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Are you burning?: Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* circa 2012

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The essay documents a screening of *Born in Flames* held in January 2012 in response to the exclusion of women and feminists from the Toronto International Film Festival. The essay includes the authors' explanation of the events leading up to the screening, documents from their organizing, and a transcript of the conversation with audience members.

Keywords: queer art; film; feminism; community space

On 1 January 2012, Toronto's FAG Feminist Art Gallery (run by Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue) in collaboration with Scott Berry marked a new beginning.

We held a semi public/private party that included a screening of Lizzie Borden's film *Born in Flames* followed by a discussion. Below we explain the reasons why we showed the film and describe our collaborative effort, the Born in Flames Feminist Film and Video Festival.

For a long time FAG and Scott have been angry and frustrated with the lack of feminist film visibility in Toronto. In our own individual ways we have tried to rectify the problem. Scott runs the Images Festival, long known for showing incredible feminist film, video, new media, and performance work as well as queer alternative and experimental work. (Deirdre also ran the Images Festival from 1995–9). Scott and Deirdre have worked together for many summers at the Independent Imaging Retreat: an experimental filmmaking workshop held every year in rural Ontario. The Retreat places significant effort on supporting women artists and on personal and political artistic expression. Deirdre also works for Vtape, an organization dedicated to video art and media works produced by artists working outside of the mainstream of cinematic cultural production. Allyson volunteered at numerous artist-run centers including Trinity Square Video and the Inside Out Toronto LGBT Film Festival. She has initiated several DIY (do-it-yourself) community-based filmmaking projects with queer youth, street-involved youth, and economically disadvantaged youth. She also toured Deep Lez FilmCraft, a screening, workshop, processing nest/pot luck in major cities such as Montréal, San Francisco, Portland, Winnipeg, and Vancouver. Deirdre and Allyson also run the FAG Feminist Art Gallery, which they describe as:

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The Feminist Art Gallery – FAG – is our geographical footprint located in Toronto, Canada. We host, we fund, we advocate, we support, we claim. We are also HAG (a home location for artists from out of town or without beds), NAG (an arm for angry letter writing), RAG (publishing), BRAG (a feminist art show-and-tell), DAG (a micro funder) and DRAG (a queer life drawing class for non-drawers).

FAG does not depend on formal funding sources nor will it ever be tied to one government or corporate controlling purse string. FAG cannot be bought, sold or appropriated by institutions. Instead, FAG is focused on a diverse community of individuals and artists and our collective and communal powers. FAG has a “matronage” program whereby people contribute to a pool of resources insuring that artists will always be paid for exhibiting their work.

It is time for solidarity, for a new kind of sisterhood that isn't based on gender and privilege and a new kind of brotherhood that isn't based on rape and pillage.

Logue, Berry, and Mitchell are all cultural producers who use film and video as one of their creative outlets. All three of us have been organizing, producing, and encouraging feminist and queer cultural production for the past 20 years. That's why we were ready for the Toronto International Film Festival's (TIFF) major bummer bomb that they dropped in late 2010.

TIFF readily, however wrongly, assumes the role of an “authority” that dictates what kinds of film cultures are worthy, valuable, and eventually “historical” enough to grace their oh-so silver screens. This is one of the reasons why our hackles went up when they published their list of Essential 100 films of all time (<http://tiff.net/essential/about/essential100>) ... a list that only included one woman filmmaker. With such a grotesque omission of all of the great films made by women, and feminists, we came up with a plan to “RESIST THE LIST.”

The transformation of shit into gold

Scott and FAG wanted to both respond to TIFF with a manifesta (see below) and we wanted a public element: we came up with the idea for **the Born in Flames Film Festival. We intend to show 100+ films by feminists on our own turf and terms, and by employing the resources of our communities. The time that this will take will be however long it takes. Institutions such as TIFF wield disproportionate amounts of cultural authority and hegemony. We felt it was imperative to counter their essentialism with another view.**

The presentation of our angry letter to TIFF took place on Boxing Day (the day after Christmas in Canada), a day typically used by the film industry to roll out many horrible mainstream schlocky films. Here is our letter to them:

Call this a STATEMENT or MANIFESTA ... Whatever works better to get your attention!

