

London Feminist Film Festival 2015: Shorts Programme

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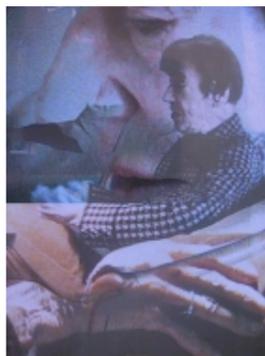
1 Comment



Bobs and brown legs peppered the foyer at Time Out's Best Independent Cinema, 2014: The Rio, all waiting with anticipation for the London Feminist Film Festival's shorts programme to begin.

Six short feminist films were shown on the third day of the third year of the London Feminist Film Festival. In this case, three is definitely the magic number. Women and men of all ages, backgrounds, skills and trades gathered on the plush red seats eager for the films to start.

Invisible Skin



Invisible skin, directed by Linnea Haviland explored the idea of “the body” as a form of constructed reality created by, manipulated by societal expectations and pressures in this documentary-style short.

Haviland used interviews with women of different ages and experiences to prove that female pressures are universal, and unfortunately, as yet, unchanged. That female obstacle; the first drop of period blood, feels no less insurmountable generation to generation.

With a background in visual art, Haviland layered the images of her interviewees in order to channel audience focus to the spoken word. One such pertinent discussion investigated society's role in turning flesh into “the body”; a body that can then be judged, abused or stereotyped.

The layering of images paired with the antiquated effect on the film, as if a silent movie, furthered the sense of stagnant and immovable pressures on a woman reverberating through the generations: these images were not unique, and Haviland's duplicating of them is almost a precautionary warning or suggestion to future women of the damaging cyclical nature of gender expectations.

This was an interesting approach to a documentary film. As a visual artist, it's not obvious why Haviland chose to draw the audience's attention to subtitles as she suggested in the Q & A section following the programme. The overall effect of the film was powerful, although subtitles could have been better incorporated into the images so the audience didn't have to pick between sentiment and visual stimulation.



Running Commentary was directed by Natasha Waugh. It uncovers the uncomfortable and sometimes debilitating everyday sexism suffered by women. The short fictional film was based on an article of the same subject.

With warm colour correction, and a wide angle shot, the woman running through the park seems fairly in control; her music is playing, and the scene feels almost motivational. A pre-pubescent skater boy then leers at the woman. This is the beginning of the low level, but certainly frustrating and undermining attention that the female runner continues to experience throughout her run, with one man audibly saying “good girl, keep it up.”

As the run continues, her heartbeat becomes steadily louder, the camera shot is shakier, possibly representing the discomfort experienced by the runner and she starts to pull a little at her clothes and hair.

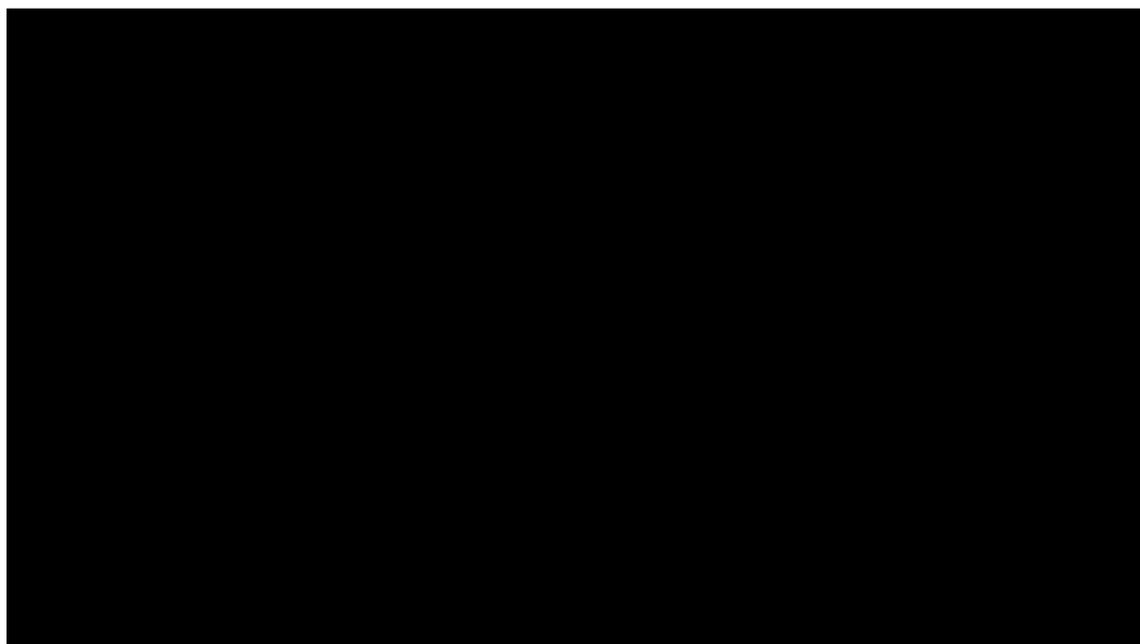
This is all juxtaposed with a male runner. In comparison to the female runner’s thumping music and heartbeat, the man’s fairly easy and carefree run is shown best in silence, a way of conveying his apparent lack of social anxiety due to his gender.

