

MOVIE ROLES

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In the wake of a mass cinema-going audience, Hollywood has turned its attention to locating markets among more specific groups. In the mid to late 70s there was a financially sound bid to reach the market that had been created by women's liberation. Positive images are what we'd been demanding, and that supposedly is what we got, in the shape of *Julia*, *Girlfriends* and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. Stories about the lives of 'liberated' women which somehow took the words out of our mouths by bringing a reformist notion of feminism into the market place of dominant cinema.

A few years later, a very different group of films was released in England. What they had in common was that they were marketed as fantasies of male violence and domination — *Dressed to Kill*, *He Knows You're Alone*, *The Shining*. Their arrival, concurrent with the media fascination with the Sutcliffe rapes and murders, was focussed on by various groups within the WLM and through pickets, demos, leafletting and attacks on cinemas, the political nature of violence against women was argued across a wide social spectrum.

These instances suggest the complexity of a feminist engagement with the product of cinema — representations of women, sexuality and violence. A political practice for feminists in relation to film and TV has therefore involved taking on the whole gamut of patriarchal values involved in those industries. In the production process womens' exclusion from employment, particularly in decision-making and technical grades, and in the product dominant forms of, for example, narrative, where individuals are portrayed against a backdrop of society rather than as agents in a constant process of change.

In Britain the situation in employment remains particularly bleak. Figures given at the 1982 ACTT Women's Conference reveal that out of 359 cameramen (*sic*) only 3 are women and out of 145 producer/directors only 10 are women. Women are still ghettoised into clerical and servicing areas of the industry, with a few interesting exceptions. Vision mixers for instance are predominantly women, for although with the

introduction of new technology the job increasingly demands technical expertise, the comparisons in operation between the typewriter and the vision mixer have meant opportunities for women to transfer from secretarial to vision mixer posts.

Pressure mainly from the Women's Film and Broadcasting Lobby, a group of women working in the industry, has had specific successes through lobbying. Before retiring as head of the IBA, Lady Plowden was taking considerable interest in women's employment in film and TV, questioning, for example, all applicants for franchises in 1981 on their intentions regarding employing women in technical grades. Their demand for equal representation for men and women in governing and administrating Channel 4 also met with some success, though a fight still remains to pressurise Channel 4 to follow through their commitments to women's programme-making.

At the level of representation feminists have been active in all areas — in production, distribution, film criticism and teaching. In this country, feminist productions started with the London Women's Film Group, which was functioning in the early 70s, producing short, low-budget films and a feature, *Rapunzel*. The group had a commitment to challenging the predominant sexism of representations of women through investigating women's position in society and developing collective production as a way of spreading technical knowledge.

Through the 70s and into the 80s, feminist film-making has become an increasingly diverse work, though a continuing emphasis on collective practice and increasing numbers of productions crewed entirely by



women characterise the process. The independent sector continues to be a crucial site for feminist production. For while women programme-makers are gaining entry into the male bastions of the commercial companies, and making creative use of the albeit problematic slots available, for example Jenny Morgan's work in *Everyman (sic)*, utilising the religious framework to investigate women's readings of Catholicism (Sweet Mother) and Islam (Virtuous Women), the bulk of feminist production work takes place outside the mainstream of the industry.

Working at film school, or with funding from Regional Arts Association or the British Film Institute, in permanent collectives like the Leeds Animation Workshop and Sheffield Women's Film Coop, or in *ad hoc* women's production groups, feminists have created the space to develop forms of cinema which, for example, break down the separation between fiction and documentary and the unmediated view of the world which the latter supposedly presents.

While the audience which independent films reach is undoubtedly small compared to the potential audience for a TV show, the establishment of Cinema of Women (COW) and Circles, who distribute work directed and generally crewed by women, has made many films, including those by early women directors such as Alice Guy (who was a prolific producer/director in Hollywood in the 20s) and *Maedchen in Uniform* (produced collectively in Germany in the 30s) available for screening and discussion.

The advent of Channel 4 certainly represents a potential for widening the audience for existing feminist work. Films from the COW and Circles catalogue will be appearing on our TV screens after November 1982, although thoughtful scheduling will be needed to replace the political and discussion contexts which many of these films were produced to be shown in. In terms of commissioned work, Channel 4 has stated its commitment to new representations and work by women. However, within a commissioning structure designed partly around interest groups (eg, youth/multi-cultural) and partly around product (eg, film/current affairs/light entertainment) the Channel has seen fit not to appoint a commissioning editor with specific responsibility to women. Many applications by feminists seem to be floundering between the inevitable 'old boy' network which underlies a commissioning structure, and accusations of lack of professionalism or technical skills so classically thrown at groups attempting to find radical ways of working.