TRY LIZZIE BORDEN

DERRY FILM AND VIDEO WORKSHOP & DISTRIBUTION BEYOND THE BROADCAST BAN

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The message from Pat Murphy, Ireland's esteemed feminist filmmaker, offered a set of suggestions of who they might approach to distribute their works internationally, in the immediate aftermath of this censorship. At this stage it was Margo Harkin's feature Hush-A-Bye Baby, a fiction film set in Derry in the early 1980s, tracing a young woman's experience when she becomes pregnant, as her boyfriend is interned without trial, and as she is without access to abortion.

'Try Lizzie Borden,' Murphy had suggested to Harkin, providing the New York phone number of the US director renowned by the late 1980s for her explorations of gender, sexuality, class, race, and labour as well as for her experimentation with how consciousness-raising, political organising and direct action might inform method and technique in film. By 1990, when Murphy's note was written, Borden had completed three features: the documentary Regrouping (1976), and the fiction films Born in Flames (1983) and Working Girls (1986).

Although Borden's work was distributed by First Run Features, she knew some of the women who ran Women Make Movies, an organisation founded in NY in 1972 by Ariel Dougherty and Sheila Paige with Dolores Bargowski. Originally established to teach women to become filmmakers, it went on to become, as they now claim, 'the world's leading distributor of independent films by and about women.' And so, Murphy suggested Borden to the DVFV as a link to Women Make Movies in New York. Murphy also suggested two other options - Marian Urch at the London Video Arts and Annie at the California Film Institute.

This note, inscribed quickly by one workshop member as a prompt for action intended for another, is also suggestive of a broader network of interconnected feminist groups who were – in a different age of media – in a potential state of communication. Through such actions and associations, the exclusivity of distribution channels, of 'top-down dissemination,' was potentially bypassed or overcome by peer-to-peer sharing. The note also signals a moment of optimism for the DVFV, vital to the progress of some members but unavailing to the collaborative's continuation beyond the early 1990s. Looking at some of the connections, I want to explore how works from the north of Ireland/Northern Ireland (NI) contributed to a vital and foundational feminist filmmaking genealogy.

The note was found recently by Sara Greavu in the archive of DVFV while researching the exhibition, Open the book at a different page for Project Arts Centre, Dublin. This follows Greavu's long-term curatorial engagement with DVFV over the past decade, which had been introduced in the mid-1990s, begun in earnest when she invited them to speak at OCA Derry-Londonderry in 2015, in an event connected to a screening series screening, Film and Video After Punk. The relationships forged through this event were to last – in recent years Greavu has worked alongside former members of the collective towards the digitisation and archiving of the DVFV's work at the Irish Film Institute among other development organisations, and she has curated multiple exhibitions with Ciara Phillips on their work including It's not for you we did it, as part of EVA 2020/21, Ireland's leading biennial of contemporary art, leading to the Project show, Open the book at a different page. In an ongoing series of conversations with Greavu (prompted by my introduction to her work with the DVFV in 2019), we have discussed the political and art historical implications of the Workshop's work, its historical legacy, and the ongoing process of the accessioning of their archive material. Simultaneously, and we thought quite separately, we have spoken about Lizzie Borden's work in a US context, its impact on international audiences, on queer and feminist filmmakers and on corresponding studies and theories. In early conversations with Greavu about the American filmmaker, I commented that when researching Western histories of queer and feminist filmmakers, 'all roads lead to Borden.' So, when Greavu then found this note, the phrase resonated (and for the second occasion) it became a prompt for action, this time ours, in the form of her commissioning my writing of this short essay.

Borden has often appeared to me to be a nodal point for feminist filmmaking, Western and beyond, not only because the work was compelling but also because Borden was quite open while making each one: workshopping ideas and scripts with her contemporaries, fundraising in ad hoc and improvisatory ways, and through a process of prolonged and often social sequences of editing in her New York loft. She modelled a kind of independent feminist filmmaking beyond mainstream film and broadcast; independent of filmmakers' co-ops; and free from the constraints and male-privileging of the 1970s 'art world', where her training began. Many emerging artists and filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s found this to be both instructive and inclusive, and legions of notable and experimental works have derived from those assisting, witnessing or even listening to accounts of Borden's way of working. And although there are clearly established and well documented connections between feminist filmmakers in New York, Ireland and in the north of Ireland/NI, this note also forces a renewed reckoning of the place of DVFV within this matrix.

Murphy was significant and influential to the DVFV - she is interviewed and is very eloquent in Anne Crilly's Mother Ireland, and her feature Maeve was important to Hush-a-Baby, perhaps not least with her conviction that, in Murphy's words, 'notions of...'

