

MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THIS

BY MARK PERANSON

excerpt

On a more grim day—one where the late afternoon, luminescent Parisian glow is replaced with the monochrome of a particularly unimpressive New York City winter—I could easily imagine Julie Delpy's depressed Céline (who admits she no longer feels pain nor excitement) in the mindspace of Robyn, the shut-in protagonist of Jennifer Reeves' Forum entry, *The Time We Killed* (which my FIPRESCI jury awarded a prize, joining *Head On* from the competition, and Robert Lepage's *La Face cachée de la lune* from the Panorama). Five years in the making, Reeves' debut feature is an impressionistic and deeply personal cinematic poem that, even though it takes the point of view of a so-called mentally disturbed woman, captures a clear view of the world that we live in now. A companion piece to Reeves' short *Chronic* (1997), *The Time We Killed* combines elements of experimental film, narrative cinema, and documentary to create a stellar example of personal filmmaking operating on multiple levels: psychological, sociological, political, and even technological.

Lisa Jarrot plays Robyn, a borderline agoraphobe, who, try as she might to keep the world outside of her Brooklyn apartment at arm's length, can't prevent it from penetrating her private space—whether it's a murder-suicide in the apartment next door, memories of her true love, or the planes crashing into the World Trade Center. We see Robyn as she tries to write a cheapo Harlequin-type romance called *The Handsomest Man*, and overcome an earlier suicide attempt that affected her memory, causing her to question whether there was a traumatic event in her childhood that could explain her current state. Jarrot composed some of her poems in character, and Reeves compensates for the added free association by toning down her own frequently stunning optically printed images; she skillfully modulates the film's rhythm to account for the consciousness of her char-

acter, resulting in a fully subjective work that manages to give space for an audience to interpret and bring themselves into the film (recalling, at times, the work of Stan Brakhage).

While the story, on paper, sounds remarkably depressing (it kind of is) and threatens to bog down in futile self-absorption (the monotone voiceover, though it constantly threatens to crack, dulls the senses), Reeves creates a structure that reflects the complexity of daily life, inserting enough humorous scenes—a tipsy Robyn entertaining a neighbour, Robyn listening to self-help tapes—and poetic reveries to mix up the monotony. Reeves films the exteriors on high contrast, handheld black-and-white 16mm (that appears, in this context, to be archival footage), while the interiors are shot on DV on a tripod; it's as if Robyn could be filming her life as an obsessive video diary. Though *The Time We Killed* is the first of Reeves' works with a cast and crew, she still finds it hard to relinquish control—the director, who was also photographer, sound recordist, and editor, made the film in her own apartment, acted as a frequent stand-in for Jarrot, and plays Robyn's surrogate sister (and former roommate at a now-defunct mental institution). As the film builds and turns back in on itself, the sense that it speaks for the writer-director is almost unbearable; the line between the actor and her director is for all intents non-existent.

As another, more accepted form of personal filmmaking—the home-movie genre—threatens to explode (witness the frightening success of *Capturing the Friedmans* or the well-received Sundance screenings of *Tarnation*), Reeves presents this new technology as two-sided: it's certainly beneficial in that it enables filmmakers to be self-sufficient, but *The Time We Killed* complicates the way DV can make an individual more isolated. The gorgeous imagery of the 16mm, especially when representing Robyn's

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memories in abstraction, makes the objects of Reeves' longing especially clear. She manages to capture a conflicted feeling, that of being afraid of a certain part of society, but also longing for communication, or an unconditional friendship—hence, the almost obsessive way Reeves comes back to animals, with their ability to give unconditional love (while lacking memory)—specifically, dogs. One could say she even wants to help save some part of society—just like she strives to rescue 16 mm from its looming demise.

As September 11th and its aftermath rolls around, Reeves allegorizes Robyn's shut-in state to that of the nation as a whole, and *The Time We Killed* resonates as an anti-isolationist statement, with all the connotations of that phrase. (One of *Before Sunset*'s most interesting ideas is that while people might not change, their ideas about the world—and, in specific, America—can, and do.) Reeves said that 9/11 made her afraid, not of another attack, but of her own powerlessness at Bush's forthcoming retaliation; the way a memory was, and is, being used as a justification to kill people. At that point, as Reeves discussed after the premiere, she decided she couldn't just make a "personal film," based on her own feelings and experiences, because they seemed less important than what was going on outside of her home. Such an attitude assumes a divide between the personal and the political, and in making the film Reeves came to the proper conclusion that the line between the two isn't all that clear. As memory drives her out of the apartment, Robyn (and Reeves) realizes that it's futile to lock oneself in—that the amnesia of the American people isn't contagious—and *The Time We Killed* so ends on a surprising glimmer of hope. **B**