

Seventeen

A film by Joel DeMott & Jeff Kreines
(16mm, color, 120 minutes)

A film about coming of age in the working class. We decided to follow a group of teenagers -- girls and boys, white and black -- whose lives intertwine during their last year in high school. By filming for more than a year, and by living where we were filming, we encountered a range of experience. A white girl has a cross burned in her yard because she has a black boyfriend. A pal of hers from the neighborhood loses his best friend, who is killed in a car accident. Another classmate fathers an illegitimate baby.

From the beginning we mixed easily with the kids. We each use only a one-person rig we designed -- a camera/tape recorder combination that allows the filmmaker to act intuitively and feel untied -- no sound person, lights, crew, or crates of paraphernalia. It matters, too, that one of us is male, the other female: we could film those moments of high girlishness and boyishness that occur only out of earshot of the opposite sex. The result is a free-flowing intimacy with the teenagers' world. Kids smoke dope, get drunk, sass their teachers, disobey the taboo against race-mixing, try to break away from their mothers and fathers. It's clear that they, on occasion, fuck and fight.

But the film is not scandalous. It got that reputation, sight-unseen by most citizens, when the authorities banned it from television, and boughten mouths told lies about it, over and over till invention became objective record, elevated to that pinnacle, and secured, by the typing sheep. Nothing new there -- that the powerful have power. We refused to change our film.

We respected the kids' complexity, celebrated their liveliness, despaired of their future. And we loved them dearly. But it was impossible to oblige America's notion that to be worthy film subjects, the working class must be saintlike, and to be embraceable, cinema-verité (or any art) should become a broken version of what the makers made.

--Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines



Seventeen, by Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines, is one of the best and most scarifying reports on American life to be seen on a theater screen.

—Vincent Canby, *The New York Times*

It's *Seventeen* that haunts the memory. It has the characters and the language — as well as the vitality and honesty — that are the material of the best fiction. Ferociously provocative.
ONE OF THE YEAR'S BEST FILMS

—Vincent Canby, *The New York Times* [later piece]

A must-see. *Seventeen*, by Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines, is a poignant, deeply affecting portrait of working-class teenagers . . . The filmmakers' (one male, one female) extraordinary intimacy with these students and their parents results in a candid portrait of American youth — at once honest, illuminating, and despairing.

—Sheila Benson, *The Los Angeles Times*

You have to go back to François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* to recall a similarly searing matter-of-factness about the anarchy of school and the yawning gap between teenagers and adults. DeMott and Kreines' *Seventeen* tingles with the urgency of headlines not yet written, as it catches kids on the run from nothingness.
Remarkable.

—Jay Carr, *The Boston Globe*

Nothing like it has ever been recorded on film before, in so much sympathetic detail. Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines (*Demon Lover Diary*) obviously empathize with the kids . . . and the two are acknowledged presences in the movie. But while the pretense of invisibility has been abandoned, the result is, if anything, even more palpably authentic. The open involvement of our surrogates, the filmmakers, pulls us in more deeply, too. This is one of the least fraudulent and condescending films about adolescence ever made.

—David Chute, *The Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*

What DeMott and Kreines have so diligently uncovered is, quite simply, a reality that's largely ignored — not a 'secret' reality, or a series of 'privileged moments' (so cherished by cinema-verité filmmakers), but things as they are. And if that's scandalous and disruptive, so be it. I left the screening room feeling happy — happy that I had actually seen a film that approximated a state of the world as it seems to me to be at times. Because when that happens (and it happens rarely enough), one feels that a measure of sanity, of lucidity, has been returned to one. *Seventeen* is a restorative film. ONE OF THE YEAR'S TEN BEST FILMS

—Michael Covino, *The Express*, San Francisco

DeMott and Kreines have created a film of rare beauty.

—*Liberation*, Paris

Take my word that it will knock your socks off.

— Brad Roberts, *The Minneapolis Reader*

It is not for technique alone that *Birth of a Nation* is so highly regarded, but for the giddy delight produced by the spectacle of racist hatred, unbridled and unashamed. DeMott and Kreines produce its opposite, in a film that calmly and simply contemplates the reality of an integrated educational system — that the races of their own accord can come together and relate freely and honestly and sexually. It is not an easy vision for America to deal with in this particular space and time. But the force of the truths that DeMott and Kreines bring forth cannot be ignored. They constitute a true *Voyage a travers l'impossible* that America must make if its soul can ever hope to heal itself.

—David Ehrenstein, *Film: The Frontline* (Arden Press)

Seventeen has roughly 38 characters. That's about as many kids, parents, and teachers as a high-school senior might get to know during home room, Home Ec, the basketball game after school, and the keg party after the basketball game. It's also at least 37.5 characters more than the average Hollywood movie. *Seventeen* doesn't glorify these characters, and it doesn't bemoan their fate. It accepts them as complex individuals — and, as LBJ might have said, as our fellow Americans.

Jeff Kreines and Joel DeMott approach their subjects man-to-man and woman-to-woman. And their one-on-one immediacy is refreshing — not to mention shocking.



