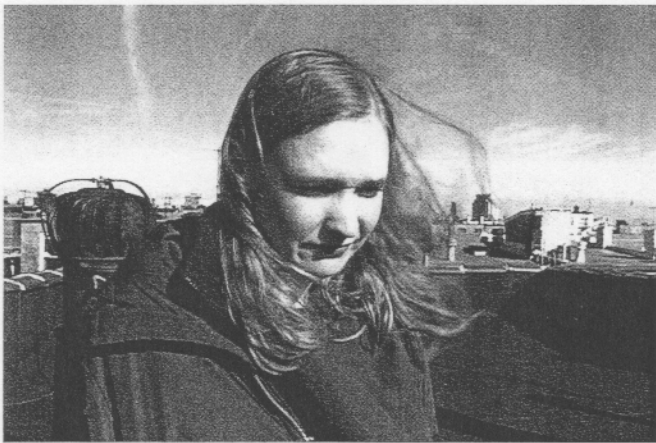
JENNIFER REEVES: It's interesting, because I had planned to leave the theatre since I had stayed too long at a recent screening and had fallen into a bad mood. The film is very serious, obviously. There's depression and violence, fear, shame, and isolation, a lot of difficult experiences. But I remembered suddenly how important it was to laugh about it all and that I *had* folded a lot of dark and sad humour into the film. But it's subtle and a lot of audience members will be unsure if it's okay to laugh at certain moments because it's like laughing at human suffering. But, the absurdity of depression, the behaviour and the way of thinking you can get into, can be really funny. So I put that in as a means of making the film more enjoyable for myself. You know, this is what we do to make our lives more bearable—we laugh at ourselves.

So at this particular screening at Outfest in Los Angeles, I told the audience, "This is a pretty serious film but there's a lot that's purposely over the top. So feel free to laugh." So people were really laughing out loud. Throughout the film, they got more and more attuned to my threads of humour. So it was great to see that the emotional range experienced by the audience was greater and more like I had intended.

Contradictions are more evident when you become somebody who's very self-aware. You've been through therapy or have read about psychology and you've spent your life observing other people. And you learn there are these contradictions between how a person feels and what's the reality of the situation. You become more aware of the layers of your past and present. Some people will fly off the handle and think they're reacting only to a present situation because they have no self-awareness at all. But Robyn is somebody who knows that it doesn't really make sense to never leave the house. She's searching for an explanation but is kind of crippled by her fear. Within that contradiction, you can either start laughing or you feel totally pathetic.

JENNIFER REEVES ON *THE TIME WE KILLED* by B. KITE

insecurity



The Time We Killed

SCOPE: And people become very exposed in regard to any social interaction, they lose the psychological callouses people need to survive in the daily world. One scene that brings out the awkward humour is the neighbour's visit, when Robyn starts by wondering whether she should get a dog and then spirals off into tangents on what dog ownership involves, including a consideration of the sound their toenails would make on the staircase.

REEVES: That scene shows how nervous you can get when you're isolated, nervous about coming off right. How *do* you have a conversation? These things are taken for granted, but if you're socially phobic or a person who's been very alone, you forget all these cues for simple things like how you make a transition, how you invite someone into your apartment, or how you get off of an awkward train of thought. She says one thing about wanting a dog but that you can't have one in the building, then she goes into other people she knew who had dogs, the dog on the wall, and what dogs mean to mankind... It's about getting stuck in a loop.

SCOPE: Was that scripted or improvised?

REEVES: It was both. I would say however that some of the best material was improvised. I gave Lisa and Susan a script that had some key lines and a list of topics that had to be discussed. And they had never met before so it was almost like they had to play themselves getting to know each other, but in character.

SCOPE: Tell me about the film's long evolution. What did you start with and how did it change as you were working on it?

REEVES: At first, it was going to be a montage film. I started collecting material for it in 1998, and in 2001, I started writing the character Robyn. I kept writing fragments of what I was thinking about. I'd just come up with little lines that later I wove into a longer narration and film plan. Phrases like "Going home now you're going to die," or "When you're dying you don't have time for small talk." Or "Like distance, boundary allows closeness. A moment is shared when eyes meet (camera eye). The film is about a hermit. She becomes a hermit after her friend dies... Photos filming the actual girl, fearing to ask and so on, and filming XXX to get over my desire to bed XXX. Filming capturing deeper intimacy, proof of significance."