From: Feminist Art Gallery (FAG)

To: Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) Date: Now and Forever

Re: MeN-ssential list of top 100 films of all time

TIFF,

*What? The? Eff-as-in-film? You can't possibly think that no one would respond to your list of the top 100 ESSENTIAL FILMS of all time with only **one woman** listed!?!*

What sort of organization that claims to be dedicated to the art of film would have no problem publishing such a list with 99 men on it?! Even your HR department should have caught the gigantic gender faux pas that your phallo-vision that has spewed all over Toronto and film communities worldwide.

You say: "This list represents the merging of 100 film list as determined by an expert panel of TIFF curators with one 100 film list as determined by TIFF stakeholders."

We ask: *Who are these stakeholders? Mostly men? Who is the "expert panel" of TIFF curators? Ditto? Who "merged" these lists to create an Essential Cinema that is, essentially all made by men, save Agnes Varda at lowly number 96? Do you need us to curate your films for you? Do you need help? For reals. Alice Guy-Blaché made the very first narrative film – we know you like those, you shill for them every September.*

We thought we could actually like the TIFF. We almost like the cinemas. We also feel soooooo glamorous coming to see movies at your palace but we won't step one foot into your premises until you set the record straight.

*We aren't going to wait for you though. We won't wait for the Agnes Varda retrospective after she passes away. We will not let your 99% MALE ESSENTIALIST list stand! **Starting 1 January 2012** and screening for as long as she takes, the Feminist Art Gallery will present the **FIRST 100 ESSENTIAL FILMS BY FEMINISTS*** series. Sunday January 1, 2012, 3 PM, **Born in Flames** by **Lizzie Borden** (1983) kicks off FEM-ESSENTIALS (the first 100 essential films by feminists*).*

You might not get this but men can be feminists too (and it is not a female birth-right). You should try it some time just to see what it feels like.*

***You aren't ready for it yet but maybe one day we should also have a conversation about gender queer and thinking outside of the gender binaries. For now let's just start with entry level ideas.*

Seriously, Feminist Art Gallery

Here are 100 recommendations, there are thousands more!

Chantal Akerman
Stephanie Allain
Suzana Amaral
Tata Amaral
Maya Angelou
Shamim Ara
Jane Arden

Dorothy Arzner
Jacqueline Audry
Rakhshan Bani-Etemad
Neema Barnette
Kathryn Bigelow
Manju Borah
Lizzie Borden
Catherine Breillat
Mary Ellen Bute
Eliane Caffé
Jane Campion
Carla Camurati
Tantoo Cardinal
Edith Carlmar
Ana Carolina
Gurinder Chadha
Sylvia Chang
Abigail Child
Zero Chou
Shirley Clarke
Dana Claxton
Claire Denis
Betse De Paula
Maya Deren
Dorris Dorrie
Germaine Dulac
Cheryl Dunye
Tracey Edmonds
Valie Export
Safi Faye
Vera Frenkel
Nisha Ganatra
Sonali Gulati
Alice Guy-Blaché
Barbara Hammer
Birgit Hein
Ivy Ho
Dianne Houston
Ann Hui
Mehreet Jabbar
Liu Jiayin
Nelly Kaplan
Naomi Kawase
Marjorie Keller
So Yong Kim

Sandra Kogut
Barbara Kopple
Indu Krishnan
Kasi Lemmons
Nnegest Likke
Barbara Loden
Samira Makhmalbaf
Sarah Maldoror
Eisha Marjara
Darnell Martin
Deepa Mehta
Marie Menken
Marta Meszaros
Elfi Mikesch
Tracy Moffatt
Anne Mungai
Lucia Murat
Fanta Regina Nacro
Mira Nair
Elivra Notari
Alanis Obomsawin
Midi Onodera
Ngozi Onwurah
Patibha Parmar
Sally Potter
Yvonne Rainer
Liz Rhodes
Leni Riefenstahl
Marta Rodriguez
Helke Sander
Helma Sanders-Brahms
Sangeeta
Aparna Sen
Nandini Sikand
Helene Solberg
Frances-Anne Solomon
Lim Soon-rye
Lisa Steele
Lee Suk-Gyung
Sabiha Sumar
Sashwati Talukdar
Kinuyo Tanaka
Tran T. Kim Trang
Monika Treut
Margarethe von Trotta

Lina Wertmuller
Joyce Wieland
Ning Ying

We then invited 50 guests to come for a New Year's Day potluck and to watch a 16mm print of *Born in Flames* with us at the Feminist Art Gallery:

INVITATION!

FAG and YOU together = Born in Flames = New Years Day 2012!!!!

FAG and Scott Berry have been cooking up a plan to launch **the FIRST 100 ESSENTIAL FILMS BY FEMINISTS** series in response to TIFF's 2010 phallo-rama list of 100 essential films (<http://tiff.net/essential/about/essential100>) of all times that only includes *one* film made by a female filmmaker. You can read our awesome angry letter below. This missive will be delivered to TIFF on Boxing Day, right on time with feature film openings in cineplexes similar to their own.

FAG wants to start 2012 on the right foot, with **an inspirational infusion about fighting racism, classism, sexism and homophobia via lesbian feminist science fiction and utopian dreams that imagine an alternative social democracy.**

FAG invites you to a **New Year's Day potluck brunch and screening of Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames***. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Born_in_Flames

We invite you to sit with us in a shag drenched sloppy textile hug for an exclusive screening of **Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*** in its original **16mm** format.

Screening begins at 3:00.

Please bring a home-made dish, or new bag of chips, or left over holiday cookies or something like that to share. We will provide some foundational nourishments. Please BYOB as well (feel free to bring *more* than enough for yourself).

RSVP by December 29 so we know how many veggie wieners to chop up in the baked beans.

Thanks, Deirdre, Allyson and Scott

We are all, women and men, the prophets of this new age

Before the film screened we gave a bit of background on the history of the film screening in Toronto. Notably, the first time it screened here was with the Festival of Festivals (later to be named the Toronto International Film Festival) in 1983. We talked about how the film was brought back for a week-long run in 1984 and the Ontario Film Review Board at that time, consisting of the notorious film slasher, Mary Brown, attempted to censor the film by rating it "R" – restricted to people 18 years of age and over – and by attempting to force the filmmaker to clip a short segment of the film before anyone, regardless of age, saw it. We talked



Figure 1. Projection Set Up, January 2012, Photo by Michele Pearson Clarke.

about how we read this history in articles written by activist Chris Berchall in *The Body Politic*. We talked about how the film was received critically and gave a bit of an overview of the story line – a sketch of the idea that it is 10 years after a socialist revolution and business is as usual. One important tidbit: before starting we asked the room who had previously seen *Born in Flames* and **less than 1/3** of the attendees had ... This was very exciting!

Then we showed the film!

We must unite to fight

Scott Berry was the collaborator and the matron for this Screening. He donated his labor as projectionist as well as paying the cost of rental for the projector and the film print.

This is his testimony about how he came to love *Born in Flames* and what he decided to do with that love:

Thank goddess my mother was a movie-holic. Sometimes she'd take me to see matinees with her when I was young before she got sick with the cancer.

I vividly remember seeing *All That Jazz*, the Bob Fosse story which came out in 1979 when I was 10 ... lots of dancing, drugs and derogatory behaviors toward women. I asked her afterward why the main character was so mean to the women in his life and my mother said



Figure 2. Watching *Born in Flames*, January 2012, Photo by John Greyson.

something like, “the major difference between men and women is that men constantly need to act out their superiority.” Or at least that’s how my 10-year-old brain remembered it. I feel fortunate to have come out first as a feminist. I was acutely aware of how women were taken for granted and stepped over and ignored from my experience of my mother’s illness and subsequent divorce.

Fast-forward to my first viewing of *Born in Flames* in 1999 at the MIX Festival in New York and my feminist flames were fanned. I couldn’t believe it. A multi-racial revolutionary film without trained actors (or a script for that matter) that isn’t afraid to show complex political relationships between “radicals”? I’ve been a fan and terribly obsessed with this film ever since. I’ve used any and every opportunity to show the film: at Dumba, the community based not for profit queer art space in Brooklyn which I co-founded, at Bluestockings Women’s Bookstore (where I also volunteered), in classrooms and most recently at FAG Feminist Art Gallery. The film really influenced our approach at Dumba to attempt and build community and create a new way of organizing with queer and feminist goals at the center but with class consciousness and a commitment to equality first and foremost – to see the connections between issues whether queer or otherwise; to recognize the inherent racist histories of the US and to honor those who have come before. *Born in Flames* is as radical a film as I can imagine even today ... one that brings the noise to the present ... up front and personal. While the “sci-fi” descriptor applied to the film foregrounds certain inherent qualities of the genre, what I’ve always loved is how the science fiction-ness isn’t in some unknown “future times,” but instead in the here and now. The fact that the film positions revolution not as ALL against the MAN



Figure 3. Discussing *Born in Flames*, January 2012, Photo by Michele Pearson Clarke.

but rather explicitly focuses on the ruptures, the complexities, the differences and the overlaps is nothing short of revolutionary in and of itself.

One for all, and all for one-ness

The following is an edited transcription of the discussion we had at the end of the screening of *Born in Flames*: the inaugural film to kick off the Born in Flames Feminist Film & Video Festival.

Person: *Born in Flames* is really hot right now; it's being shown all over the place. We want to talk about why now? Why is this film of such interest for people to see now? It's not just because of nostalgia, right?

Person: It's not nostalgia; it's how things were communicated then, pre-Facebook. Looking at a typewriter is really interesting – that alone is enough, I would say, to elicit attention. The film is fascinating as a documentation of the trickle down of technology and how activists used it then and how they use it now. It is important to see how action happened and how it was in the streets. I mean it really was person to person. It involved groups of people and was tangible and physical and that's the part that actually strikes me about seeing this film again today.

Person: The room was all atwitter when we saw the first images of the World Trade Center. Everyone seemed a bit shocked to see it again after the fact and I wonder about how, if we consider the Occupy Movement and we consider the kinds of shifts in our political systems worldwide ... I wonder how people feel seeing those images but also how we reconcile the parallels of what really isn't that long ago. It was in 1983 when the film was made (even though it is premised in a fictional future). Since then there has been lots of violence worldwide. We know it happened then and we know it's happening now and now we're trying to look at images of activists taking up arms to try and fight for basic rights. It's a complex terrain I think, visually. For me anyway, to see women with guns and explosions.

Person: When I first saw it in 1985, the filmic style seemed more chaotic to me. It didn't seem to be a strangely futuristic concept anymore. It seemed kind of awkward but now watching it does seem right from the moment.

Person: Can I ask a question? Was the story in the film suggesting that the World Trade Center was being blown up by the women's rights movement?

Crowd: No they were blowing up the transformer at the top. The antenna.

Person: OK ... but she does drop a bomb in it.

Person: ... A handbag bomb.

Person: They were interested in destroying the antenna on the World Trade Center as a tool and not as a symbol, which is interesting and very different than the reasons why the actual bombing happened.

Person: I think what really struck me is the development of an arch of conservatism. It was 1983. The Reagan era was fucking booming, Thatcher was in power. Mulroney was in power. It was like a trifecta of idiots. Conservative idiots. So, there was a loss of jobs and there was trouble around unions. While there wasn't the same kind of dogmatic right that's happening now – although I'm sure we can all have lots of disagreement around that – the world looks a lot different right now than it did in 1983. The idea of looking for union jobs right now seems naïve. We are in a time period where there's an enormous amount of job loss but it's not only because of a conservative right government. It's a different kind of economic shift that is more about the banks and corporations. So, there are interesting parallels but there it isn't the exact same situation. It's a different kind of conservatism and I think that's really interesting. It also made me think of that piece, I think it was by Gran Fury – does anyone remember this piece where Gran Fury went on NBC news? They bum-rushed NBC.

Person: Yeah, it was during the Iraq war.

Person: The way the women in the film were fighting conservatism using the media reminded me of some of those types of actions that really did happen.

Person: And are still happening. Technology and media has changed so much but people still want direct action. They still want to create places were resistant bodies

can come together. It is obvious to make the connection to the Occupy Movement. There has been a similar strategy of consciousness raising in the Occupy Movement and I think that's part of why this film is of interest now. It works as a kind of consciousness raising film for what is happening politically and what people can do right now. People with technology are able to use it to make huge things happen.

Person: Like when the UK riots were getting out of hand because people were texting each other? The right wing press was blaming these riots getting out of control because of tweets and text messaging.

Person: I was thinking a lot about the Occupy Movement while I was watching the film. What I thought was happening in the movie was that they were starting to talk about how all the movements were fractured and if they could only get together they would have more power and that unity was being interrupted by the idea that maybe we shouldn't be all one – that we should be fractured so that we are more effective. They seemed to all come together at the end, that's what I got from it. But I thought it was really interesting in this moment that we're having now where there is this full acceptance of this idea of non-unity. It's like, "No, let's not join together let's just keep the questions going." What is so great about Occupy is that the media didn't know how to talk about it so they had to ask questions and what they got was a whole variety of answers. They couldn't find a leader, which is incredible.

Person: I love how feminism is depicted in the film. It's so exciting to see feminism or feminist activism represented because we never ever get to see it. But also, Borden represents feminism in a really complex way where it's not about a unified front and it shows all the complications around different ideas about things like the effectiveness of action, choices made around actions and positions, how to think them through and also when to stop thinking it through and *do it*. I love that part of the film. Seeing these complex feminisms ends up making the film kind of hard to get because it's trying to do so many things at once – it feels very familiar and that is a nice feeling for a change.

Person: Yes and the satire is really subtle. Borden creates these really subtle beautiful moments like the women who are writing the editors for the Socialist newspaper. Their transformation gets co-opted into the revolutionary government. Consider what's at stake with this idea. It's such a beautiful subtle plant. The filmmaker is letting them have transformation without it being dogmatic or just broad satire.

Person: I think it is the prescient angle of the North African politics which is the bigger weirder connection for me. Just the other day in the mainstream news there was a feature on virginity testing in Egyptian prisons. So it seems to be that this revolution has connections to the sexual, gender component to what's going on there. It's like the underreported or the thing that's just bubbling right under. It is the mixing of gender involved in the clash. And that links with the whole Malcolm X period where it was about world revolution not just American revolution and racism and gender (although that is how it was underpinned). This complexity is hinted at in *Born in*

Flames but now it's come back big time. So I think maybe the connections to Arab Spring is more amplified.

Person: Yeah! Remember in the film when they brought out the map and they flipped it over? There wasn't Google Earth. (Laughter.) Orienteering, that's what we need to bring back.

Person: The difference is the way broadcast is now just owned. At the time when the film was made there was the revolutionary idea of broadcast. That radio waves could reach anywhere. Now all of the satellite broadcast is owned and of course no one pays any attention to mainstream media any more. And why? Because it has been completely corrupted. So there's that sense of how many layers there are. Like when you were speaking about Reagan, I was wondering what's the difference between that generation of Neo Con and this one. I'm in my third decade of Neo Con sophistication, myself. What is the difference between Mr. Harper and Mr. Reagan? What is fundamentally different is just the sophistication or lack of sophistication in how one handles communication. And generally that brings up a level of frustration. I mean we were talking about Facebook and how people can use it as a political tool. The opposite of that is that I still have left over paranoia about where my file is being kept by the RCMP. Now people just volunteer their information for their file. Is that just paranoia? You know what I mean? Everyone knows somebody who's worried about whether their tracking device on their phone is being monitored. That's also one of the currents that comes out of that period in the 80s is this constant form of normative infiltration that's always going on.

Person: Yes and what is still going on, as depicted in the film, is the political argument between the strategy for incremental change from within and the revolutionary reorganization of society which is what the main socialist parties always argues for. I like in the film that there is a broadcast by the president announcing that housework is about to become officially paid and that is what gets interrupted by the feminist revolutionaries. I'm still waiting for the announcement that the housewives will be paid and a redefinition of who housewives are.

Person: And with the condom business, was that some kind of comment on women's work?

Person: Yes of course and don't you like how the montage flips from wrapping raw chicken parts to sheathing a dink to snipping hair ... all women's work.

Person: So was that women's work talking about sex work or are they talking about protection, self-protection, from STDs, pregnancy?

Person: I had an issue with the way that sex work and rape were considered to be the same thing.

Person: A separation between consent is totally different. So that seemed old fashioned.

Person: Well the sex wars of the 80s and 90s were just revving up and Borden's next film, *Working Girls*, was a documentary about sex work from sex workers'

perspectives ... I think that like all of us, Borden's politics probably didn't stay in the same place.

Person: Let's keep talking about all of this stuff and move to the potluck table maybe? Everyone in? Thanks for the discourse. (Applause)

FAG visitors in attendance at the screening:

Stephen Andrews
 Sharlene Bamboat
 Cecilia Berkovic
 Suzanne Carte-Blanchenet
 Jon Davies
 Naomi De Szegheo-Lang
 Tamara De Szegheo-Lang
 FASTWURMS
 John Greyson
 Marisa Hoicka
 Michelle Jacques
 Jacob Korczynski
 Natalie Kouri-Towe
 Sholem Krishtalka
 Deanne Lehtinen
 Logan MacDonald
 Kelly McCray
 Hazel Meyer
 Michele Pearson Clarke
 Steph Rogerson
 Cheryl Sourkes
 Tess Takahashi
 Tracy Tidgwell
 Jamie Zarowitz
 Christina Zeidler
 Michael Zryd

Notes on contributors

Allyson Mitchell is a maximalist artist working in sculpture, performance, installation, and film. Her work has exhibited in numerous venues including the Textile Museum of Canada, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Warhol Museum, Tate Modern, and the British Film Institute. She is based in Toronto, where she is an Assistant Professor in the School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies at York University and runs FAG, a feminist art gallery with Deirdre Logue. <http://www.allysonmitchell.com>

Deirdre Logue holds a BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and an MFA from Kent State University. Her performance-based film, video, and installation works are self-portraits uniquely located between comfort and trauma, self-liberation and self-annihilation. By using domestic objects

and spaces to contrary ends, her works capture gesture, duration, and the body as both subject and object. Recent solo exhibitions of her award-winning work have taken place at Open Space in Victoria, Oakville Galleries, the Images Festival in Toronto, the Berlin International Film Festival, Beyond/In Western New York, YYZ, and at articule in Montreal. She was a founding member of Media City, the Executive Director of the Images Festival, the Executive Director of the CFMDC and is currently the Development Director at Vtape. Deirdre Logue together with Allyson Mitchell formed the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto in 2010. <http://deirdrelogue.com>

Originally from Detroit, Scott Miller Berry is a Toronto-based cultural worker, filmmaker, and programmer who has been working in community-based arts for over 15 years (co)instigating projects such as Early Monthly Segments, Brooklyn Babylon Cinema, Dumba Collective, the 8 Fest Small Gauge Film Festival, Homocore Detroit, *Schmear The Queer*, and *Out/Word*, a newsletter for LGBT and/or HIV-affected prisoners. Jobs held include: secretary, record-store clerk, shop steward, server, and radio producer. He currently leads the team at the Images Festival. Scott very rarely posts here: <http://cineparlour.tumblr.com>