TRY LIZZIE BORDEN

DERRY FILM AND VIDEO WORKSHOP &
DISTRIBUTION BEYOND THE BROADCAST BAN

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'Message from Pat Murphy' was scrawled in black ink on the back of a Xeroxed newspaper clipping among the files of the Derry Film and Video Workshop, a highly active group of self-trained and predominantly female video and filmmakers galvanised in 1983 by the Channel 4 Workshop Scheme. This scheme had developed from the British film workshop movement of the 1960s, which had encompassed several failed attempts to standardise and unionise independent and artist filmmakers. The 1982 scheme aimed to train and platform marginalised voices in the UK media landscape, an innovation supported by the ACTT, various regional agencies and arts councils, and Channel 4.[1]

The scheme afforded diverse collectives around the UK various opportunities including access to equipment, training and editors, to commissioning opportunities and to wider audiences. Workshops were encouraged to consider community-building through filmmaking including the provision of technical training and discursive screenings. Selected groups included Amber Films, Black Audio Film Collective, Sankofa, Retake, Belfast Independent Video and Derry Film and Video Workshop (or DFVW, as I will abbreviate them from here). Channel 4 (C4) were then building their reputation as a progressive, politically engaged broadcasting platform and their relationships with workshops were intended to be symbiotic. But some of the workshops' mandates presented threats to various stakeholders, documenting subjects that were sometimes perceived as being in tension with the state. This was perhaps nowhere more evident than in the case of DFVW's first major documentary completed under the Workshop scheme, *Mother Ireland* (1988). The film included the voices of republican women, and thus became subject to Douglas Hurd's Broadcasting Ban in 1988, obstructing its broadcast on C4 for another three years.

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 DFVW 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'[2], was potentially bypassed or overcome by peer-to-peer sharing. The note also signals a moment of optimism for the DFVW, vital to the progress of some members but unavailing to the collaborative's continuation beyond the early 1990s. Looking at some of 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 DFVW 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 DFVW over the past decade which, although they'd been introduced in the mid-1990s, began in earnest when she invited them to speak at CCA 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 memers of the collective towards the digitisation and archiving of the DFVW'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 DFVW 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.[3] 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 DFVW within this matrix.

Murphy was significant and influential to the DFVW - she is interviewed and is very eloquent in Anne Crilly's *Mother Ireland*, and her feature *Maeve* was important to *Hush-a-by-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), 195–209.

2 For a thorough and incisive distinction between circulation and distribution in artists' film see Erika Balsom, *After Uniqueness: A History of Film and Video Art in Circulation*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 10-11.

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, 23:1, 6-16

"documentary truth" seemed like the greatest fictions to me... only fiction could offer a critical space where different kinds of representation could be unpacked and explored.[4] Originally from Dublin, Murphy's family had moved to Belfast in the late 1960s, and in the early 1970s she studied first at Hornsey College of Art and then at the Royal College.

In 1975, Murphy devised a performance with other artists from the Theatre of Mistakes, alongside Anthony Howell, Fiona Templeton and Michael Greenall. It was, 'a performance [that] featured *a chorus of performers* in the first-floor windows, [where] any passer-by walking up the pavement would trigger closure of the windows – which in turn caused most the performers in the street to fall to the ground.'[5] Murphy explored different media in this period before interrupting her studies at the Royal College to attend the Whitney Independent Study Program in NY in 1977. Murphy, interviewed by Julian Petley in 1983 has said,

> [At the Whitney] I met a group of women filmmakers, including Lizzie Borden, and began to realise that I *did* want to work with actors in a particular kind of politicised filmmaking. I stayed there about two years, and then decided that, although New York gave me an identity as a filmmaker, the film scene there was so bound up with the music and art scenes, and with a particular kind of style, that I couldn't make the kind of films in which I was most interested. So, I decided to go back for my last year at the RCA where I had a budget to make a film.[6]

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/ NI. *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.'[7] 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 ostensible 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 shelve 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 Katheryn 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.'[10]

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

4 Murphy, MUBI Notebook, 29th November 2021, https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/pat-murphy-introduces-her-film-maeve

5 Quote from Theatre of Mistakes' wordpress site, https://theatreofmistakes.wordpress.com/2017/05/08/the-street/

6 Pat Murphy interviewed by Julian Petley in "State of the Union", *BFI Film Monthly* 53. 624 January 1983: 32. See also Pat Murphy, interviewed by Trisha Fox, "Culture and the Struggle", *IRIS* (June 1984): 29. Murphy would subsequently feature as a central performer in New York filmmaker Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*. Quoted in Connolly, *An Archaeology of Irish Cinema: Ireland's Subaltern, Migrant and Feminist Film Cultures (1973–87)*, Doctoral thesis, DCU, 2003

7 Connolly, *An Archaeology of Irish Cinema: Ireland's Subaltern, Migrant and Feminist Film Cultures (1973–87)*, Doctoral thesis, DCU, 2003

8 So Mayer, 'Regrouping, again: Lizzie Borden's "diabolical hour" comes around', Sight and Sound, 22 July 2016, https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/festivals/regrouping-lizzie-borden-edinburgh-2016-revival

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.'[11] 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... [12]

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.'[13] 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 and she was active in her contribution to Circles, a mutual support network for female filmmakers, established in London in 1979, an organisation which later merged with the Cinema of Women to become Cinenova in 1991, which remains the UK distributor for Borden's *Born in Flames*. Interesting then, that Murphy in 1990 recommended the DFVW contact London Video Arts, but this may have been for practicality's sake during an organisational transition. There's certainly more research to be done about this connection.

'Try Lizzie Borden' had been written in black ink, likely by collective member Geraldine McGuinness, but Margo Harkin did not make contact with Lizzie Borden then. Through Murphy, Harkin found a range of distributors for *Hush-A-Bye Baby*, one of which was Other Cinema in London, which was established in 1970 and by the Cinema Guild in the US, and again, Harkin has said, 'Pat was the one that guided us on that.'[14] But this call, from Murphy to Harkin and the DFVW, and the note that was transcribed during it retains a value, revealing how such a network of women filmmakers and distributors promised a vital alternative to the DFVW beyond Channel 4 at a crucial moment in DFVW's lifespan. It encourages us to think in greater depths about the position of their works among the most impactful feminist filmmakers of their generation.

More broadly, I see this handwritten note as material evidence of how feminist networks work; of how conversations, public or private, or private made public, can turn into a chorus of people grouping or regrouping; of how group-work can make and decide its own form and how this might also manifest *in their work*. It is a photocopy of a trace of how feminist networks might coincide and strive – however successfully, at the time – to become connected. Found, scanned, and shared, the note also becomes a prompt, a way of thinking about the past and then reorientating it. 'Distribution was so bad in this country,' Borden lamented this dark London Monday evening in January 2022, her morning in LA, 'I haven't seen the DFVW's work in this country for that reason. I want to see Margo Harkin's work because that's my issue, my issue now that I'm working on is Choice. On abortion. But it's unavailable in this country, you cannot see it.' Then, Wednesday-real-time, through Crilly and Harkin, through Greavu and I, the DFVW's work arrived on Borden's desktop. The work has been shared. Lizzie Borden has been tried.

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

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