

London Feminist Film Festival 2017: Rio Cinema Archive

Posted on 18/09/2017 by Rona

In the second part blog of our blog from the 2017 London Feminist Film Festival ([see first part here](#)), [Selina Robertson](#) contributes an exclusive extract from her presentation on the Rio Cinema archive, one specialising in queer and feminist films. And [Elaine Burrows](#) adds her personal reflection on that history. In conclusion, [Ania Ostrowska](#) and [Selina](#) reflect on the closing discussion, which featured crucial questions of archives and intersectionality.

History and the Rio Cinema



— Rio Cinema Publicity Materials featuring 'Peroxide Double' ©Rio cinema archive 2017

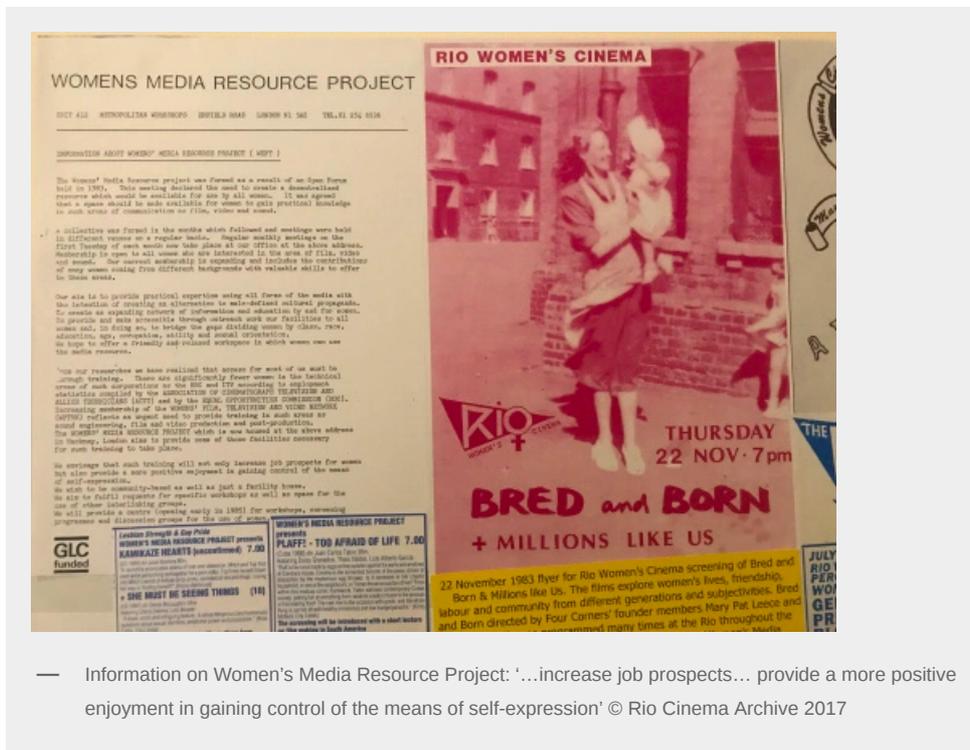
[Selina Robertson](#) writes:

Hauntings in the Archive! (see [last week's blog entry](#)) resonated on several fronts with Selina's doctoral research, especially in terms of those filmmakers' queer feminist approach to the VBKÖ archive. They were seeking to answer the question of how to write the "disorderly narratives" (as J. Jack Halberstam calls them in *In a Queer Time and Place*, 2005) within the gaps, absences and silences of the archive. In her talk Selina shared with the audience how her engagement with the Rio Cinema's archive revealed that throughout

the 1980s and 1990s it was a vibrant, inclusive cultural space, supporting a diversity of intersectional queer and feminist cultural production, hosting and supporting a variety of collective, curatorial activity.

The Rio archive, stored on-site, holds not only vital information about how London's queer and feminist programming and curatorial practices shaped the reception and circulation of alternative moving image practices, it also contains fascinating clues about the cultural memory of the diverse feminist communities, film collectives and activists who came to shape this marginalized history.

Two feminist collectives were particularly active at the Rio throughout that period. The Rio Women's Cinema Group was established in February 1984 by a group of women associated with the Rio. Every third Thursday of the month, the group programmed double bills of early women's cinema, classic Hollywood 'women's cinema' and contemporary feminist cinema, followed by discussions. The group was well connected and regularly collaborated with local feminist activist groups and sister film collectives such as Four Corners and Circles[1]. A wide mailing list shows the extensive networks of activist feminist communities in London at the time, including The Feminist Library, Hackney Black Women's Group and Sisterwrite.



— Information on Women's Media Resource Project: '...increase job prospects... provide a more positive enjoyment in gaining control of the means of self-expression' © Rio Cinema Archive 2017

The Women's Media Resource Project (WMP), also known as WEFT, was an intersectional feminist collective funded by Hackney Council, Greater London Arts and the BFI. The project started in 1977 with the purpose of bringing to the UK music by lesbian musicians signed with Olivia Records. In 1985 the collective started working with the Rio. WMP had an intersectional feminist curatorial agenda to create a lesbian feminist social space through which to organize discursive mixed media events, film and video screenings, and training sessions for women to work in the music industry at the Sound Kitchen, located in the Rio's basement. We saw pictures of selected ephemera on the screen and Selina, in collaboration with the Rio, also curated two exciting ephemera collages that were on display outside the screening room.

Elaine Burrows writes:

Selina Robertson, co-founder of Club des Femmes, “a queer feminist film curating collective”, described in her presentation “Desperately Seeking: Mapping the History of International Feminist Film Curatorial Collectives at the Rio”, material that she had found in the Rio Cinema’s attic – unsorted, uncatalogued, it contains flyers, posters, programmes, from years of Rio programming – which relate to her own PhD research into feminist film curation in the 1980s and 1990s. I was there (as it were): it’s very strange to see one’s own history being uncovered in this way. I lived (and still live) locally, and went to the screenings, and knew (and still know) several of the women who were part of that programming team. I suppose it’s the shock of hearing names of people you know, realising that, like them, you are in some way “part of history”, and recognising that history began a minute ago, not just fifty years back.

Questions Going Forward – The Politics of Preservation

Ania and **Selina** write:

The discussion afterwards started from the shared features of presented archives, as in the words of the chair Althea Greenan they all drew our attention to seeing archives as ‘rhetorical spaces’, spaces for people who consult them to be heard as they debate the past and its relevance to the present and future. The complexities of archival politics were fully on view: Selina mentioned the joy and excitement at opening of the Rio’s treasure trove of lesbian and feminist collectives of the past while Samia of [Women of Colour Index](#) reading group (see also last week’s blog) talked about the feeling that a ‘can of worms’ is opened in the process of making visible women of colour in a predominantly white archive.

‘Please people, keep archiving!’ Terry Wragg of Leeds Animation Workshop made this important plea from the audience, reporting the difficulties of small independent collectives and organisations to find funding for that purpose. Other questions included how to further feminist thinking about the archive and how to produce new feminist knowledge about and within the archive in terms of activism, art-making and resistance. Questions, of course, which we took away from a stimulating discussion back into our own research.

Elaine Burrows worked for many years at what is now the BFI National Archive. She has been a member of WFTHN since it was founded, and is also a longstanding member of the boards of both [Cinenova](#) and the [British Entertainment History Project](#).

Ania Ostrowska is a PhD candidate at the University of Southampton (UK), researching authorial agency of contemporary British women documentarians as part of AHRC-funded project [Calling the Shots: Women and Contemporary UK Film Culture](#). Since 2011 she has been a film editor of popular British feminist blog [The F-Word](#).

Selina Robertson is a film MPhil/PhD candidate at Birkbeck. Her research is a curatorial investigation into the hidden histories and strategies of curating queer and feminist moving image as activism and advocacy in London 1979-1995. In 2007 she co-founded, with Sarah Wood, [Club des Femmes](#), a queer feminist film curating collective.

LFFF 2017 programme available [here](#)

Feminism and the Archive session's page available [here](#)

[i] See, also, BFI article: 'Women of the avant-garde: remembering a key debate':

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/news-bfi/features/women-avant-garde-vital-discussion>

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