John McNulty

I Can Still See Your Shadow Walking

Paris. Tuesday, April 7, 2015.

Yesterday a friend informed me that a classmate of mine at NYU, Thea St.Omer, was found dead in her shop in Syracuse. It is a blunt fact. It is awful news. It has affected me deeply, for although I did not know Thea that well, I believe that everyone we meet has the potential to throw their weight into how we view the world. Thea did this for me with a single image.

It was 17 or so years ago that I went to film school in New York. Thea was among many classmates. I did not know Thea that well. The odd conversation in the hall, the observations made in showing each other's work. That especially film school trait of giving commentary that is as much about proving one's own intelligence as helping one's classmate with honest criticism. I must admit I was guilty of some pretty snarky comments in my time at NYU.

Film school can be a strange laboratory where kind words are spoken, but it can be rough to show your work to peers.

Thea never had such qualms about such things. I remember her originality. I remember her fearlessness. I remember her innocent take on the world. Namely that anything was possible, especially in Art.

Above all, I remember her take on the point of view shot.

We had been asked by our professor, the French filmmaker Pascal Aubier, to come up with our take on the first person shot. Or at least I think this was the exercise, it may have just been "go out and film some random things in the West Village."

Anyway, what Thea came back with, what she projected was a jubilant point of view. And entirely her own.

The outline of Thea was seen by all in that small screening room that day. She has chosen to film herself. To film her unmistakable silhouette passing over trees and signs. I remember thinking to myself, *It's a strange shot.* I had never seen someone use the camera in the first person before.

But Thea went one further. The camera in this case was actually where her head was supposed to be. Her arms trailed by her side. It was a portrait of a person with her head as a camera. It was an image I found funny at first. At first glance, it would seem that it didn't work, the filmmaker as character. The head as a camera. But the more I considered it, perhaps Thea had the right idea. It may not have been text book but it is still a point of view shot that I think of to this day. And teaching film at a film school in Paris I see a lot of point of view shots. But that was Thea. Or so it seemed to me from afar. She did not care what was practice. She cared about being true. True to herself and in that moment, she was showing us an image that we had never seen before. Is that not the point of any great shot? To burn itself into the memory. Thea had the last laugh. I have seen plenty of point of view shots since. Hers is the one I remember.

The news of this death has challenged my bearings. It is sudden. Shocking. For I can still see her shadow. I can still feel her in that first person shot she had filmed so many years ago. She was a person that popped right out of the background. She was a beautiful island. A startling example of first person point of view. I wish I had got to know her better.

RIP Thea St.Omer.

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