

First-person for all

Jenni Olson and Jennifer Reeves rap about radically honest filmmaking

Terrorism brought me out of the house," says Robyn Taylor (Lisa Jarnot), the apophoric protagonist of Jennifer Reeves's *The Time We Killed*, that wry statement serving as the setup for a dry punch line: "The war on terror drove me back in." Watching Reeves's impressive movie for the first time, I was struck by the traits it shares with another recent work, Jenni Olson's *The Joy of Life*. Both foreground first-person narration, often matching it with emotive explorations of landscape. Both feature poets (Jarnot in Reeves's film, Lawrence Ferlinghetti in *The Joy of Life*). From the life-and-death dichotomies in their titles on up, *The Joy of Life* and *The Time We Killed* could easily be considered West Coast and East Coast bookends of the type of feminist experimental filmmaking that thinks big — feature-length big. As Reeves prepares to visit the Bay Area for the MadCat Women's International Film Festival, and Olson gets ready to take her movie to Vancouver, the time seemed right to hook the two directors up for a talk.

Johnny Ray Huston

Jennifer Reeves: I got your film yesterday, watched it this morning, and loved it. I'd seen a documentary last night and was so relieved that your film did everything most docs don't, even though it's not a straightforward doc. There were a few moments that were pretty heart-wrenching.

I'm a big fan of James Benning and Chantal Akerman and work that meditates on beautiful imagery. To have that happening in your film on one level, and for it also to go on this inward journey — it was powerful.

Jenni Olson: For about a year, people have been saying to me, "Have you seen *The Time We Killed*?" When I rewatched the beginning of your film the other day, I was struck by the first two shots in particular. I thought, "Oh my god, there really is a connection [between our films] here."

JR: They're so completely different on one hand — watching yours, I had major color envy [laughs] and total respect for the patience and time you allowed with the images. I tend to cut things short. But we're both trying to say the things that nobody wants to even say to their own friends, the most embarrassing truths we know about ourselves and generally hide from the public. Things that don't come out in narratives or documentary films because everyone is trying to justify themselves rather than show human weakness.

JO: "Vulnerability" is the word that I come back to. I've always admired that in — to draw from experimental work —

Su Friedrich's films. They're really intimate, and in being so personal they become universal.

JR: I guess the droll self-critique comes out. You have to laugh at yourself in the process of sharing the things that make you feel most alone. That creates a conviction.

JO: Your film's intense, in terms of the atmosphere you create. When the camera is inside with the character, you have a sense of safety and peacefulness, but if you go outside or into her memories — and the sound design is amazing — the way it's shot and the use of solarization create all this anxiety.

JR: People react to the film differently, according to their dispositions. The scenes inside, some people find them claustrophobic and all they want to do is get out.

All the stuff shot outdoors, the external stuff, was shot with a handheld

JR: That was the first experimental film I'd ever seen, back in high school. My brother was really into it because it was an underground pothead thing.

JO: One of the remarkable things about that film is that you so intensely identify with the main character [Henry] and his reality. There's that same kind of internal experience and disturbing psychology.

JR: Something about that film, and something that I admire about David Lynch's work overall, is that the sound is used very creatively to make the emotional realm feel in a way that isn't cliché. It's often done through counterpoint or a hyperreal emphasis on a particular sound — it's distorted in a way that you can't tell it's distorted. It tweaks your emotions.

Essentially, sound to me is the door to someone's internal life. It operates in a physical way — sound reaches out to

starts in November 2002 and goes until April 2003.

JR: That's strictly a structural device. But I like the fact that the movie is similar to a diary, reflecting day-to-day thoughts. Diaries are very nonlinear — not only are you living in the present, you're connecting incidents to the past, associating them with memories. The diary format elucidates that.

JO: You only use six different title cards. I struggled with something similar for a long time while writing *The Joy of Life* because it has a diary format as well.