What is particularly powerful in this film is how subtle the directing is, reflective of the regularity with which this kind of harassment occurs in everyday life. As the catcalls begin to grate on the female runner more, the picture becomes greyer; a signifier of the dull, unforgiving reality of harassment.

Most importantly, the female runner confronts the final harasser. It’s comical how shocked he looks, which is a great tool used by the director to break up the slightly uncomfortable atmosphere. By laughing as an audience, we’re empowering the woman; we create a sisterhood between screen and seats, which is vital, especially as there are few occasions in the media when a woman has the upper hand.

This was a fantastic film, simple yet thought provoking. It spoke its message eloquently and succinctly and for that it not only deserves to be enjoyed for its own sake, but also has a strong future as an educative tool.

A Bird in a Cage



A Bird in a Cage WAS an example of some of the best, most approachable story telling I have witnessed. The director, Lauren Orme, combines animation, historical stills, film footage and a school choir–esque choral accompaniment to provide an insightful and extraordinary look into the life of Welsh-born Margaret Haig Thomas, a key women’s rights activist born in 1883.

The twenty-minute film was bursting with information, recounting almost the whole of Margaret’s activist career. This amount of information could have been stifling if not executed with the stylish creative flare Orme clearly possesses.

The animated sequences were tasteful, accurately portraying Margaret’s character rather than creating an infallible caricature of the real person. The animations also seemed to immortalize her troubles, making them a physical memory in the tangible card and fabric Margaret’s character was made of.

The style of the piece, with the light choral music also showed the fight for women’s equal rights as an obvious and simple solution to a destructive pattern of patriarchal power. Perhaps in this way, the more aggressive feminist tactics were breezed over with a whiff of sweeping more combative history under the carpet. By portraying Margaret as a cardboard cut out with a tight BBC pronunciation, the director may have diluted the feminist thirst apparent at the time. However, for a personal and factual documentary the film worked very well.

Women may no longer be kept as birds in a cage; Margaret Haig Thomas’ sentiment lives on in feminist theory and is central to subverting patriarchal “norms”. This film was executed well and a pleasure to watch and learn from.

There and Back



There and Back tells of the trauma felt by director, Trish Kelly as she recounts her experience of sexual assault.

It is difficult to write an objective review of this piece. When a soul is laid so bare, as in this film, human compassion seems to override camera quality, angles, underlying meaning and that oh-so-watchful eye for mistakes.

The film begins in an empty counselling centre in Ireland. Trish begins to tell her story; her voice is loaded with hard-to-conceal emotion and, like a riverbank about to burst, the frail wobble in her voice is touching yet encouraging. The audience want to support her.

The slight home-video camera effect when Trish is telling her story to camera is grounding. This is stone cold reality; a reality in which the clock tick-tocks in the background, each second of living, a torment, a regret that she hadn’t let him kill her. Her shattered life was too much a responsibility for her to bear. This is not just Trish’s reality, but also so many women’s reality across the globe, and yet each story is just as horrifying, just as impacting, and just as abhorrent.

