

## **The Challenges of Theatrical Releases: The Example of Cinema of Women**

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Cinema of Women – COW as it became known – was set up in 1979 by a collective of six women<sup>1</sup> who had been ‘shocked’, as they put it, by ‘the limited availability of good films made by women’.<sup>2</sup> During the 1980s they built up a distribution library which specialised in feminist documentary work, issue-based shorts and feature films. Looking at COW’s records, it’s very evident that they benefited more or less immediately from the dramatic growth during the 1970s of women’s groups and feminist initiatives. These groups provided – in UK terms – a very substantial non-theatrical market for films dealing with women’s issues.

Initially COW had been set up on a voluntary basis with virtually no resources, working from one of the founder’s homes. But by 1981 the non-theatrical market had provided sufficient surplus income to rent a small office and employ a part time worker – Jane Root – who helped develop the theatrical side of COW’s business.

Although the non-theatrical market clearly generated an income, COW were committed to doing cinema releases because they felt, as they put it, it was ‘the only way to reach large numbers of women’.<sup>3</sup> ~~And this was for three reasons:~~

- ~~1. Although non-theatrical business kept work circulating to significant audiences, hiring a film to small groups of people across 20 or 30 bookings couldn’t match in pure numbers filling a 400-seat auditorium over several weeks.~~
- ~~2. The publicity generated by doing cinema releases raises the national profile of films and ensures their subsequent regional exhibition.~~
- ~~3. COW felt theatrical exhibition could provide a means of accessing women who might enjoy feminist films, but might not participate in the women’s group circuit or related feminist initiatives.~~

And in the course of the 1980s they undertook several cinema releases, ~~roughly one a year~~.<sup>4</sup> But setting up and sustaining those releases – enabling audiences to see the films – proved challenging and I want to look at aspects of 3 of those releases to explore some of the challenges COW faced: and those releases are Marleen Gorris' first feature *A Question of Silence* released in 1983, Heiny Srour's *Leila and the Wolves* released in 1985, and Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* released in 1986.

## 1. A Question of Silence

### SYNOPSIS

For anyone who's not seen the film it focuses on three women – a housewife, a secretary, and a waitress – who meet for the first time while shopping in a boutique. When the male store manager accuses the housewife of shoplifting, the other two women come to her aid, and together they attack and murder the manager. Although narrative based, the film is shot in a semi non-realist style and offers an explicitly female perspective on how women experience oppression under patriarchy. While the male judiciary can only understand the women's actions as a form of insanity, the women themselves experience their resulting bonding as a form of liberation from the oppressive nature of their previous existence and are declared perfectly sane by a court appointed female psychiatrist.

Now Jane Root has already written at some length about COW's experience of distributing this film in an article in 1986 for ~~Charlotte Brunsdon's 1986 anthology *Films for Women*~~, but I want to return to COW's release of the film in order to add to Root's discussion and locate that experience within the general challenges that COW faced.

As Root observed in her article, COW felt the film's 'fresh combination of provocative politics and knowing humour about the everyday substance of women's lives' had the potential to appeal to a wider audience, beyond the limited scope of the festival and women's group circuits. However, doing a major cinema release and servicing non-

theatrical bookings for a title required multiple film prints and hence substantial investment – which was beyond COW’s means. Like all small independent distributors, COW was therefore always taxed with the issue of finding ways of financing their acquisitions. Over the years they explored various avenues, but in the case of AQS, they were able to apply to the British Film Institute’s ~~Film Availability Service~~ which had begun helping distributors offset the financial risk of bringing less commercial work into distribution. They did this in two ways:

1. one method was by offering an advance towards a 16mm print, which was then recovered by taking a percentage of the return from each booking.<sup>5</sup>
2. the second was by offering the distributor a (normally larger) advance against Regional Film Theatre revenue;<sup>6</sup>

Via the second method, COW were able to access the substantial sum of £6000 to finance the acquisition of *A Question of Silence* as their first major cinema release.

