

## SOME WOMEN

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Damaged goods! Jennifer Reeves' *The Time We Killed* and Peggy Ahwesh and Bobby Abate's *Certain Women* summon up the old-fashioned misogynist metaphor and also set in motion its deconstruction.

These are grim, unsparing little movies about women who have been betrayed and/or brutalized by men, other women, and/or society at large. The female protagonists are damaged all right, but the filmmakers have endowed each of them with a complicated subjectivity, making it difficult to dismiss them as "goods." Their pain resonates with the temper of the times, but that's not to say it's seductive.

Although Reeves and Ahwesh, both avant-garde film veterans, have turned to narrative feature filmmaking, no one could accuse them of crossing over or harboring commercial aspirations. In *The Time We Killed*, Lisa Jarnot plays Robyn, an agoraphobic writer who finds it almost impossible to leave her Brooklyn apartment. Except for the occasional visitor, Robyn is alone onscreen for almost the entire film. Jarnot, a third generation New York School/Beat poet collaborated with Reeves on the associative monologue that runs as a voiceover throughout. The high-contrast, expressionistic black-and-white visuals are a mix of digital video and 16mm. Reeves used video for the scenes that take place in the apartment or during Robyn's brief forays into the outside world and 16mm to evoke Robyn's memories-of childhood, old lovers, travels, past happiness, and past traumas-working over the film material on an optical printer. The resulting ghostly fragments are the correlative of the stream-of-consciousness voiceover. Robyn's phobia confines her to her apartment, but the film explores another kind of interior-that of her mind.

*The Time We Killed* is a 9/11 film. Robyn has a history of psychological breakdowns, but the fear that keeps her trapped in her apartment is not entirely irrational. She hears the couple next door fighting every night-their rage culminates, we're told, in a murder and a suicide. When the Twin Towers fall, she ventures into the street, just to be with other New Yorkers, but their "blood lust" and desire for revenge sends her back to her refuge, where the cries for war continue to emanate from the TV. "Terrorism got me out of the house, but the war on terrorism drove me back in," she explains succinctly. Memories of lost childhood and lost love mingle with the sanctimonious pronouncements of Bush II and his cohorts. Eventually, personal examination and political commitment come to together in a faintly happy ending. Robyn packs up and leaves her apartment-and America, it is implied, as well. (*The Time We Killed* won the international critics prize at the Berlin Film Festival, where its anger at addlebrained American imperialism worked to its advantage, and it had its U.S. premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival.)

Robyn is a composite heroine, created from a combination of Reeves's own home movies and diaristic footage collected over years of avant-garde filmmaking and Jarnot's partially improvised text. In one sense, the titular "We" refers to this composite. But it also has the effect (as does Jarnot's rough-edged, confiding voice) of drawing us in and making us aware of our complicity with the screen character. It's not so much that we

identify with her as that we feel some kind of solidarity-a shared responsibility for "*The Time We Killed*."

Stylistically, *Certain Women* is far removed from *The Time We Killed*, but they share the common theme of women who feel-or have been made to feel-like criminals simply because they were born female.

### *Certain Women*

And, not incidentally, the most affirmative element in both films is the image of a woman leaving town. A collaboration between Ahwesh, who teaches at Bard College, and Abate, who was one of her graduate students, *Certain Women* is based on Erskine Caldwell's 1957 novel *Some Women*. Caldwell's novels functioned as soft-core porn for middle-class suburban women in the years after World War II, and the film captures the novel's seedy atmosphere and prurient effect. It was made with the apparently enthusiastic cooperation of Bard's film faculty and student body, who make up much of the cast and crew. There's an outstandingly creepy turn by Adolfas Mekas as an abusive farmer who wants his daughter to bring home the bacon by becoming a prostitute.

Ahwesh and Abate shot in small towns near Bard, about 90 miles north of New York City, where gentrification hasn't completely taken hold. As in David Lynch's films, the *mise-en-scène* is anachronistic, suggesting that nothing much has changed in America in the past 50 years and that the aught decade has more in common with the Fifties (particularly in relation to power dynamics between the sexes) than we like to think. With its intercut story lines about teary-eyed, big-breasted girls-in-jep, its cheap motels, roadhouses, crumbling Catskill palaces, and a not-so-secret whorehouse where the working girls and their customers act out seamy S & M scenarios, *Certain Women* owes as much to *Twin Peaks* as it does to Caldwell. Ahwesh and Abate's approach is less romantic than Lynch's, however, both in terms of what they depict and how they depict it. The filmmaking is as blunt as in the Doris Wishman exploitation pictures Ahwesh cherishes and as filled with heartfelt fakery as Cindy Sherman's black-and-white movie stills. (*Certain Women* premiered in the New York Underground Film Festival. Midnight-movie programmers couldn't ask for more classy trash.)

Women-damaged, depressed, deranged, and dangerous-are also the subject of a more mainstream recent project, *Monster*, the Aileen Wuornos biopic directed by Patty Jenkins and starring, as if you needed to be told, Charlize Theron, whose larded-up body and fright-mask makeup convinced enough people that she had given a great performance to win her an Academy Award. I've written elsewhere ([www.citypages.com](http://www.citypages.com)) about my mistrust, to put it politely, of the film's portrait of Wuornos-its lack of politics, its class condescension, and the transparent Oscar calculations involved in every choice made by the director and the actress. And Theron's performance at the Oscars as well as her and Jenkins's addresses at the IFP Spirit Awards proved my suspicions were founded. Having vampirized Wuornos, Theron and Jenkins failed to mention her in any of their acceptance speeches. I'm sure there was enormous pressure on them by their Hollywood handlers (most of whom Theron thanked profusely as the cameras ate up her retuned body and golden fake tan) to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their source material. And while it's true that Wuornos is not an easy subject to reference in a two-minute speech, some mention of her and of the social welfare and justice systems that neglected, abused, and finally executed her might have been in order. Without Aileen Wuornos, Theron wouldn't be able to price her services at \$10 million (and her handlers wouldn't be looking forward to bounteous commissions). Wuornos was executed in 2002. This year, the Academy Awards were held on February 29, which was also her birthday.