

Leeds Animation Workshop

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Leeds Animation Workshop (LAW) was, and still is, one of the first and only female-led animation collectives in the world, formed in 1977 in England. LAW started off as a campaigning group of female friends coming from a variety of backgrounds in the arts, politics, and education, and is characterized by their grassroots, politicized filmmaking, one of the many independent film collectives emerging during the 1970s and 1980s. This was a unique period of production in Britain in which radical film collectives produced and distributed films which challenged the mainstream film industry via integrative, collective, production methods using oppositional form and subject matter (Harvey, 1992). LAW was part of the “workshop sector,” supported by the Workshop Declaration a pact devised in 1984 between the workshops, the film and TV trade union ACTT, Channel 4, the British Film Institute (BFI), and the Regional Arts Associations. The National Organisation of Film Workshops, of which LAW was a member, worked hard to negotiate contracts which allowed independent film groups equal pay, cross grade working, and guaranteed copyright, in a context of long-term funding over a period of two to four years, along with TV and cinema distribution. The ethos of the workshop movement was one of nonprofit, equal participation in the production of films, which encouraged a social and political contribution to society. Supported for several years by a revenue grant from the BFI, LAW was one of the first and the longest surviving of all the British film workshops which at their peak numbered around 20. Obtaining an equipment grant from Channel 4 in the mid-1980s, LAW was able to acquire a rostrum camera and a Steenbeck editing machine creating, according to Terry Wragg one of the founders of LAW, their own means of production (Tasker, 2016). Throughout its existence LAW has fulfilled the workshops’ collective, noncompetitive ideal by involving the group in the various stages of a film’s development, with skill sharing and equality central to LAW’s mind-set (Tasker, 2016). By circulating the different roles, from creative, to the technical, down to the administrative and cleaning tasks, the hierarchical nature of mainstream film production is countered and the technical process of making a film demystified.

Leeds Animation Workshop has produced over 40 short films to date, many made during the repressive social conditions in Britain during the government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, when enterprise culture, privatization, and individual consumerism undermined solidarity and collectivity, a feature of the independent film workshop movement. Paradoxically Thatcherism did little to undermine any of LAW’s cooperative ideals throughout this period. Based in Leeds, a city with a strong culture of left-wing and feminist activism, LAW’s films were part of the oppositional

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movements emerging during the 1970s and 1980s, which formed an alternative England. Their work was promoted at grassroots level via the network of underground free sheets, newspapers, and magazines, with some films gaining wider exposure on the newly arrived Channel 4 in 1982, whose remit was to innovate and experiment both in form and content (Dickinson, 1999). Their films have always dealt with contemporary politics including women's and gay rights, antinuclear and environmental issues; and are often accompanied by booklets and discussion, to facilitate debate and understanding. The underlying bedrock to the group was the Women's Liberation Movement, with all their films approached from a feminist viewpoint. Part of LAW's activism consisted of communicating political ideas from a female point of view, their output during the 1980s falling under the political, feminist filmmaking of the time described as "populist feminist counter-propaganda" designed for debate, education, and organization (Lant, 2006). Their first 10-minute film *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* (dir. LAW, 1978), highlighted the lack of preschool, state childcare provision and was shown at women's meetings, community groups, and trade union meetings; animation having the ability to reach out to a wider audience (Tasker, 2016). These films contrast with the experimental, feminist films from the same period; Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddle of The Sphinx* (1977) and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman 23 quai du Commerce* (1975) also referenced issues around domesticity and female labor but their techniques of real time, voice-overs, and denial of representation were for an art initiated audience. LAW's mission to make their films accessible to audiences was paramount, although programming feature length films such as *Vagabond* by Agnes Varda (1985) alongside their short animations was also another method of widening their audience base.

Most of LAW's films use cel (short for celluloid) animation, where hand-drawn pictures are overlaid one over the other on transparent sheets. Animation suited LAW for its simplicity of process, smaller crews, few actors, and no studio rentals also meant less economic investment and decisions made more collectively. Filmmaking in the early 1980s was inaccessible for most; with animation all you really needed was pencil, paper, and paints (Tasker, 2016). Purported to be a medium more suited to women filmmakers, using low-tech equipment; the studio at times replaced by the kitchen table (Lant, 2006). Their films are kept short, none lasting more than 20 minutes, this favoring a more innovative and auteurist approach (Kitson, 2008). Cartoons also lend themselves to quick interpretations, in the early films, according to Wragg, characters are symbolic and condensed with different points of view conveyed succinctly (Tasker, 2016). In *Crops and Robbers* (dir. LAW, 1986) a bloated strawberry, fueled with pesticides, lounges in his deckchair, representing the exploitative practices of capitalist agribusiness in the developing world, a film which discusses complex issues of surplus wealth and famine. This is juxtaposed with real images of violent protests and historical quotes. In *Council Matters* (dir. LAW, 1984) the domestic vacuum cleaner becomes Freda the cleaner's flying broomstick where she explains in accessible language how democracy works. Intending to attract an audience through humor, music, and image there is also an emphasis on regionalism away from the elitism of London, stressing working class local communities. *Risky Business* (dir. LAW, 1980) addressed worker safety, featuring the northern terraced street and the factory in a style reminiscent of the *Daily Mirror's*, working class,

cartoon hero Andy Capp. The novelty is that she is a female shop steward striving for better working conditions at the factory. As in all their films, content and form merge, a strong political message from the female workers' point of view is conveyed through accessible visual and audio codes. The heroine's accent, demeanor, and environment ally her to a familiar, Northern, working-class culture.