So out of all these idea fragments I was collecting, Robyn began to emerge. Meanwhile I was shooting with my Bolex on random trips out in the world—I went to the Berlin film festival to show *Darling International* (co-directed with M.M. Serra) and I filmed my friend Valeska there. I went to New Zealand in 1998 and went home to Michigan in 1999, and was shooting animals, landscapes, people, and water. It was all about gathering and responding to the world, almost like I was creating a home movie for a fictional character.

SCOPE: Were you planning on working with Lisa from the beginning?

REEVES: I actually put an ad in *Backstage* and I got around 300 headshots and letters from aspiring actresses. And all of them were presenting themselves and trying to look really pretty and feminine, which I guess is what you do. But the whole actorliness and glossiness of it really turned me off. I also realized this was going to be another personal no-budget film, so I needed somebody I could work with over a long period of time in a more organic way. So I went back to my usual method and thought of friends who were non-actors.

Lisa was the friend with whom I was most actively talking about the concerns that I had for the film. And her poetry is so very connected with my kind of filmmaking. She just made sense. The majority of our shooting happened in the spring and summer of 2002. And later, I shot her point-of-view shots. For almost a year it was just me, alone in the apartment, shooting out the window or using myself as a stand-in. That was, I guess, another part of pick-

ing her, because we both have long fingers, kind of bony arms—there was enough similarity in our body types that I could be her body double.

I lived the film. It was my apartment, I was the body double, Lisa wore my clothes, and her point of view out the window in the movie was actually just my everyday point of view. For instance, one day I was at home editing the film and it was so gusty that the wind blew the plants off of the windowsill so they broke on the floor. And so I thought, "Okay, this is a significant event that happened in the apartment," so I just got out my PD150 camera and shot the destroyed plants on the floor, and used the image to imply Robyn had done that in a fit of rage. I worked with available light. If the moon looked particularly beautiful one night out the window, I'd just have to get my camera out and shoot it. So rather than creating a scene for a movie, I was responding to the actual environment.

I also went through my own archives. For years I've been recording sound and shooting, so I had outtakes from other films and home movies that I brought into *The Time We Killed*. I wanted to create a more personal, "real" experience, something that would be a movie but would also share something more intimate of what I know. And what I care about.

SCOPE: And was there something about doing it through another character that made that process easier?

REEVES: It maybe makes it easier to cut things out. But as a rule I think it's more interesting when artists transform their own experience, rather than recount it. If I decide one day to actually do an autobiography, I would probably want to do it in book form. But I don't think people really need to know about my life. I have things to offer in terms of what I observe, what I feel or believe in. I think when we're really honest about our emotions, everybody's a lot closer together than they were aware of. Differences sort of melt away if people are more honest.

And that's probably one of the things I feel most vulnerable doing. When I sit in the theatre and feel nervous about my movie, it's partly about feeling my own emotions exposed. A lot of the film deals with shame, embarrassment, failure, silly hopes, and kind of ridiculous fantasies. I'm doing it earnestly but at the same time ironically, because that's what you have to do sometimes, it makes it a little easier. So making this hybrid between actual home movies and a made-up story—there was something to be revealed in that clash.

Maybe it poses a question about how people invent themselves. I mean, one of the things with Robyn is that she is an artistic person and you can see this connection between her novel and her own desires and how she uses writing to be somebody else. I wanted to get at that fact of human nature. Even autobiography

contains self-invention, but often disguises it. So in some ways it felt more honest for me to make her an imaginary character.

SCOPE: It does keep teasing the boundaries, though. You integrate some of your family's home movies into the fiction and list yourself in the credits as playing Robyn as a child.

REEVES: Yeah, I used my father's Super 8 footage from when I was a kid. I was so happy to integrate those images into my film, because my love of movies came partly from the experience of watching those scenes on a Super 8 projector in our living room as a kid. It was a way of looking back at these different times and feeling better about them, because everyone was

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performing for the camera. I didn't have a very happy childhood, and these home movies became a myth, affirming that we actually had a happy family and that we did stuff together.