1 See also, Peter Thomas, “The British Workshop Movement and Amber Film”, Studies in European Cinema 8, no. 3 (2011), 196–209.


3 For more on Borden's influence see Lucas Hilderbrand's 2013 essay which traces the influence of Born in Flames to Teresa de Lauretis's conceptualisation of feminism as an ongoing process, as defined both by opposition and aspiration, and of Born in Flames as an example in film that was formative to her subsequent coinage of 'queer theory' in 1991. In the heat of the moment: Notes on the past, present, and future of Born in Flames, Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory, 22(1), 2011, pp. 10-11.
Murphy moved back to London in 1979, by which time she’d written a provisional script for Maeve, as an alternative to anthropological or oppositional films recording conflict in the north of Ireland. Maeve progresses through a series of flashbacks of a young woman’s life travelling between her native Belfast and new home in London, with sequences of on-location conversations between herself and her family, her ex-boyfriend, and her friends, with the armed forces representing a constant presence in shots of Belfast (conspicuously absent from her domestic environs in London). Murphy’s title character actively questions various belief systems that coincide and collide within her family unit and friendship groups, presenting complexities rather than conclusions.

As Maeve Connolly has noted in her doctoral project on Murphy’s work, ‘the structure of the film denies a certain homogeneity which allows the audience to experience uncertainty. Contradictions are set up which are not resolved in the narrative.’ Through Maeve, the film explicitly addresses itself towards ‘a real divide in the Irish Women’s Movement’, between ‘those who deny that any attention can be paid to republicanism at all and the Women Against Imperialism position which claims that women’s liberation will be the result of a United Irish Socialist Republic’. Connolly proposes that the notion of a divided audience is central to Murphy’s work. And, progressing from Murphy’s work among the chorus of performers within the Theatre of Mistakes this particular structure of voicing different viewpoints locked in conversation creates in her film a remarkably clear prism of antagonisms, undissolved and unresolved and through which comes light. It’s a method through which Murphy achieves complexity beyond a forced consensus, which I would claim is a method that is instructive to Borden and a resolution formative to Born in Flames.

Borden had met Murphy just after the release of her Regrouping, an experimental documentary that had attempted to, in Borden’s words, ‘capture the value of a women’s group’, by staging and shooting conversations between women with whom she was associated including Joan Jonas, Barbara Kruger and Kathryn Bigelow. Influenced by Vito Acconci, Yvonne Rainer, and Trisha Brown, Borden (like Murphy had) engaged performance in her filmmaking techniques. In a 2016 article for Sight and Sound, So Mayer has observed ‘Borden’s use of re-performance and repeated gestures, and her focus on the body. These were combined with cinematic strategies [using] overlapping voices which move in and out of synch with the visuals, jump cuts and other distancing devices… one realises that Borden’s title refers not only to the social patterning that forms the film’s ostensibly and elusive subject, but also its own manner of presentation.8

Borden’s Re-grouping was criticised for a number of reasons: by some of the women who participated in film who objected to Borden’s various interventionist techniques, and by critics and organisers for its prioritisation of solely white women’s voices talking about labour in abstract terms. So, after this initial reception Borden decided to shelf the 16mm film and move on to Born in Flames, aiming to include a far greater cross-section of women engaged in feminist activities and activist circles. Work began on this film in 1977, during the period that she met Murphy. Born in Flames imagines several groups of women, ten years after a successful ‘social-democratic war of liberation’ who are divided over methods of achieving gender equality. There are various divisions among the women, the most explicitly articulated of which is racial. Borden, in the aftermath of Regrouping, was influenced by the work of the Combahee River Collective, and the film’s ambition was, in Borden’s words, ‘to occupy the lane between black male radicals and white feminists.9

In preparation she had sought out black and queer actors and individuals for her next project, and the film’s leads include the DJ Honey of underground Phoenix Radio (played by Honey), Adelaide Norris (played by Jean Satterfield) as head of the Women’s Army, and Zella Wylie, an outspoken radical and organiser (played by the formidable activist Flo Kennedy). There are other prominent female figures but a significant presence within the narrative is that of a trio of white, female, middle-class editors of the Socialist Youth Review, played by Kathrynn Bigelow, Becky Johnson and Pat Murphy. All of the characters’ qualities were influenced by the personalities of the women she cast, and Borden has described her method of filmmaking here as evolving through conversation, improvisation, re-scripting, re-performing, shooting and editing. Some of the most sensational aspects of the narrative (including the death of Norris, and the appearance of found footage of the Saharan women’s army) arrived through this process of chance statements and encounters.