One of their most explicitly feminist films, *Give us a Smile* (dir. LAW, 1983), the first to be made under the Workshop Declaration, is also regarded as their most controversial (Lant, 2006). Referencing the notorious Yorkshire Ripper murders in the Leeds and Bradford area in the mid-1970s, LAW, according to Wragg, decided to tackle the issue of sexism head on, throwing everything they had into the film (Tasker, 2016). Moving between live action and animation, it combines footage of male police officers in uniform and photo montage from magazines. It includes aggressive questioning: "Did you smile at him first?" "Did you say no when what you really meant was yes?" are taken from a 1975 police report and court case, implying women's guilt in rape cases. At the time the overarching message from the police was for women not to go out alone after dark. Local women's groups retaliated at the time, protesting that this was a virtual curfew on women, imposing a restriction on women's movement. This is communicated in the film through a radio announcement that men must alter their behavior to stop being a threat. As with many of LAW's films this was an attempt to encourage questioning of the status quo, also aiming to change the police's attitude and lack of support for women. The cartoon protagonist is initially juxtaposed within a collage of real advertising and derogatory headlines within a soundtrack of jeering name calling by men. The final sequence, however, shows women creating their own images and slogans over the sexist adverts, headlines now reading, "Women fight back" countering the dominant viewpoint of the time and giving hope for change. *Give Us a Smile* can be seen as part of the early feminist critique of the stereotyping of women, which deconstructed ideologies of femininity.

Out to Lunch (dir. LAW, 1989), like many of their films, uses satire to highlight social issues. Cut out animation shows how language and space excludes women, one of the central tenets of early feminist theory. Set in a cafe, domestic symbols of food and words in a menu "ego soufflé" and "slimmer's special" all become part of male oppression. The overhead camera of a dining table, showing two women squashed in one corner while the men stretch out, raises the viewer's awareness of the daily rituals of sexism. LAW intended the film to campaign for women to become linguistically visible (Lant, 2006) Like most of their films it reaches a satisfactory resolution; the waitress scoops up the men on her tray, rinses them in the washing-up basin, and sweeps the sexist words into the bin. LAW also seized on animation's ability to metamorphose characters and make objects move. In *Alice in Wasteland* (dir. LAW, 1991) the main character telescopes and retracts while explaining many serious environmental issues. These are shown in a whirlwind trip of bright drawings accompanied by upbeat music and narrated by an inquisitive, modern-day version of the Lewis Carroll heroine. The short timescale like all of their films leaves room for discussion and doesn't run the risk of boring the audience.

Leeds Animation Workshop carries out extensive research before scripting and storyboarding takes place. For *Crops and Robbers* (dir. LAW, 1986) there was consultation with freedom fighters from Africa, South America, and the South Pacific as well as workers in Leeds. This densely layered and sophisticated film explores the effects of British and American imperialism by using cartoon and live action. Issues around debt, famine, and aid are presented as a game of Monopoly, spanning different continents and historical periods. As with much animated fiction traditionally aimed at the child audience, LAW's films use fairy-tale narratives aimed at adults to explain and explore difficult subjects. Four films narrated by Alan Bennett look at how women are exploited in employment and training. *Did I Say Hairdressing? I Meant Astrophysics* (dir. LAW, 1998), tells the story of The Wizard Zed, the "great man of science" and examines how girls are shut out of the male dominated world of science, engineering, and technology. In the film the son is nurtured to follow in his father's footsteps while the daughters are merely left to learn about cooking.

From the mid-1970s through to the 1990s, an extensive range of local and national feminist publications, to which LAW's members contributed articles and cartoons, helped promote their films and activism. The publications were a lifeline within a climate that was predominantly hostile and unreceptive to alternative views. Exhibition outlets included Channel 4's *Eleventh Hour*, a late-night slot reserved for independent filmmaking, as well as different community grassroots groups, educational venues, and independent cinemas. The decade of retrograde Thatcherite policies did not mean the end of community activism with Leeds Animation maintaining its practice and political stance, with contemporary films covering employment rights and the environment, as well as focusing on personal stories; bullying, sexual abuse, learning disabilities, and coming out. They continue to work in close collaboration with grassroots organizations; *They Call Us Maids, The Domestic Workers' Story* (dir. LAW, 2015) tackles modern slave labor and was created in conjunction with pressure group Justice 4 Domestic Workers, raising awareness of important unheard narratives. The resurgence of contemporary feminism and the formation of new female film collectives and festivals has propelled LAW's films back into the spotlight. Dissemination of their message via digital streaming and social media networks has ensured new audiences for these important, politically orientated, women-centered narratives.

SEE ALSO: Feminist Media Activism; Gender and Political Cartoons; Researching Women's Film History; Stereotyping in Advertising; Thatcher, Margaret; Waves of Feminism; Women's Activism

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