JR: My film is about depression and a sort of self-imposed captivity, and a lot of people don't want to know what that feels like. For some people the title cards are like, "Oh my god, more..." because those markers emphasize the character's lack of movement.

What I say to people who have a hard time with my film is that if you start to think while you're watching and you assume that means it's a bad film because your mind is wandering, well no, I want you to be a thinking person. I want my film to open up questions for you, spaces for you to connect it to your own life. If you have associations



On the outside: Robyn Taylor (Lisa Jarnot) makes a rare venture outside her apartment in *The Time We Killed*, directed by Jennifer Reeves (inset).

you. Even if you're sitting at a remote distance from the screen, it comes to you. Image can always be objectified in a way, but sound becomes very internalized; you take it in. I actually think that sound design should become my day job because it's one of the most pleasurable aspects of filmmaking for me in terms of discovery. I often wish filmmakers or films had more of a tradition of pushing the sound.

I've saved phone messages on cassette tapes for a period of around eight years as kind of a scrapbook. Some of the phone messages in *The Time We Killed* are from my personal stash.

JO: I use a similar patchwork combination of the real and fiction so that the feature-length narrative structure works. You have to make things up and create drama. *The Time We Killed* uses months and years as a time frame; it

with your life, you can go to them, and then when you return to my film, that's good, you can interact with it. Nothing is lost. You don't have to know everything that I'm saying.

JO: As a programmer and a filmmaker, that's what I think an experimental film is — a film that requires your participation. It means that every person has an individual experience, as opposed to Steven Spielberg, who says, "Now the music comes up and everyone cries."

JR: Every second of that type of film carries you through this seamless experience. You're so engrossed in it that you're not even conscious of yourself and your body.

JO: Which can have its merits [laughs].

JR: — Yes, we need a break sometimes. But many people are getting

Continued on page 38

breaks from themselves for the majority of their waking hours.

JO: *I describe my film as poetic, and I think of your film as very poetic. We both have actual poetry in our films.*

JR: The six poems in my film are Lisa Jarrot's.

JO: *Did you know and like her work?*

JR: Lisa is a good friend of mine. Stan Brakhage introduced us a number of years ago after first introducing each of us to the other's work. One of the reasons Brakhage wanted us to meet was that Lisa's work is very free-associative and rich in imagery. The poems in the film she wrote while I was shooting her. That was her way of getting into the character, since she's not an actress.

For me there's a sense of self-critique in *The Time We Killed*, the main character's isolating herself in this house, but actually she's safe and privileged — and that same choice is being made by so many people in these different apartments. When 9/11 happened, I was already working on *The Time We Killed*. Everyone being so isolated and concerned about their own survival has created this kind of fragmented society, making it easier for George Bush.

JO: *I have definitely wondered if people were just going to be irritated with my protagonist and think, "Stop whining." You have to be brave enough to depict a character with flaws.*

JR: It's rare. What stands out to me is when your main character says something to the effect of, "I want to be a really great lover, more for my ego than for the pleasure of my partner. Well, for the pleasure of my partner too..." She's sharing something you wouldn't tell anybody. People don't talk about their flaws, and I sometimes wonder how many people are in total denial because they never come close to acknowledging them.

JO: *We're setting an example for the masses [laughs]. I have one final question: What drives you to make experimental work?*

JR: I often ask myself that question. Experimental film is extremely varied — you can't say that phrase and have any idea how it operates, because most experimental film is very unique personal expression. You enter someone else's way of thinking or seeing or presenting an experience of the world.

There are probably another ten reasons why I keep making experimental films, but basically I want to connect on a deeper level with people.

JO: *Thank you for connecting with me [laughs]. ♦*

'The Time We Killed' screens (as part of the MadCat Women's International Film Festival) with director Jennifer Reeves in person, Sun/25, 8:30 p.m., Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission, SF; Tues/27, 7:30 p.m., PEA Theater, 2375 Bancroft, Berk, S7-S8, (415) 436-9523.

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