

Film Reviews

The Witness.

By James Solomon.

Filmrise Productions, 2015.

89 minutes. DVD format, color.

The Witness is a very personal and moving investigation into the sensationalized murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964. Every woman living in New York City at the time felt Kitty's terror and her pain. We knew that it could have been one of us, walking home alone late at night and unaware of being stalked by a violent stranger. Her brutal rape and murder by Winston Moseley became an immediate media sensation. Reporting by A. M. Rosenthal in the *New York Times* shifted the ground from Kitty's victimhood to the existence of witnesses who heard her screams for help and yet did nothing. The coverage in the paper of record created a lasting myth of urban apathy, discussed and reexamined over a twenty-year period of time by investigative TV reporting, social scientists, and politicians. With each retelling, Kitty—the vibrant woman who loved and was loved by a woman, who had friends and plans for her future—faded into the background of the story of her murder.

Kitty the woman was erased from history and, as the film's director James Solomon reveals, also from her family. Her three brothers and their wives and children speak very openly about this erasure. Her oldest brother Vincent doesn't want to hear details: "For what? She's dead, murdered. I don't want to hear that." Her youngest brother Frank, with great emotion, admits that he "needs to bury it." One of her nieces recounts reading a story in her high school English class and realizing midway through that it was about her aunt; a nephew recounts that he never personally heard a story about Kitty from his family. So, it is with great courage that her brother Bill undertakes the journey of rediscovery and personal healing detailed in the film. As he says, "It's hard to let go when you never know the whole truth."

There are four trajectories to this journey. There is the search for witnesses. Were there really thirty-eight who did nothing? Is the urban-apathy myth true? Did Kitty die alone? Bill painstakingly goes through police records, trial transcripts, reporters' notes, and personal interviews. Kitty was initially stabbed in the back while walking from her car on the street. We learn that there was an eyewitness: an elevator operator who saw this first attack and did nothing. The second attack took place in the vestibule of her building. Her upstairs neighbor Karl Ross opened the door and looked down but then shut it; eventually he made the call that appears on the police log but only after the killer had fled.

Ultimately Kitty's friend Sophie Farrar was called and told of the attack. She ran to Kitty and held her friend as she died. There is comfort to be found in this act of love. Most of the neighbors were in fact "ear witnesses" who heard what they thought to be a lovers' quarrel. These neighbors made two assumptions that continue to deflect attention from acts of battering and domestic violence: First, what was happening was something private; and second, although this is never raised in the film, that males are entitled to women's bodies. This trajectory leads to Bill and the spectators bearing witness to Kitty's murder. This is a harrowing and yet honorable experience. Solomon depicts the crime through a series of black-and-white sketches. This device provides distance and makes it easier to focus on the violent actions of Moseley, the killer. What it must have been like for Kitty is powerfully rendered in the film by an actress who reenacts her screams for help. We sit, as we see Bill doing, powerless in our chairs in the dark of night.

A second trajectory focuses on the killer, Winston Moseley, described by the investigator in the case as "one of the most bloodthirsty killers I ever met." Two weeks prior to Kitty's murder, Moseley had raped and shot a black woman, Anna Mae Johnson, then set her house on fire in an attempt at covering up his brutality. This never received the attention of the press or the justice system, and Moseley was never charged. Director Solomon omits an analysis of institutionalized racism and the role it played then and plays now in police work and journalism. The facts of Kitty's murder are etched on our collective consciousness but not those of Anna Mae or the black woman he later raped and held hostage after escaping from prison. The lives of black women matter. It's hard to hear Moseley's son deny this truth as he meets with Bill in the film. It's equally hard to hear this man, a minister, spew anti-Italian stereotypes as he attempts to enlist Bill's help in obtaining parole for his father. He believes his father just snapped because Kitty was yelling out racial slurs. He has no problem asking Bill if he's connected to the Genovese crime family, saying with bravura that everyone in his family believes he might not come back from the meeting but if it's his time to die, so be it. Mafia stereotypes abound in a letter sent from the older Moseley in which he claims to have been the getaway driver for the real killer, Dominic, an Italian gangster. Bill speaks for all of us when he says, "Everyone believes their own bullshit stories."

Solomon's third and fourth trajectories intertwine. One is Bill's quest for closure and meaning for his life's decisions. Believing the story of the apathetic bystanders who didn't help his sister, he enlisted in the military to prove that he wasn't like them. In the Vietnam War, he comes close to having her experience of being murdered: Solomon uses black-and-white stock footage to represent Bill's rescue from a Vietnam field after having his legs blown off. He tells us that at that moment he "thought of Kitty and what it was like when she knew that

no one was going to save her.” This sequence in the film is very disturbing and, in my view, unnecessary. The opening of the narrative makes Bill’s physical state clear; in his wheelchair, he is featured in almost every frame. But his tragedy is not the same as Kitty’s. The film captures his cathartic journey to rediscover his sister and restore her into the family’s memory, and he should be commended for this accomplishment. At his center is a hole that he fills, but the hole that allows for the family to “almost erase her from their lives” is never examined. Perhaps this is a failure of nerve or will or *omertà* or shame because she was a lesbian, or something else entirely, but it remains unsaid and leaves room for speculation about the place of women and the importance of their lives in Italian American family life.

The final trajectory brings to life Kitty the sister, the friend, the lover. Solomon often uses home movies and photos in the film; they reveal a smiling, laughing woman, one a high school friend, Ilse Hirsch-Metcheck, describes as “the head of the pack.” These serve as a respite from the tragedy of her death and the erasure of her life. Bill comes to realize that the woman Kitty brought home on weekend visits to her family and whom they thought of as her roommate was in fact her lover, Mary Ann Zielonko. She speaks with Bill off camera. Black-and-white sketches are again effectively used to convey her poignant narrative of love and loss. You can feel your heart break when she recounts her experience at the morgue and how she slept with Kitty’s shirt. This relationship was clearly the most important one in Kitty’s life, yet Bill chooses to tell his son that “his Aunt Kitty had been married” for a very brief period of time to “a man named Rocco.” A number of their wedding photos are featured; Kitty is a smiling bride. This image contrasts with another one that appears and is in fact used to advertise the film—Kitty’s mug shot. It is the most-used and famous photo of her. When the film quiets down, when it allows us to remember Kitty, one realizes that her deviance was as important to the family drama as her victimization. Both are guarded against. This is a hard moment of recognition for the lesbian spectator. Our love matters. Connections between women matter. Now, many months later, when I think of the film and Kitty, I don’t imagine her mug shot. The image I left the theater with and the image that stays with me still is of Kitty dancing and vamping in a park surrounded by laughing women. And I’m grateful.

—DAWN ESPOSITO
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