COW succeeded in opening *A Question of Silence* with month long London runs at the Screen on the Green in Islington and the Paris Pullman in Kensington. But as Root discussed, they did not anticipate the negative responses it would elicit from the predominantly male film critics, some of whom were extremely scathing. These ranged from Philip French in *The Observer* describing the film as ‘the unacceptable face of feminism ... as rigid in its thinking as any hard-line Stalinist movie of 40 years ago’<sup>7</sup> to Milton Shulman in *The Standard* declaring that the film’s resolution was ‘an argument that would have justified the Nazis exterminating the Jews, Herod’s slaughter of babies and the lynching of blacks.’ ~~Genocide is a comparatively modest moral device compared to the ultimate logic of this film’s message, which is that the species should become extinct rather than survive in partnership with men.~~<sup>2</sup>

Box office receipts during the opening week were mostly well under 50% capacity at both venues. To stop the exhibitors pulling the film prematurely, COW mounted an extensive ‘rescue mission’ which included pulling together a substantial volunteer effort

to undertake a massive leafleting campaign, and had the effect of gradually increasing audience numbers over the second and third weeks. While neither cinema was willing to extend the run beyond four weeks, the increased numbers enabled COW to get it transferred to the Gate Bloomsbury. Although audiences levelled off, they remained stable enough for the film to enjoy a further eight-week London run. In turn the film became a *cause célèbre* and COW regarded it as something of a victory for ‘woman power’.<sup>8</sup>

I’ve covered this in some detail because keeping the film in the cinemas was crucial for COW. In interview, former COW worker Eileen McNulty explained that audiences for films like AQS took time to build, because ‘the audience for these films never anticipated or expected to see that sort of film in the cinema’. But to keep it in cinemas, COW had to convince the cinemas that it was commercially viable to screen feminist films. To do that, they had to build audiences and then sustain them for as long as possible. And in fact AQS was seen by just over 8000 in its first 4 weeks across the 2 first-run cinemas, and a further 5400 when it transferred to the Gate Bloomsbury.

The visibility gained by playing at three first-run London cinemas also had additional benefits. Firstly, it meant that over the next two years AQS was programmed by independent repertory cinemas around the country on a fairly regular basis, ~~in addition to its guaranteed screenings at the BFI’s Regional Film Theatres.~~ And secondly, the film’s visibility had a direct and almost immediate impact on non-theatrical business: according to McNulty ‘word went around like wildfire about it and we had loads and loads of women’s groups and film societies in the country trying to get hold of it.’<sup>9</sup> ~~When a women’s group in Liverpool screened Gorris’ film and attracted an audience of 80, for instance, they reported: ‘In 3 years of screening women’s films in Liverpool this was our most successful screening, in terms of numbers attracted (our normal average is about 20-30!). It is clearly widely known among feminists as a great film’ (WITCH, Liverpool).~~

So at one level it’s possible to argue that COW were very successful with AQS. The fact that – as Root observed – Gorris’ second feature, *Broken Mirrors*, was quickly picked up

by a commercial distributor suggests that COW had precisely demonstrated the commercial viability of feminist films. However, without COW's extensive grass-roots publicity campaign, Root was moved to observe that it also 'disappear[ed] from London cinemas with indecent haste, having failed to gain either general audiences or feminist support'. Indeed, COW found they could never take audiences for granted and always needed to supplement press coverage of their releases with their own intensive poster and leafleting campaigns, ~~which required drawing on 'hoards of volunteers'.~~ As McNulty observed, ~~it required huge commitment — 'it was our life really' — which was ultimately difficult to sustain over the longer term.~~<sup>10</sup>

It is also worth noting that even with its London runs and subsequent regional screenings, COW failed to turn a profit on the release of AQS, but just about broke even. Hence it didn't generate surplus income which could be invested in future releases. Indeed, even though AQS became an extremely well-known film in the UK, it was actually seen in cinemas across the country by less than 25,000 people overall over a two year period. ~~And in fact not all the feedback from non-theatrical hires was positive, with some hirers reporting audience members walking out.~~

*[ In fact I thought it was just worth sharing a letter that was sent to one of the first run cinemas as evidence of the perception and strength of feeling that COW had in some cases to counter in trying to build audiences. XXXXX ]*

## **2. I now what to turn to Anne Devlin**

Since it demonstrates that commercial cinemas remained cautious with regard to programming feminist films.

