

Getting Over The Woman Problem: Creating An Inclusive Film Industry Through Reclaiming The Frame

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Abstract

In this interview with Mia Bays (*Birds' Eye View*), we discuss the recent Reclaim The Frame project, a year-long UK-wide touring programme that showcases female directed or scripted films, usually new or recent releases. The interview explores the idea that this kind of curation is a necessary feminist intervention in the contemporary British cinema circuit, one that offers audiences agency and acknowledges that initiatives in film production alone are not sufficient to shift structural inequalities in the film industry. The piece begins with some contextual detail before turning to my discussion with Bays.

Keywords: gender (in)equality, audiences, curation, film industry

‘We thought we’d fixed the woman problem... and it’s got worse’ – Mia Bays, Director-at-Large, *Birds' Eye View*.

What is the woman problem in film, and what actions can be taken – in the industry, at film festivals, in distribution and marketing, within academia – to tackle it? On one level, the woman problem is a matter of statistical record we see across mainstream Hollywood, British and Western European cinema. The 2018 ‘Women and Hollywood’ report showed that, of the top 500 grossing films released in the USA in 2017, women comprised 23 per cent of directors and 6 per cent of cinematographers. This unequal gender divide behind the scenes impacts on on-screen representation too; the 2017 report demonstrates that on the films that had at least one female director, women were twice as likely to have the most significant role in the film (45 per cent versus 24 per cent.)¹ Similarly, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded project ‘Calling the Shots: Women directors and cinematographers on British Film since 2003’ found that women made up 14 percent of directors and 7 per cent of cinematographers in the period 2003–2015.² The French Centre Nationale du cinéma et de l’image animée (CNC) carries out major statistical analysis of the French film industry; for the last five years this has included an annual report into gender equality in the industry. This report also provides comparative data across Europe. Its March 2019 report showed that 27 per cent of French films were directed or co-directed by a woman in 2017. They found that France compared well to southern European countries, with 10.1 percent of Italian films and 14.2 per cent of Spanish films directed by women, and was on a par with Denmark and Finland (both on 25 per cent). They also found that women were likely to work with lower budgets than men – in 2017, the average film budget for women in France was 3.5 million euros, some two million euros less than the male average. The lack of female directors relative to male directors has repercussions in terms of who is more likely to be hired – women are more likely to choose to work with other women and promote them – and what gets shown on screen. Furthermore, the smaller budgets women directors work with imply that women directors are still seen as a

bigger commercial risk than men. The highest budget accorded to a French female director from 2006–2016 is to Agnès Jaoui for *Let's talk about the Rain/ Parlons de la pluie* (2008) with 12.2 million euros. The highest overall budget is 50.8 million euros, for Mathieu Kassovitz's *Babylon A.D.* (2008).³

The woman problem goes beyond these numerical facts. There is also the question of how women are treated within the industry. One of the most culturally prestigious and internationally famous film festivals, Cannes, is notorious both for the bad behaviour it tolerated/enabled from film producer Harvey Weinstein and the lack of representation of female directors in the main competition for the Palme d'Or. Notoriously, in 2012, not a single film in competition was directed by a woman, and by 2019, this number had only risen to four out of twenty one. According to critic Kate Muir, the lack of space for female-helmed films and the sexual abuse directed at female actors are linked:

Cannes itself is a two-week celebration of male brains and female beauty, as a walk down the Croisette in the evening will attest ... Many wheelers, dealers and producers still parade with paid-for models or prostitutes on their arms, which makes female film-makers deeply uneasy about what, precisely, is valued by the money men.⁴

The 50/50 by 2020 Collectif, launched in Cannes in May 2018 with a highly symbolic parade of eighty-two women on the famous steps of the Palais du Festival, aims to achieve gender equality in the film industry. It is campaigning for film festivals to have gender balanced selection committees and juries as well as considering the number of female directors represented in competition. Following lobbying by the Collectif, in September 2018, French Culture Minister Françoise Nyssen announced a 15 per cent production bonus for any CNC-funded film with equality in its above-the-line posts; this has been applied from January 2019.⁵

The stark truth is that women are under-represented both on-screen and off-screen, across differing national cinemas. Whether these films are destined for multiplex cinemas, streaming platforms or the film-festival circuit; women are paid less; they have smaller budgets; they are more likely to suffer sexual harassment; they are less likely to have the most significant part in a film and be the central character. Film festival culture has a vital part to play, both in creating better structures for women to work within and in showcasing work by female directors. Toronto International Film Festival 2019 had an equal number of films directed by women in its Gala lineup. Festivals are only the beginning of a film's journey toward finding its audience, however. They might start a buzz about a film, but in an increasingly crowded market-place, can being directed by a woman actually help a film to acquire a commercial edge? Can we change the tone of the conversation? Women's difficulties – in accessing fair representation; in getting money together to make films; in articulating a female/feminist perspective in a media savvy way – can actually be mobilised as radical way of rethinking the notion of female difference. The film festival alone cannot do this, but some of its characteristics, such as allowing audiences access to filmmakers and critics, and creating a sense of spectacle and event around a film release, can be exploited to enable this to happen. This is the vision of the Reclaim

the Frame initiative. For Mia Bays, the dynamic director-at-large of Birds' Eye View, which runs the Reclaim the Frame scheme, feminist activist conversation has to be ongoing. It is not enough to have one or two weeks a year where attention is drawn to the issue of female authorship in film. Women need fair representation all year round. In an interview recorded in March 2019 and through giving me access to the May 2019 interim report on Reclaim The Frame to the British Film Institute (BFI) board, Bays has provided me with the opportunity to analyse one of the most significant interventions occurring in the contemporary UK cinema circuit for women and film.

Sarah Franklin's work on sexism demonstrates that it is a form of reproduction.⁶ By this, she means that sexist institutions and the institutional sexism they support build a world dedicated to maintaining existing structures, as well as the forms of aspiration, imagination and habitual perception that shape their development over time. From a socialist/feminist perspective, reproduction is also the supplement to production, the unpaid or low paid feminised work such as housework and childcare that is private, taken-for-granted, and rigidly policed. This reproductive work – work of care and sustenance – shores up a system of cultural values and normative discourses that tells us who and what matters. Franklin draws attention to how the academy reproduces itself in its citational practice, and through using the term 'reproduction' links this to patterns of care and value attributed to masculine and feminine attributed labour.⁷ Reclaim The Frame interrupts the work of reproducing British film culture. It not only spotlights female labour in the film industry, it also challenges audiences to think differently about the notion of a 'great' director. Franklin's work allows us to see how this may also be part of a broader movement rethinking reproductive film culture, such as the Raising Films pressure group aiming to improve conditions for filmmaker parents and carers.⁸

Birds' Eye View was founded in 2003 by Rachel Millwood and Penny Grylls. It launched as a film festival dedicated to showcasing the work of female directors and was supported financially by the UK Film Council and took place at the BFI Southbank, London. By the time Bays was invited to run Filmonomics, a female film-maker career and project development programme, in 2014, the project was out of steam. It had lost funding and the people involved were exhausted. Bays saw her chance to do something different with the brand. Rather than a static film festival model, where most of the energy and focus is on one location and one week, Birds' Eye View was reinvented as a year-round touring programme, with incentivised screenings to bring 'ever greater audiences to films by women'. It would support a variety of cinemas around the country offering audiences the opportunity to watch a film directed or written by a woman, discuss the film after, and undertake some kind of related activity such as a writing workshop or craft event. For filmmaker Deborah Haywood, whose film *Pincushion* (2017) was promoted by Reclaim The Frame, the package was 'like the film equivalent of pushing the turbo-charge button on the Hoover.'⁹

The pilot scheme was launched in May 2018 with *Revenge* (Coralie Fargeat, 2017), followed by *Pincushion* (Deborah Haywood, 2017), *Faces Places* (Agnès Varda and JR, 2017), and *The Rider* (Chloé Zhao, 2017). The pilot was successful – 'it proved that there was audience and industry appetite and that we were filling a niche.' Phase Two started in October 2018 and will

run until March 2020, and so far *Been So Long* (Tinge Krishnan, 2018) and *The Kindergarten Teacher* (Sara Colangelo, 2019) have been the selected films. The project started with six cinemas in five cities (London, Birmingham, Manchester, Newcastle and Plymouth), which with the increased funding awarded Phase Two has now expanded to ten (Glasgow, Leeds, Sheffield, Brighton and Exeter). Alongside the specialised releases supported by the BFI, there is also a Reclaim The Frame plus strand paid for by the distributor, such as for *Wild Rose* (Tom Harper, 2018), showing the value accorded to these promotional and marketing activities, and a focus on revisiting classic, under-screened films by women, or where a female contribution has been under-promoted. The latter strand started with the ‘Woman and Obsession’ Double Bill of *Dance with a Stranger* (Mike Newell, 1985) and *Smooth Talk* (Joyce Chopra, 1985). Through including films directed by men working from a female authored script, such as *Dance with a Stranger* and *Wild Rose*, Reclaim The Frame spotlights the varied roles women can play in film and its authorship, opening up questions of creativity and authority.

Reclaim The Frame is a multi-site feminist consciousness-raising exercise. It brings films of different genres, from different production contexts, in different languages, with directors from different ethnicities, to open up an inclusive, welcoming space. It imagines a British film culture that is open, diverse, and exploratory, making concrete the links between feminist and intersectional politics, and reminding us that film cultures occur as much in the crucible of distribution and exhibition as they do in production. Women are perceived as difficult in an industry that still operates overwhelmingly through male norms. The name Reclaim The Frame explicitly grounds the project in a feminist politics informed by Simone de Beauvoir’s famous declaration that ‘humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself, but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being ... He is the Subject; he is the Absolute – she is the Other.’¹⁰ Reclaim The Frame shows how mainstream cinema’s narratives and perspectives are male rather than universal, asking audiences to consider the gender bias in how men and women get represented in film. The stated ambition of the Reclaim The Frame project – to provide ever greater audiences for films by women – asks us to reframe questions of activism, film history, curation, and feminism. Shelley Cobb and Linda Williams argue that the process of recording interviews with female directors currently working in the UK film industry is an intervention within film history, recalling Christine Gledhill’s argument that the feminist film historian is not one who supplements the archives or textbooks by adding the missing women, but one who actively remakes history.¹¹ Their interviews document the female creative labour within the contemporary British film industry; they are also making the historic and political case for a more gender-attentive approach to film history. Cobb and Williams also situate their project as an opportunity to unite academic enquiry with film practice. The documentation of the Reclaim The Frame project at this stage in its evolution, as it enters its ‘turbo-charged’ phase, allows for a similar approach to distribution and exhibition, and the role of female producers, programmers, and curators. Throughout this interview, we see the significance of mutually supportive networks of women in positions to promote each other’s work, and how the problem of getting female filmmakers’ work to audiences does not end with the finished film – it is here that the journey begins. Reclaim The Frame’s ‘Vintage’ strand explicitly engages with feminist revising of film history, spotlighting neglected female contributions to film, but equally its inclusion of a diverse range of contemporary female

directed or scripted films provides future audiences and film scholars with a richer and more diverse feminist-inflected cinematic canon from 2017–2020.

For Bays, the first step for a feminist intervention with audiences is consciousness-raising: making the audience aware both of what female directed and/or scripted films are available; how they might centre a story differently; and giving the audience the power and agency to be more demanding film viewers. The issue is not one of production, in a time when it is (relatively) cheap and easy to make a film. As Bays points out, eight hundred films a year are released into UK cinemas. She explains: in this environment, ‘for independent film anyway it’s a struggle, to get access to cinemas, to really penetrate the market, to be culturally lifted up, and women’s films that are independent, low-budget, often documentary, very often not star-driven, therefore don’t have a big marketing budget, you know we say in the industry, they don’t get a release, they escape’. To be a bit polemical about it – what is the point of more women making films if these films never get seen? The problem then is how to help a film find its audience, and how to help an audience find a way to a more gender balanced cinematic diet. This is particularly an issue with the 18–35 age range, especially targeted by the BFI’s audience outreach work and notoriously tricky for art-house/indie cinemas to attract. As Bays explains, ‘An older audience rely on critics, but a younger audience don’t so much, at all.’ The industry has to think more carefully about how to help audiences seek out films and be able to experience them on the cinema screen.

At the same time, Bays is determined not to ghettoise or essentialise, aiming for as broad a range of films as possible. There is no one singular ‘woman’s perspective’. *The Rider* exemplifies the ethos:

so we screened *The Rider* which is an amazing film, which was on the top 10 of lots of critics’ lists last year, second feature by Chloé Zhao, which is entirely centred on a male experience, and we had a lot of people saying ‘Why are you promoting this film? She’s done nothing for women!’ But women can tell really great stories about men. And why would we dictate what stories women tell? Women don’t have to tell stories about women. That’s a real problem, that perspective. It was really great to have a film that centred masculinity from a female perspective. And he was a Lakota Sioux man, so, you know, and her gaze is Chinese-American, and for us that was fascinating. I’ve never seen a film through those eyes before. So for us it was really important to be able to shine a light on films that had some kind of extraordinary element to them. We realised afterwards, unconsciously, we had picked films that all did something extraordinary. So we’re not necessarily saying these are the best films, these are perfect films, we’re not saying anything really, we’re just saying these are interesting perspectives.

Simone de Beauvoir’s dictum is inflected with a philosophy Teresa de Lauretis might recognise. Plurality of perspectives and a deliberately intersectional approach show female filmmakers not as Woman but as women, and hopefully advance too the representation of men and women on screen. Woman is ‘a fictional construct, a distillate from diverse but congruent

discourses dominant in Western cultures’ whereas women are ‘real historical beings who cannot as yet be defined outside of these discursive formations, but whose material existence is nonetheless certain’.¹² Showcasing the diversity of stories women filmmakers engage with positions women as flesh-and-blood subjects who are actively involved in making meaning, rather than symbolic constructs. Rather than the familiar ‘Mulveyian’ anti-illusionist, avant-garde cinema of unpleasure, we find a resolute defence of narrative form and the power of stories: ‘film culture is how we represent ourselves in the world, film’s such a powerful medium, everyone relates to the importance of the medium and why representation and inclusion matters.’

Prior to her involvement with *Birds’ Eye View*, Bays had worked for seven years as a producer for Microwave, Film London and the BBC’s microbudget feature film scheme. It was her experience at Microwave that convinced Bays that the industry has a woman problem:

we made seven movies over seven years, and only one was by a woman. And so I was one of the commissioners, and then the creative producer on the scheme. And when I left, that felt like the big failing. We’d done very well on diversity, working-class voices, supporting new, debut filmmakers, a really great broad range, but only one woman out of seven. And so this turn towards the female perspective and supporting female filmmakers was a sort of reaction.... And I think also conversations were starting to be had around that time. In the industry there was a new data study around that time that showed nothing had changed in ten years.

As this initial iteration of *Birds’ Eye View* was coming to the end of its funding, Bays seized her opportunity to use her influence, and take *Birds’ Eye View* in a new direction. She started to have conversations within the industry, pushing for a new approach that focused on the audience, explaining: ‘It felt like there were an enormous amount of conversations around we need to make more films by women because we’re reacting to the data, but actually, realising that’s a tiny part of the problem. You can make loads more films by women, you can finance them, but if the worldwide distribution sector doesn’t buy them, they’re unseen, and if they’re unseen, what’s that doing for anyone? And it’s a deep philosophical problem we have!’

Bays relishes the opportunities Reclaim The Frame events open up for a more inclusive arena for audience interaction, beyond the usual Question & Answer session:

one night only, it’s not filmed, if you’re not there you’ve missed it. It’s a call to action, there’s a reason to go to this particular show. We always line up interesting speakers who relate to the film, either through its content or its perspective, and we do some other kind of activity. And it’s a conversation about a film, so we call it A&Q, not Q&A. And part of it was a reaction to being bored, deeply bored, with Q&As, which are deeply hierarchical, very gendered – who feels confident enough to speak? And a big massive observation is smuggled into a question and they’re just problematic. And even the most interesting people, who might have made a film you loved, might not be interesting talking about their work. And you get

generic questions so everyone ends up sounding a bit the same. And conversations are much more interesting to listen to than staccato Q&A [...] maybe there's a female perspective here too. We don't want hierarchy here, so how do we re-invent that bit too. We wanted it to be inclusive, we wanted to be welcoming, we wanted men to feel welcome. We wanted that anyone, however they represent themselves, feels happy to speak. We wanted to create a flat line across, not a pyramid of 'we're the experts' who you must listen passively to. The point is, we all respond to the film and then we ask what the audience think, we say quite stridently we don't want reviews, because that's annoying!

The opportunity to undertake an activity in addition to participating in an A&Q is also part of Reclaim The Frame's approach to inclusivity:

People who don't feel they want to engage in the conversation, they can talk to us afterwards in a smaller setting. When we showed *Pincushion* we made pincushions. And the catharsis of doing something while talking allowed for some really deep conversations and confessions. Someone might say very quietly 'I really identified with that, it happened to me.' It's such a privilege to hear this. So we work very hard at opening the space up for everyone, and sometimes that's opening it up widely, and other times making it more intimate.

Bays recalls one incident that illustrates the impact creating a different, inclusive space can have (and incidentally shows the importance of Reclaim The Frame's geographical range):

Some of our best moments have been in Plymouth. When we took Deborah Haywood who did *Pincushion* to Plymouth, there was this girl who was really young, 19 or 20, and she was really thin, and very shy, and she was with a friend of hers. She was kind of skulking in the corner. Deborah and I were in the bar, and I think we were making pincushions, or maybe we were just inviting people to come over and speak to us, and this friend came over and said my friend will never come over, because she's really shy, but she's actually a filmmaker and she'd love to talk to you. I said 'bring her over' and he said, 'no, she's way too shy, she just won't come, I've tried.' And so I said, 'well ok, we'll come to her, will that be OK, will she stay?', because it really was that delicate, it looked like she was going to bolt, and she was a bit agitated. So we went over and spoke to her, and she said, 'No-one comes to Plymouth, and I want to be a filmmaker', the thing is she was already making films but she wouldn't own it...[...] Deborah said, she said the first thing you have to do is to own that, you're a filmmaker. Deborah is a lovely soul, and she intuited something, and I left them to it. We had some posters with us, and Deborah signed if for her, and she cried, it was really touching [...] That could be the moment for that girl. It just shows you what can happen when you create an inclusive space, and you pay attention.

The decision to go to smaller, more remote cities such as Newcastle and especially Plymouth underlines Reclaim The Frame's regional agenda. Part of the impetus for including Plymouth Arts Cinema and Newcastle's Tyneside Cinema was that Bays had discussed the project with the cinemas' programmers when she met them on a female leadership course, Women in Exhibition. Both Anna Navas, Film Programmer in Plymouth, and Holli Keeble, the Chief Executive at Tyneside in Newcastle, responded with great enthusiasm and commitment. Crucially, Navas and Keeble are the decision-makers in their cinemas, rather than needing to consult more widely, and were able to offer immediate buy-in: 'So they were very central to shaping it, so we immediately knew that Plymouth would be a really good place, and Anna was saying we need this ... Our audiences would really respond, there's nothing else like this, we really need this, and we need your help, we can't do this by ourselves, there's too much work to do to everyday just running the cinema. You need outside help. So we create the framework, and that makes it much easier for them.'

Reclaim The Frame builds a grassroots activist thirst for more female directed/written cinema, and takes a markedly intersectional approach, considering the many barriers to access for audiences, primarily cost and location. Reclaim The Frame's ambition to grow the audience for female directed films is warm, inviting and celebratory in tone, aiming to bring people in. It does not want to criticise or blame the industry but rather looks to highlight what is available, and position itself as part of the industry rather than an agitator outside it. Nevertheless, there is a politics of curation and viewing asserted here. Reclaim The Frame asserts the importance of film viewing as a collective, communal act, promoting the cinema itself as a potentially activist space. Bays argues that 'often cinemas are community spaces, and people don't have village halls, and town halls anymore, so cinema can have an important function. And we wanted to help with that sense of community, holding events in a particular cinema'. Reclaim The Frame also encourages interested people to sign up as influencers, which enables them to attend a screening for free as long as they are accompanied by someone buying a ticket. There were 356 influencers at the project's launch and, as of July 2019, there are 778.¹³ The influencers offer something more than a means of generating a bigger audience. They enable people to feel invested themselves in the broader aims of the project, to raise awareness of films by women, and issues of gender and representation: 'The point was to align conscious consumerism with activism with film-going, film loving. It was to say to the audience you're powerful, because what you decide to see and not see makes a difference.' Reclaim The Frame has an uncompromising proposition at its heart: things have got to change, in production, in distribution, and in exhibition. The audience can be part of this change.

Rather than effectively previewing films, as a film festival does, Reclaim The Frame decided to work with films just as they were coming out, in either their opening weekend or in the coming week. Part of the logic behind this was to make a maximum impact and help a film possibly stay longer on screens, and to keep a sense of freshness. For Bays, the cinema is still the space 'where you make culturally and commercially the most impact.' The two films I saw in Plymouth from this slate – *Revenge* and *Faces Places* – testify to the variety of films and the types of discussions they lent themselves to, while also both foregrounding the issue of perspective (who frames the image? The story?) *Revenge* is a gory, blood-and-guts rape-

revenge movie, borrowing from a range of references such as Wes Craven, Quentin Tarantino, and Park Chan-wook, and was director Coralie Fargeat's debut feature length-film. The first minutes of the film show us stereotypes of cinematic masculinity and femininity as Richard (Kevin Janssens) and Jen (Matilda Lutz) arrive at his hunting lodge by helicopter. Richard is very wealthy and very married, phoning his absent wife; Jen is very pretty and very sexy, scantily clad in pants and a cropped T-shirt reading 'I [Heart] LA', happy to be Richard's plaything. When Richard's two friends arrive early, the camera work exaggerates the men's longing gazes at her body as she performs a titillating dance. The next morning, Richard leaves on an errand, and Jen is left alone with Stan (Vincent Colombe) and Dimitri (Guillaume Bouchede). Stan approaches Jen for sex, and when she refuses, asks 'what is it you don't like about me?', annoyed by her change from desirable object to non-consenting woman. He rapes her, and the sound design lets us experience the trauma; Dimitri turns up the sound on the television to drown out her screams. Upon her boyfriend's return, Jen begs to go. He prefers to leave her for dead in a desert canyon after the men find she won't simply keep quiet about her rape. From here on in, Jen undergoes a quasi-supernatural transformation into an avenging warrior. The conversation following the film honed in precisely on questions of consent and judgement about heterosexual women's desire to attract a male gaze. *Faces Places* is a documentary co-directed by veteran Agnès Varda and street photographer JR. The pair undertake a road trip in JR's customised van, pasting up huge photographs of the people they meet on their travels. They also discuss Varda's fading eyesight, and the film finishes with JR removing his trademark dark sunglasses. Varda has teased him about the glasses, and recalled how she managed to get Jean-Luc Godard to remove his when he played a cameo role in *Cleo from 5 to 7*/*Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962). The film teases us, as the image of JR without glasses is blurred and indistinct, as if we were seeing through Varda's perspective. In Varda's typically ludic style, the film constantly plays with questions of viewing. Afterwards, the conversation was ruminative and wide-ranging, considering what role art plays in people's lives and what it means to live in a world where we constantly take photographs of each other and of ourselves.

There was a desire to allow audiences insights into topics films address. