

New platform launches for feminist film

Inaugural festival challenges typical representations of women on screen

Hackney Picturehouse will host the very first London Feminist Film Festival between 29 November and 2 December, writes *Alexia Deller*.

The festival will screen feminist shorts and feature films from international women directors, including films from rising stars to established classics. Each film session will be accompanied by a panel discussion featuring prominent filmmakers, feminists, academics, and art critics.

Director of the Festival Anna Read says: "I'm passionate about feminism and films so it's kind of a marrying of



Bidisha, the festival's matron

those two things.

"I've been to cinemas and film festivals and noticed how it's always quite male dominated, with hardly any films directed by women and often the

representation of women on screen is very narrow and stereotypical."

Read isn't wrong. Between 2007 and 2010 just 11.8 per cent of UK films released were directed by women and of the 22 films in contention for the prestigious Palme d'Or at Cannes this year, not one had a female director.

But the problem isn't due to a lack of supply. "Film schools are made up of around 50/50 [men/women], but it just doesn't translate once you get into the jobs, especially the top jobs," says Read.

There has been a massive response to the London Feminist Film Festival (LFFF) with over one hundred submissions from every continent except Antarctica. All the films are directed by women. But the problem isn't just lack of female directors, it is also how women are represented on screen. "The two things are connected," says Read. "If you've got

A film needs to have at least two women in it who have a conversation about something besides a man

quite a narrow, stereotypical representation of women on screen then that's part of what leads to the undervaluing of women in society, and can lead to women not being valued enough to get big jobs."

To determine gender bias in the film industry, many use the Bechdel test, a simple test devised by American cartoonist Alison Bechdel in the 1980s. To pass the Bechdel test, a film needs to have at least two women in it who

have a conversation about something besides a man. A surprising number of films fail the test, including famous films like *Avatar*, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Social Network*.

But the LFFF doesn't want to focus on the negative, says Read. The festival wants to get people talking about feminist issues and film, but mostly the aim is to support and celebrate women. Many of the panel sessions will be chaired by the Festival's Matron (not patron) Bidisha, a culture critic, broadcaster and writer.

Bidisha says, "I support [the festival] wholeheartedly as a women's advocate and also as someone who has always loved film and sat in countless screenings watching the action and the credits and thinking, where the hell are the women? Well, here they are."

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