Seventeen should bring out all the middle-class prejudices against the working class that our movies rarely confront because America is supposed to be a classless society. This film hits polite audiences where it hurts — it makes a quick assault on couch, hygiene, and table manners, all the things George Orwell had to leave behind when he went down and out in Paris and London . . . DeMott and Kreines give themselves over to the kids' rhythms and currents, and the result is a revelation.

This rich, funny, and challenging movie has become a *cause celebre*. I simply urge you to see *Seventeen* for what it is: a candid and vital exploration of American youth.

—Michael Sragow, *The Boston Phoenix*

Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines' *Seventeen* is both a provocateur and pathfinder. With jolting force, their film takes us back to that time when our elders wanted us to be "ladies and gentlemen" and we wanted anything but. Yet unlike nice teen dreams such as *American Graffiti* or beer-bash fantasies like *Animal House*, the insolence in this movie has real fire . . . *Seventeen* is no sequel to *Sixteen Candles*: It's 140-proof moonshine moviemaking. ONE OF THE YEAR'S TEN BEST FILMS.

—David Elliot, *The San Diego Union*

I wasn't able to watch another foot of film for days, because any movie pales after seeing DeMott and Kreines' *Seventeen*.

—Michael Ventura, *The Los Angeles Weekly*

A rare and gripping sense of gritty honesty permeates this controversial film about white and black working-class teenagers in Muncie, Indiana . . . *Seventeen* is a far more dramatic, complex picture of adolescents than anything we've seen before — on the large or small screen.

—Judy Stone, *The San Francisco Chronicle*

Seventeen is brutally candid. And just as brutally funny. The film was made by Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines in what they have called a style of “direct cinema.” What is captured certainly goes to the heart of a whole generation.

—Peter Stack, *The San Francisco Chronicle*

Since *Seventeen* was a scandal as well as a film, the most striking thing about this non-fiction feature is its utter lack of sensationalism . . . Working without hidden cameras or even telephoto lenses, DeMott (who's a woman) concentrated on the girls and Kreines on the boys. Where other filmmakers might blow into town and take three weeks to jam data into ready-made formats, DeMott and Kreines' method allowed them the luxury of watching events develop. One of the ironies of *Seventeen* being cut from Middletown was that DeMott and Kreines were far closer than any of their colleagues to the Lynds' participant-observer techniques . . . The DeMott-Kreines style has an extraordinary intimacy.

—J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice*

Seventeen is not just superb non-fiction; it's among the strongest films of any kind over the past few years.

—J. Hoberman, *The Village Voice* [later piece]

DeMott and Kreines are able to penetrate the lives of their subjects, gaining their confidence and casual acceptance; there's never any sense of the distorting presence of the camera, even in the film's most intimate scenes. This warm, intimate, almost embracing style is the exact contradiction of the technique of Frederick Wiseman. *Seventeen* has an emotional center unlike anything in Wiseman . . . The censorship of *Seventeen* is a disgrace, but it does prove that non-fiction movies can still have a special kind of impact denied to the other forms of filmmaking — they still pack the wallop of the real.

—Dave Kehr, *The Chicago Reader*

DeMott and Kreines' *Seventeen* is a monumental and radical film . . .

The two lived in the community for 18 months, DeMott filming the young women and Kreines the young men. Both the live-in strategy and the like-gendered filming make this a stunning expose of the most intimate side of teenage life. By getting close to their subjects and moving tight with the action, DeMott and Kreines have created a unique style and an honest delivery. The film's content is what distresses



corporate and civic leaders. It is not the story of a strong-willed working-class Muncie boy who heroically makes his way into the Ivy League, nor is it of Muncie's white middle-class Central High. Its subjects are the teenagers from a part of the city known as Shedtown.

Seventeen captures the rebellious student view of high school as a failing institution and reaffirms the reality of America's classist society. Unorthodox in style and controversial in content — a powerful work of art.

—Jacqueline Zita, *The Minneapolis Reader*

Extraordinary cinema by Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines. Dope, sex, alcohol, rebellion, death, interracial relationships and tensions — this is *Growing Up* as you'll never see it in Hollywood.

—Fiona Ferguson, *City Limits* [London]

DeMott and Kreines' *Seventeen* has uncommon power — and provocative value. Its intimacy with Lynn and her teenage friends is fascinating. Their naturalness, as they're filmed in their day-to-day lives, is astonishing. Finally, *Seventeen* is more frightening than *The Day After*.

—John Carman, *The Atlanta Constitution*

Why is *Seventeen* considered so provocative? Possibly because it explores the classrooms, the sexual desires and the racial tolerance in Muncie. Possibly because it's hard truth instead of soft fiction. In an atmosphere of teenpix dishonestly cosmetized and deodorized for audience protection, frank, gutsy *Seventeen* is a revelation.

—Carrie Rickey, *The Boston Herald*

We should be thankful, then, for Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines' *Seventeen* . . . DeMott and Kreines have filmed their subjects with liberating candor, and with an intimacy that seems unparalleled. This is due largely to their revolutionary style of one-person filming . . . The filmmaker becomes just another person in the room. There is no dichotomy between "Them and Us." There is real intimacy rather than a pretense of un-self-consciousness.