However, what was predetermined was this ideological transformation of the white trio – a self-conscious response to the criticisms of Regrouping. In Born in Flames, this group were to undergo a shift in thinking through successive conversations, private and public. This begins with their initial parroting of their male seniors at the Socialist Review, warning against a women’s army as a counter-revolutionary distraction from ‘The Party’s’ goals of universal liberation. Conversations progress and convictions change, the most pointed of which is articulated by Murphy’s character, who – by the film’s conclusion – has both joined the Women’s Army and become one of its spokespeople, declaring ‘we will not stop fighting until we get proportional representation in government.’

Borden has discussed how much Murphy brought into this process, both in terms of her

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5 Quote from Theatre of Mistakes’ wordpress site, https://theatreofmistakes.wordpress.com/2017/06/09/the-street/
9 Borden and Harbison, correspondence, Jan 2022
10 Transcript, Born in Flames
practical commitment to production (outlasting both Johnson and Bigelow who both relocated to Hollywood during this period) and within the nuances and specific phrasings of each of her declarations, which Borden describes as ‘all Pat’. Pat Murphy’s account of this scripting process slightly differs:

The script is Lizzie’s… Yes, the three white women editors were the key starting point, but what was wonderful about the great free structure that Lizzie both created and responded to, was the way in which the film reacted to changing events and possibilities in Lizzie’s own life. Through Honey she became friends with all these radical Black women and that profoundly affected her thinking about story and character. Kathy, Becky and I became secondary or tertiary figures as the narrative developed… As for the script process… she would tell me the way the story had gone while I was away… she would then describe the way she wanted the sequence of scenes to go and then we would improvise and shoot…

As the film develops Murphy’s character becomes increasingly self-assured, voicing a breakthrough moment where she articulates to her two counterparts the limits of their group’s conception of what constitutes political work (as being held within dialogue), and frames this in contrast to ‘spontaneous’ responsive strategies of the Women’s Army indicated through physical action. Borden’s work, like Murphy’s, has been described as ‘choral’: it is full of people talking, articulating and arguing, with sound-bridges spilling between scenes, full of vocal juxtapositions between speech and song, gender and octave, hush or amplification. Borden’s cacophony expresses the clash between state and embodied experience, between written and physical action. What resonates from both Borden’s and Murphy’s films are the discontinuities and fracture lines within Western feminism, in the US and UK, and the disjuncture not only between ‘waves’ but within them, and then as now.

‘Murphy had a double life, a triple life’, Borden recalled when questioned about these sets of connections. From the late 1970s, ‘she would come, and she would go’, between ‘her artist-life in New York, and her life in England and in Ireland. ‘When she went to make Maeve,’ Borden said, ‘we had no idea how important it was, and she was so modest about it. It was shown in a couple of places [after it was released], but we were in shock [when we realised that] she went to a real war zone and then she came back to this pretend or fictional war zone. Only later did we realise what an extraordinary feat that was, and how important she was, because she never really revealed that, and we never saw her in the context of that. We were playing.’ So, Borden was referring to the fact that Maeve was made between 1979 and 1981, this exact midway point in the filming of Born in Flames which began in 1977 and was completed for the Berlin Film Festival in 1983, the same year of DFVW’s formation. In ways, DFVW inherit from both directors, foregrounding and instigating real conversations, utilising and establishing consciousness-raising groups, women’s groups and community groups, listening before, during and between shots, working up to clear positioning within a script.

I think it’s fascinating to consider these works in concert: the influence that Murphy had, in her own work, and within Borden’s seminal film, so influential to broader feminist and queer art and thought. And also, to consider Murphy’s profound influence on the work of Anne Crilly and Margo Harkin among others in the Workshop, who also would, as part of their commitment to their community, screen both Murphy and Borden’s works in Derry, and go on to inspire the work of many more artists and filmmakers to come after them.

Crucially, Murphy early on recognised that access to distribution was inequitable

11 Borden and Harbison, correspondence, Jan 2022
12 Murphy and Harbison, correspondence, Jan 2022
13 Borden and Harbison, correspondence, Jan 2022
14 Harkin, through Greavu, in correspondence, Jan 2022
This essay was commissioned by Project Visual Arts in response to the exhibition Open the book at a different page – Derry Film and Video Workshop (2021), by Ciara Phillips and Sara Greau, co-commissioned with EVA International. It is published on the occasion of the seminar event Tapes under the bed, convened in partnership between IMMA, Project Arts Centre and The School of Art and Design, Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin). Supported by Goldsmiths, University of London, the Association for Art History, UK, Tapes under the bed is curated by Dr Isobel Harbison, Lecturer, Department of Art, Goldsmiths, University of London and Sara Greau, Curator, Project Arts Centre, Dublin.

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