



EXPERIMENTA

Born in Flames

We are delighted to present a pre-recorded post-screening discussion with film programmer and academic Karen Alexander as well as film writer and curator So Mayer, hosted by film critic and programmer Tara Brown.

‘Do you expect people who see the piece to understand the conceptual decisions that have gone into it?’ the filmmaker Lizzie Borden asked the artist Richard Serra in an interview about his drawings for a 2011 retrospective. Serra could have returned the question to Borden (his former video editor). Her oeuvre, four predominantly narrative features and a handful of commercial TV episodes, pushes at the limits of the conceptual. Simultaneously intellectually and sensorially exhilarating, Borden’s work puts the conceptual into the corporeal and vice versa, clearly emerging from the downtown New York scene that she charted in her first film *Re-grouping* (1976).

Having moved to New York to pursue visual arts in the early 1970s, the young Borden wrote for *Artforum* about the conceptual art scene around Serra and about performance artists such as Yvonne Rainer and Joan Jonas. Already a rebel – her teenage decision to change her birth name Linda to that of the notorious supposed murderer was ‘the best rebellion I could make’ – she found herself radicalised by this aesthetic experimentation and by leftist feminism; she channelled that admixture into a curiosity about film, inspired by the work of Jean-Luc Godard and Gillo Pontecorvo. What resulted was a filmmaking career unique even in the fluid zone of 1970s New York independent cinema. One marker is a comparison with her friend and early collaborator Kathryn Bigelow, who borrowed Borden’s car to shoot her first short *The Set-up* (1978) between her cameo appearances in *Re-grouping* and Borden’s second, and best-known, feature *Born in Flames* (1983). Bigelow, who emerged from a similar educational background in visual art and critical theory, went on to become the premier feminist filmmaker reimagining Hollywood genre movies; by contrast, Borden has only recently seen interest in her work revived on an international scale with Anthology Film Archive’s restoration of a 35mm print of *Born in Flames*.

Shot over nearly five years for around \$40,000 – scraped together from small artists’ grants and Borden’s own income – the film became a cult classic. Borden said it was shot ‘on reversal. I would look at it, try not to scratch it, and edit it down and throw most of it away and then just make duplicates of what I wanted to save.’ As early as 1985 Teresa de Lauretis took it as inspiration for her argument for the emergence of a ‘female gaze’, noting that Borden’s was a rare film that corrected ‘the invisibility of black women in white women’s films... or of lesbianism in mainstream cinema.’ Arguing for its revolutionary aesthetic as well as its politics, de Lauretis perceives *Born in Flames* as the instigator of a no-wave, guerrilla feminist cinema that was never quite realised. Bigelow was not the only filmmaker in Borden’s circle: the Irish director Pat Murphy and the screenwriter Becky Johnston (who wrote *Under the Cherry Moon* for Prince a few years later) both appear in *Born in Flames* as co-editors with Bigelow of the *Young Socialist* newspaper.

The film opens ten years after a social democratic War of Liberation in the USA, with the promise of social justice unfulfilled and women of colour finding

themselves last among supposed equals. The first third of the film focuses on the slow formation of a Women's Liberation Army: mixed-race feminist groups represented by pirate DJs (played by Honey and the punk artist Adele Bertei) and, eventually, the white newspaper editors come together around the murder in police custody of the militant Adelaide Norris. The science fiction of *Born in Flames* is grounded by the film's documentary aspect: its world is the lower Manhattan of the late 1970s, diversely populated and ungentrified.

The soundtrack also captures its moment: the way the DJs' beats and verbal blasts move out across the city prefigures the rhythmic presence of Mister Señor Love Daddy in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989); the film takes its name from its theme song, by the 60s lo-fi proto-punk band Red Krayola (Borden initially intended to call it *Les Guérillères* after Monique Wittig's novel of 1969).

In her study of the downtown New York art scene, *The (Moving) Pictures Generation* (2012), Vera Dika situates Borden as part of a shift toward narrative practices, and concomitant wider distribution, in downtown New York film, destabilising 'both established avant-garde and mainstream film practices' through its focus on 'the cinematic body, its poses and affects, now seen in transgressive states, and across the boundaries of sexuality and gender.' Dika's book and Celine Danhier's 2010 documentary about the scene, *Blank City*, which includes an interview with Borden, are testimony to the revival of interest in an extraordinarily generative moment, which echoes our own – emerging from post-Vietnam nihilism through radical political formations and new technological possibilities that ended in gentrification. The work of Rainer and the choreographer and dancer Trisha Brown has been revived in London in this new era of austerity; Borden's improvisatory, everyday aesthetic is of a piece with theirs.

Born in Flames was censored in Canada, criticised by feminists in the peace movement for showing its characters taking up arms against patriarchy, and described as 'politically naïve' at the Society for Cinema Studies in New York. Likewise, *Working Girls* (1986), a funny, downbeat narrative feature about sex work, met the scissorhands of the Ontario Censor Board and became associated with the 'bad girl' art wars of the mid-1980s, which saw filmmakers such as Abigail Child excluded from festivals, in line with the era's anti-pornography feminism, because of their depiction of sexuality. With its cast of unknowns, its lesbian protagonist, and its use of an objective, *vérité* cinematic language within the close confines of the brothel, *Working Girls* was definitely not *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1988). Borden spent six months interviewing sex workers across class boundaries about their working conditions and perceptions of the industry. She was responding in part to the Canadian documentary *Not a Love Story* (Bonnie Sherr Klein, 1982), which played a leading role in the anti-pornography stance of American feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon.

Borden's frank, fearless and often funny approach to sexuality in *Working Girls* and *Love Crimes* (1991) led to an unusual career in television, long before downtown New York contemporaries such as Susan Seidelman and Martha Coolidge were directing *Sex & the City*. She directed two segments of Playboy's softcore video anthology *Inside Out*, telling Cynthia Lucia that working for Playboy allowed her to return to the 1970s idea of 'wild sexual expression'. She then wrote the screenplay for the all-female portmanteau film *Erotique* (1994), which brought together an international quartet of filmmakers, including New German Cinema provocatrice Monika Treut and Hong Kong

Second Wave director Clara Law. With a resurgence of debate around sex work, including Amnesty International's endorsement of decriminalisation, *Working Girls* is due for a revival. *Born in Flames*, too, remains relevant; talking to Alison Kozberg about a screening earlier this year as part of the Walker Art Gallery's exhibition 'Downtown New York: 1970s Art and Film', Borden noted that the issues the film addresses 'haven't gone away. Economic issues, Sandra Bland [who died in police custody in 2015], the murders of black men, women's issues, gender issues ... in Hollywood, a mile away [from where Borden lives], where *Tangerine* was filmed, a transgender assault happens every couple of months... It's been decades and we need to fight harder than ever.' As *Born in Flames* rises phoenix-like, Borden's uniquely wide-ranging oeuvre offers viewers the opportunity for a revolutionary Re-grouping: to go downtown and bring together the conceptual and corporeal once more.

So Mayer, Sight & Sound, October 2016

BORN IN FLAMES

Director: Lizzie Borden

Production Company: Lizzie Borden

Assistance: Jerome Foundation, CAPS, Young Filmmakers

Producer: Lizzie Borden

Production Assistants: Steve Cohen, Rosemary Hochschild, Tom Bills, Cathy Campbell, Allan Tannenbaum, Jeff Rathus, Roberta Raeburn, Ryan, Bill Stokes, Ed Friedman, Becky High, Suzanne Fletcher, Vinnie Arevalo, Karen Achenbach

Screenplay: Lizzie Borden

Story Consultant: Ed Bowes

Directors of Photography: Ed Bowes, Al Santana

Additional Photography: Chris Hegedus, Jacki Ochs, Gary Hill, Michael Oblowitz, Becky Johnston, Peter Hunton, Lizzie Borden, Johanna Heer, Sheila McLaughlin, Greta Schiller

Video (women in desert): Phil O'Reilly

Video Camera: Phil O'Reilly, Tom Bowes, Kirsten Bates, Jack Walworth, Richard Tiernan, DeeDee Halleck

Special Photographic Effects: Hisao Taya

Special Effects Graphics: Dirk Zimmer

Special Effects: Hisao Taya

Video Graphics: Jo Bonney

Editor: Lizzie Borden

Editorial Consultant: Ed Bowes

Sound Recording: Tom Crawford, Rachel Reichman, Rachel Field, Dan Edelman

Cast

Honey (*Honey*)

Adele Bertei (*Isabel*)

Jeanne Satterfield (*Adelaide Norris*)

Flo Kennedy (*Zella Wylie*)

Pat Murphy, Kathryn Bigelow, Becky Johnston (*newspaper editors*)

Hillary Hurst (*leader of Women's Army*)

Sheila McLaughlin, Lynn Jones (*other leaders*)