At one point in the film Lynn Massie, the girl who is really the film's center, is turning out the bedroom light, and she quietly says, "Goodnight, Joel." This is a small, but very human, moment. Most documentarians try to pretend that there isn't a camera in the room, and we are left with the feeling that the subjects are desperately trying to act natural.

DeMott and Kreines knock these barriers down, and as a result bring us face to face with some very powerful material. There are very few films which deal so openly with the way that racism can be a part of everyday life. Racism is just one of many areas explored in *Seventeen*. DeMott and Kreines follow the lives of more than thirty people, including teachers, parents and kids. And the film is shaped not by a pre-conceived idea, but by the real shape of what DeMott and Kreines experience. Exhilarating to watch — a stunning, eye-opening film.

—David Schwartz, *Film Folio*

Consider the Boy Movies [by Francis Coppola, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, John Hughes et al] and the recent film *Seventeen* by Joel DeMott and Jeff Kreines . . .

Only *Seventeen* snaps the fever of youth glorification in which filmmakers gawk and swoon before the altar of youth. DeMott and Kreines' steady fascination with the daily life of high-school students in Muncie, Indiana, eventually exposes the average filmmaker's tendency toward gaudy and tawdry escapades . . . George Lucas may have started it all with *American Graffiti*. His pop-guru status (ever pinching the pulse of the nation) has legitimized the preoccupation with juvenilia and childish points of view in our films. Now, not even a great filmmaker like Coppola approaches a youthful subject with mature detachment. His Boy Movies failed not because of stylistic excess but from total lack of irony. Coppola accepted the presumed sensitivity and fatal beauty of adolescence the way less hysterical and less artistic movies also present a sentimental, fantasy-derived view of growing up . . . We have glimpsed the sad inanity of Steven Spielberg applying his wizardly instincts to perpetuating shallow teenage escapism. Having no idea of what a modern teenager dreams, Spielberg is obsessed with curating the junk dreams of old Hollywood.



That's the trap: Movies about young peoples' dreams that lack inspiration . . . The shitstorm of Boy Movies are all crafted from reminiscence as much as reduction, and combined into romance . . . The majority constitute a white-boyish perspective, with phallogentric blonde-chasing the point of most of the pictures . . .

Seventeen moves away from every commonplace of the Boy Movies, providing a fresh, resonant image of American adolescence . . . DeMott and Kreines center on a 17-year-old white girl, Lynn Massie, in her interactions with black and white teenagers at Southside High School in Muncie. The subject is teenage truculence and the transitory, ironic alliances made between sexual and racial opposites . . .

Working with the swiftest, most astute camera control and directorial sense, DeMott and Kreines catch high-school experience by conveying its tempo. Robert Altman's revelation during the Seventies came from restructuring genres, so that the naturalistic rhythms of events could tell a more truthful story. Similarly, the brilliance of *Seventeen's* classroom scenes derives from the liveliness and intrigue of the space between events of the sort Altman emphasized . . . DeMott and Kreines catch unguarded views of these kids' deepest feelings.

The filmmakers' organic approach — traveling with the action — gives *Seventeen* a fascinating, almost dramatic grip. At its best, the film shows a lost paradise of American youth — an innocence that's closer to ignorance. This essential, hard fact eludes most filmmakers. The girlish enthusiasm Lynn expresses for the boys she dates, when alone with DeMott, is, at last, an American equivalent to Miss 19 in Godard's *Masculine/Feminine*. Lynn's zigzagging emotional momentum carries the right note of experimentation and uncertainty . . .

What Lynn goes through is like the greatest Debra Winger role Debra Winger never played. First seen seated next to a tough, cow-jawed schoolmate, Lynn has a placidity that rivets one's attention; then her sly flirtation with the black boys in her co-ed Home Ec class reveals her wit, her softness, her radiance. As Lynn's interracial romances develop, along the typical teenage course of infatuation to resentment, matters get complicated simultaneously by the racial enmity of the black girls who resent Lynn and make threatening phone calls to her home and by the unidentified whites who burn a cross on her parents' lawn. Through these conflicts we see Lynn toughen as she puts down her adversaries; then we see her ebullient personality darken and close down as she defies her parents and when she restricts her dating to a group of racist white boys . . . Lynn and friends fumble believably in their relationships — "unless society changes they'll still be doing what they were doing when we filmed," says DeMott. "Floating back and forth between two different worlds — worlds of boys and girls, worlds of black and white."

This tragedy gets no sentimental embellishment from DeMott and Kreines . . . They present kids feeling out their moral and social positions — perceiving every kid's individual significance, making them a part of this country, not special cases or problems . . . *Seventeen* is better than realistic. It's moral: it presents teenagers in a racial, political context more meaningful than just sex-drugs-rock'n'roll.

This is a wonderful film . . .

—Armond White, *Film Comment* [excerpts]

One thing is for sure: *Seventeen* is without a doubt one of the greatest movies, perhaps the greatest, about teenage life (not to mention American life) ever made.

—Johnny Ray Huston, *Indiewire/SF360*