What is film? It's a visual portrayal of human experience in one form or another. Following a short documentary course, Trish must've known that her story didn't need cinematic excellence, it just needed to be told, which in itself must've been an incredibly cathartic experience.

The film's title "There and Back" is reassuring. Once Trish has told her story she discusses the benefit she's felt from counselling against a backdrop of images from nature. Such natural images have a Keatsian quality, proving that our human essence is harmonized with nature.

This is a film that needs to be shown everywhere; women's' refuges, schools, high schools and workplaces. This is a story worth sharing, to show women that although that memory may never leave, the feelings that that memory conjures can be diluted with the right help. This is a remarkable, honest and important film, and I recommend it to all women and men alike.

La Ragazza e la Gondola (The Girl and the Gondola)



La Ragazza e la Gondola (The Girl and the Gondola) was directed by Abbe Robinson in Venice, Italy. It tells the poignant and heart-warming story of a girl wanting to follow in her father's footsteps as a gondola captain, in spite of gender precedents within the industry.

This film undoubtedly had the best camerawork out of all of the shorts from this programme. It starts with the clear picturesque water, a child's hand running through the ripples of current. Romantic Venetian tableaux created by the second to none cinematography were paired with traditional Italian music.

The overall feel of the production was similar to Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amelie* with its quirky shot choices and vibrant colours.

The film incorporated a fair bit of symbolism; it was only under the light of a feminine moon that this aspiring female gondolier could play and practise her skills in her father's boat, or even it seems, only in this darkness could she disclose her subversive ambition with friends. This kind of clear symbolism, although possibly overused, wasn't clichéd and fitted well into this enchanting tale of female determination and ambition in the face of societal gender constructs.

There is a sweet moment of female solidarity as she pays for a ride on the sole female gondolier's boat with her pocket money, rather than riding her fathers for free. This kind of strong female connection between two generations is hardly seen unless within a familial setting; it was an almost tangible moment of sisterhood.

This film is a beautiful visual treat; the story is set out well, and the acting from the young girl was superb; subtle and arresting. This is a short built on a powerful foundation of female strength, ambition and solidarity. This is one to watch and feel.



Director Jasmine Doyle-Pitt brings *Kids on Gender* to the screen: a look into what gender means through a child's perspective. This is obviously a fantastic idea for a documentary, tapping into the inquisitive nature of children whilst at the same time uncovering their preliminary learned behaviours.

The kids seem to know what girl and boy activities should be and how they should be divided between the genders, sadly lamenting that they might get bullied if seen crossing the gender boundary, especially the boys. However, when asked what makes a boy and a girl, they stumble a little more on their answers. Don't we all?

What is so special about this documentary is the children's honesty. Children have an innate ability to question, and possibly find it easier to pick a part their preconceived notions as they are, as yet, less consecrated than an adult's. It is almost magical to watch their brains tick over the subjects being discussed and at times completely hilarious.

This may seem on the surface a sweet, but possibly inconsequential way to educate children; it's obvious that more needs to be done in schools to combat the us/them paradigm. These kids had noticed that boys have more fun in films and that women tend to play boring characters or, as one girl said, they're all just princesses waiting to be saved from their towers. That is fairly shocking. We possibly wrongly think that female oppression starts kicking in when we hit puberty, but kids are intuitive, perceptive, and at ages under ten, are already picking up on their possibly limited role in society as portrayed by the big screen.

This was a masterfully put together film, edited with impeccable comic timing. It is both hilarious and thought provoking, for me, the perfect recipe for a feminist short.

This was a fantastic event, with most of the films not only serving as entertainment, but also as an educative tool for all generations and genders. This programme was brilliantly put together, the cherry on top being the Q & A session with the directors, allowing the audience a closer look in to aims and thought processes behind the shorts. Although this glorious festival has drawn to a close for this year, I strongly recommend going to the next one. The London Feminist Film Festival is a hub of engaging people and experiences, I can't wait for next year.

For more information, please visit: <http://londonfeministfilmfestival.com/lff-2015-programme/sat-22-aug-4-00pm-feminist-shorts/>