But I like the subtleties of those movies, you can see awkwardness and revealing looks...like when my father shoots me at age three straddling a bomb at the war memorial there's this skeptical look I give the camera. And I just think it's funny that Robyn is so into dogs, because in this scene of me as a kid (standing in for Robyn) I am literally diving out and tackling my dog onto the ground. This poor dog is so abused by the overzealousness of my brother and me. But Sparky was a good sport. He always got up and kept playing. But I found it wonderful to be able to bring in a sort of self-critique through this document of my own childhood.

SCOPE: What led you to choose high-contrast stock?

REEVES: Hi-Con was actually the first decision of the film, before I even knew the subject matter. I had shot a little Hi-Con for several other films and found it so compelling, I wanted to make a whole film with it. You lose detail and the subject that you're shooting can seem more distant or abstract, so it was a challenge. I felt I could use this in a way that would bring out nostalgia, memory, and loss. With Hi-Con you only get an impression and the basic form of what you're shooting, without the gradations of light. It's pretty much pure black and white with very little grey. It emulates how time and memory abstract experience leaving only the impression of what was most important.

Which relates to another concern of mine—the anticipated demise of film that people keep talking about. I had this feeling like this was my last chance and I wanted to make something really beautiful that

had only to do with film at the most basic level: light inscribing itself on emulsion, the lack of light not.

And that also brought out the continuity I saw between totally different places and things. There's a montage where a llama in Michigan is connected with ostriches in Indiana to race horses in California to farm horses in New Zealand to birds flying somewhere else in California. These free associative montages are like your mind, your mind can jump anywhere immediately.

People might find it claustrophobic because they can't forget themselves. The film asks the viewer to think about matters of the self without escape.

But I like limits, I like rules, to a certain extent. Obviously in a film like this that's working with montage and free association, with many ideas that don't have to be tied to the plot, I had to have certain parameters. So the Hi-Con was one. All the Hi-Con is handheld, all the interiors were shot with video on a tripod. To create the different worlds, the different realms of experience. I'm a cinematographer also, so a lot of times when I'm out shooting the Hi-Con I'm not thinking, "Where is this going to fit in the movie?" but rather, "How can I best render this moment, get at the essence of this moment or this place?"

SCOPE: The idea of constructing memory also enters into the political material of the film. Robyn speaks of the Bush administration making an improper use of memory, using it as a rationale to kill people.

REEVES: Yeah, she talks about the anniversary of 9/11 and how it was used by the Bush administration to gain support for invading Iraq, picking the scab of this wound to get everybody riled up and scared enough to want to go out and kill people. Meanwhile, Robyn is involved in the process of trying to remember her past. She's had amnesia from the time she was 17, but wants to understand herself and to free herself to move forward and do good. People can use memory for positive growth, or else use it to further an evil cause.

Later on, Robyn says, "I'm afraid of catching the amnesia of the American people," which refers to the times we've invaded countries and did things that were wrong—that hurt people, made nations not trust us, created poverty and starvation—things many Americans like to forget. And it's in the way the media operates. We'll be so inundated with some topic or scandal for a week or a month, and then it's essentially forgotten. It's almost like being in a perpetual state of the present tense without reflection on the past and with no real consideration of the future. It breeds this horrible ignorance, and I guess that's another thing I was getting at.

I was trying to weave in these different planes that normally wouldn't be brought together. Narrative film is usually much more simplified, gathering information about what unfolded in some story toward an end. But this film is very nonlinear, it goes inside her head and it goes outside. And it even goes into something that's not in her head and not in the external world, but more like my commentary on all of it.

So there are these different levels that are pulled together. On the one hand, it might be overwhelming and hard to put together for the viewer, but it's also what I feel people need more practice doing. Because we're so completely inundated with images and commentary through the media—it's so all-pervasive at this point that people just kind of shut it off. There's like a

filter, like, "Okay, too much, not gonna process that." It's strange, because people watch a lot of tv but you don't actually see that many different images. You mostly see people speaking to you and telling you what you see, what to think.

SCOPE: Tell me a little bit about the animal motif in the film.

REEVES: I really love animals, obviously. I also think the way people treat animals is an amplified reflection of the way we treat other human beings. So essentially, I wanted to break down that boundary a little bit more between animals and people. Both on the level of emotionally connecting with another being but also on a symbolic level.

If humans are used to believing that we are superior beings, that there are lesser beings whose life is less valuable, that in turn fuels how free we feel to kill and exploit other people. You know, racism. Racism is coming into play in this dehumanization of the Iraqi civilians. The "Shock and Awe" campaign probably wouldn't have been as easy to sell (to senators, to the American public) if it had been against a nation of Caucasians. But while critical terms like "dehumanization" and "treating people like animals," express injustice and sadism done to human beings, there's an implication that it's more acceptable to treat animals like disposable objects. I feel that very different kinds of abuses and exploitation are actually connected.

So, on the one hand, my film is reaching out and celebrating the "personalities" of these different animals. Because I see them as individuals. And I shot portraits of them in the same way I would a person, the way the shot's composed, the kind of eye contact. On the other side, the film references cruelty. There's the animal-testing footage. At another point, there's this really sweet poem about sheep running in a field of grass on the soundtrack, but what you see is a sheep in a cage with just concrete and stones under her feet, looking forlorn. So there's that contrast.

The animal theme is noticeable to people because you don't often see animals integrated into a serious movie. If animals are in it, it's got to be Disney, a kids' movie. And I did something even more unusual, combining experimental and narrative in a long piece.

SCOPE: Other films that occupy a similar territory might be Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1974), Resnais' *Muriel* (1963), *Eraserhead* (1977)...

REEVES: Also Guy Maddin's films. I love the fact that he's created his own language, that he's been doing his own kind of narrative, developing his own sensibility for so long that it's really strong and unique. I would love it if more filmmakers did that—or were given the opportunity to do it.

SCOPE: I was actually expecting the film to be a lot more claustrophobic. Robyn's enclosure is opened up by the memories and associational footage. And also there's this weird way in which she's both isolated and really exposed, because of the constant barrage of neighbours' voices and stimuli from the outside world. It comes to seem almost impossible to completely isolate yourself in the film.

REEVES: Other people might find it claustrophobic because they can't get lost in an action sequence, or forget themselves. The film asks the viewer to think about matters of the self without escape. Some people will do anything to avoid being alone.

I like to spend time alone—I feel a need to have a certain amount of time by myself to let the mind flow. I can actually feel more “claustrophobic” out and about. I have a threshold of how much time I can socialize, and then I just need time to process new experiences and ideas. So for me, having these sequences that were supposed to be her imagination, was perfectly natural and important. I didn't want them to be like these typical little sequences that just represent the fact that she imagines things. I wanted the viewer to actually live in that interior space and feel how freeing and vast it can be.

Somebody recently mentioned *Repulsion* (1965) with reference to my film, but in that film it mostly shows the woman in her apartment, moving the camera this way and that way to show her fear and instability, and there are these little flashback moments in her head. But they're so truncated, they only give a glimpse into her head. She remains a mystery, and her whole thought process remains very simplistic.

Though there are things I like about *Repulsion*, I really get tired of movies that simplify people who are in a state of mental illness. Besides that it's irritating people need to do that, I find it much more fascinating how the mind actually works, all the different places you can go, how freeing and how frightening it can be. Your own imagination can scare you to death, and then other times it can totally soothe you, or excite you.

SCOPE: Do you see this film as more directly related to *Chronic* than some of your other work?

REEVES: It definitely is, even just this topic of recovery from mental injuries based on early trauma.

SCOPE: But the end of *Chronic*, with its apocalypses blooming behind every façade, seems to suggest there's no real escape or recovery possible.

REEVES: Yeah, obviously when you're afflicted with this sort of self-destructive impulse, or unhealthy behaviours which have come up in reaction to the world as a survival mechanism, you're either on this path of continually getting closer to actually destroying yourself or you find a way to replace those unhealthy patterns of behaviour and somehow become a new person. So recovery is very uncertain, some people recover and some people don't. In *The Time We Killed*, Robyn has survived and she'll keep surviving, but the question is: How much better can she get? I don't know what the statistic is, but probably most people are unhappy to a certain extent for much of their lives—it's the human condition, right? So Robyn's at a state where she's “surviving,” but she's not living anything close to a full life. But at the same time, and one of the reasons I brought in the world situation, is that Robyn does have her apartment, her job, the ability to live. Even though she's suffering mental anguish, she also enjoys her privileges of creativity, making meaning. Having time to daydream is a luxury when bombs are falling. ☐

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