Marty Pottenger (*other woman/woman at site*)

Ron Vawter (*FBI agent*)

John Coplans (*chief*)

John Rudolph, Warner Schreiner, Valerie Smaldone (*TV newscasters*)

John McLearen (*TV spot Revolution*)

Julia Hanlon, Pat Place (*women from Regazza*)

Maria David, Towana Starks, Cat Hightower (*women from Phoenix*)

Veronica Campbell (*woman at daycare meeting*)

Mayumi Sakaguchi (*woman at induction*)

Chris Brewer, Ryan (*girls in subway*)

Bill Tatum (*Mayor Zubrinsky*)

Jorge Ramos, Julio Peña (*rapists*)

Merián Soto (*rape victim*)

Mark Heidrich (*man on subway*)

Dana Johnson (*woman reading*)

Jerry Nixon (*Adelaide's boss*)

Gary Valdes, Dirk Zimmer (*co-workers*)

Jacques Sandulescu (*foreman at 2nd site*)

Gary Hill (*man in truck*)

Sis McQuade, Susan Sawyer, Sherry Rosso,

Donna Allegra Simms, Valerie Jones,

Ramona Galindez, Katy Taylor, Marion Benjamin,

Joan Ellis, Carolyn Fitzgerald,

Alice Sullivan (*women at site*)

Belle Chevigny (*Bella Gayle*)

Paul Zonghetti (*2nd agent*)

Alexa Evans (*woman arguing with Honey*)

Malick N'Diaye (*African man*)

Dolly Udemezue (*African woman*)

Barbara Scott (*woman with machine gun*)

Hanita (*voice of woman in desert*)

Diane Jacobs, Felice Rosser

(*women at secretary strike*)

Hal Miller (*cop at precinct*)

Peg Brennan (*lawyer with Zella*)

Michael Sullivan (*2nd FBI chief*)

Nancy Reilly, Sheila Carr

(*women in jail/women breaking into CBS*)

Rosemary Hochschild, Vanessa Zannis

(*women in jail*)

Ed Bowes (*socialist editor*)

Allan Ryan (*handgun demo*)

Kathy Gunst, Amy Chen

(*women breaking into CBS*)

Dan Edelman, Mike Bencivenga, Eric Bogosian, Gregory Samuels (*CBS technicians*)

Walter Scheuer (*President*)

USA 1983

80 mins

Preserved by Anthology Film Archives with restoration funding from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association and The Film Foundation

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Relaxed Screening: The Horse Boy

Tue 27 Jul 18:00

Terror Vision: Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things

Thu 29 Jul 21:00

Seniors' Free Matinee: Personal Services

+ intro and Q&A with author, Graham Rinaldi

Mon 9 Aug 14:00

Projecting the Archive: The Blue Lagoon

+ intro by actor Susan Stranks (young Emmeline)

Tue 10 Aug 18:00

Member Picks: Almost Famous

Thu 12 Aug 17:45

Silent Cinema: The Wit and Wisdom of A.A. Milne

+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator

Sun 15 Aug 12:40

Experimenta: Thundercrack!

+ intro by Jane Giles, author of 'Scala Cinema 1978-1993'

Sat 21 Aug 17:00

Relaxed Screening: Stand Clear of the Closing Doors

Tue 24 Aug 18:00

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Souad

+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Ayten Amin

Tue 24 Aug 18:00

Terror Vision: Dr Terror's House of Horrors

Thu 26 Aug 20:40

EARL CAMERON

BRITAIN'S FIRST BLACK SCREEN STAR

Celebrating Britain's First Black Screen Star

Sun 1 Aug 14:00

African Odysseys present: A Warm December

Sun 1 Aug 17:30 (+ intro by actor Esther Anderson); Wed 18 Aug 20:40

Pool of London

Mon 2 Aug 14:00 (+intro); Wed 25 Aug 20:50

Two Gentlemen Sharing

Fri 6 Aug 17:10 (+ intro by season curator Burt Caesar); Mon 23 Aug 20:30

Flame in the Streets

Sun 8 Aug 15:00; Sat 28 Aug 17:10

Sapphire

Tue 10 Aug 20:20 (+ discussion); Sat 28 Aug 13:00

The Fear of Strangers (+ intro) + The Chocolate Tree

Sat 14 July 14:10

Thunder on Sycamore Street + discussion with Actor Ashley Walters (schedule permitting) and playwright Stephen S Thompson)

Sat 14 Aug 17:30

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