### **SYNOPSIS**

The film is set in Ireland during the Republican uprisings of 1798. In the history books Devlin has usually been remembered – if at all – as the faithful housekeeper of the Republican leader Robert Emmet. Based on Devlin's prison journals, the film instead foregrounds her political commitment and personal strength as demonstrated by her

refusal to name her Republican companions whilst being subjected to interrogation and torture after being arrested. Although the film's focus on a marginalized female figure is clearly informed by a feminist sensibility, it is also a historical costume drama and arguably had greater commercial potential than *A Question of Silence*. It had also had a 'successful' (Murphy, 12.8.85) 5 week run in Dublin and had received largely positive reviews.

Pat Murphy, the film's director, had agreed COW could distribute *Anne Devlin* in November 1984. A lengthy process then followed during 1985 in which COW tried to find a suitable opening venue and date. Eventually by August 1985 they had started negotiations with Roger Austin of Mainline to secure a four week run at one of their London Screen cinemas, preferably either Screen on the Hill in Belsize Park or Screen on the Green in Islington. Mainline refused to open it at the Screen on the Hill because they felt the film was 'not "big" enough' so discussion concentrated on Screen on the Green. Since this was where AQS had also opened Mainline were aware of COW's ability to build audiences, but COW found this was not sufficient to secure them either a four week run or a firm commitment.

As McNulty explained in a letter to Murphy:

As you know we do not have a cinema ourselves, and in negotiating with the cinema owners/programmers we are in competition with what they consider to be more commercial, or "less difficult" films than the ones we distribute, in terms of choice of cinema and length of run. With *Anne Devlin* we have had the basic problem that we are having to convince Mainline that the film is more commercial than they choose to think it is. They know from experience that we have authority in this field and have ensured the success of films they would not have thought of as being at all commercial, yet they are needing a lot of convincing, and indeed pushing. (21 Aug 85)

When pressed by Murphy for a firm date for the opening, McNulty went on to explain that Mainline had not yet confirmed a date, and asserted that ‘this is where their lack of commitment to the film shows itself’. But the reservations that Mainline had about the commercial viability of the film were also evident in their willingness to offer only a 2 week run, rather than the 4 weeks they gave AQS. ~~At the time of these negotiations, McNulty thought it likely that they would be offered ‘a two week guaranteed run with an extension if the film does well. If that is what they offer we will try and negotiate for a follow-on run at Baker Street’.~~

In the end Mainline offered the Baker Street Screen as the opening venue, rather than the more desirable Screen on the Green sought by COW . However, the opening – scheduled for end of January 1986 – in fact failed to materialise when Mainline enjoyed an unexpected box-office success with *Letter to Brezhnev* (Chris Barnard, UK, 1985) which looked likely to sit in the Baker Street cinema ‘for months to come’.<sup>11</sup> As a result COW were forced to shift the opening to the Hampstead Everyman – a repertory cinema – where it eventually opened in March 1986.

I’ve not found any correspondence in COW’s files to indicate how Murphy felt about the sudden change of venue, but although it was generally positively reviewed, according to the records COW kept the film was not reviewed nearly as widely as AQS.

#### **4. And this brings on Leila and the Wolves**

Because on the basis of this film’s release it’s possible to argue that Mainline may have in fact been justified in their reservations regarding the commercial viability of feminist films.

#### **SYNOPSIS**

The film revolves around Leila, a Lebanese student dissatisfied with the official, colonial, male-dominated version of history. Through her eyes, the film explores the hidden role of Arab women in the recent history of Palestine and Lebanon. Through the use of

reconstruction and archive newsreels, the film takes Leila back in time, starting in Palestine under the British mandate in the 1920s and ends with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The director undertook extensive campaigning and educational work to promote the film and was understandably keen to pin down a release date.

In January 1985 COW were able to confirm that Cinegate would open *Leila and the Wolves* in April 1985 at the Gate Notting Hill, and that it would stay there for 4 weeks ‘provided that it does not fall below your minimum running costs which need a weekly attendance of 1200. If during the first week, attendance is below this, but not below 1000 and it appears that word of mouth recommendation will increase attendance, then you will consider retaining it.’ The agreement with Cinegate also allowed for a longer run at Notting Hill and a subsequent transfer to the Gate Bloomsbury if the film did well. According to the box office returns in COW’s files, however, it ran for only 3 weeks with attendance figures of 910 in the first week, 704 in the second and 678 in the third. Yet COW’s records also give ample evidence of the extensive efforts they invested in trying to promote the film.

What starts to become evident in looking at their records of the releasing of both *Anne Devlin* and *Leila and the Wolves* is the extent of the challenge that COW, as a very small UK distributor, faced in trying to launch major cinema releases. It is very telling that in one letter to Murphy, McNulty explains she is the only person in the office that week. And those limited resources clearly meant they were unable to meet all of their filmmakers’ expectations of what a distributor should be able to do.

There is, for instance, correspondence from Murphy to suggest that having decided to go with COW, she was not entirely satisfied with their efforts on the film. In the August of 1985 when COW were in the middle of negotiating with Mainline Murphy wrote complaining of (1) numerous postponements to the release date, with possible dates having already been mooted for November 1984, April 1985 and then September 1985 and (2) a lack of communication. She stressed that ‘The success for the Dublin run was

the result of a tremendous amount of concerted effort between myself and the Irish distributors’.

Heiny Srour similarly voiced her feeling on more than one occasion that COW should and could be doing more than they were to both promote the film and bring about its speedy release, and on one occasion threatened to ‘take the film away from [COW] if they weren’t prepared to go far enough’ (11/69 jp 29).

All these concerns on the part of the filmmakers are of course perfectly understandable, but for 10 years COW offered one of the few alternatives to commercial distributors. For them, they were invariably trying to balance doing all that was necessary to promote the films they distributed with their ability to support that activity, ~~whether via earned income, subsidy or volunteer labour~~. As one COW worker summed it up quite bluntly TO Heiny Srour ‘COW can’t invest beyond a certain point because we just don’t have the money’.

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<sup>1</sup> Mandy Rose, Fern Present, Audrey Summerhill, Caroline Spry, Melanie Chail and Maggie Sellers COW, Cinema of Women Films, Aims and Description, Meeting July 26, 1979. Source: Cinenova, (COW films, Misc File).

<sup>2</sup> Press Release for Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames*, undated. Source: Cinenova (COW films, *A Question of Silence*, correspondence).

<sup>3</sup> Penny Ashbrooke, COW collective member, letter to Marie (Allod), 10 March 1983: 1. Source: Cinenova (COW films, *A Question of Silence*, press list). Ashbrooke reiterates this in ‘Infront: Women find a new voice in the cinema world’, *Equality Now!* No. 1 Autumn 1983, p. 17. Source: courtesy of Eileen McNulty. In this article Ashbrooke stresses COW wanted their films ‘to get to as many women as possible’.

<sup>4</sup> Their first theatrical release was Leontine Sagan’s *Maidens in Uniform* (Germany, 1931) which launched at the Hampstead Everyman cinema in 1981. They followed this with Marleen Gorris’ *A Question of Silence* (Netherlands, 1982) in 1983, which played three first-run London cinemas; Margarethe von Trotta’s *The Second Awakening of Christa Klages* (West Germany, 1979) again at the Hampstead Everyman and Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (USA, 1983) at the Screen on the Green, both in 1984; Heiny Srour’s *Leila and the Wolves* (UK/Lebanon, 1984) at the Gate Notting Hill and Sheila McLaughlin

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and Lynne Tillman's *Committed* (USA, 1983) at the Screen at the Electric, both in 1985; and Pat Murphy's *Anne Devlin* (Eire 1984) in 1986 at the Hampstead Everyman.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Christie, letter to COW Films, 25 October 1979. Source: Cinenova (COW films, *The Power of Men* File).

<sup>6</sup> Ian Christie, letter to COW Films, 25 October 1979. Source: Cinenova (COW films, *The Power of Men* File).

<sup>7</sup> Philip French, *The Observer*, 20 February 1983, p. 30. Source: Cinenova (COW Films, *A Question of Silence*, reviews).

<sup>8</sup> Ashbrooke, letter to Marie, op. cit, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> McNulty, in interview with Knight and Thomas, op. cit, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Penny Ashbrooke, letter to Lesley Thornton, *The Observer Magazine*, 17 February 1986. Source: Cinenova (COW films, *Anne Devlin*, press screenings).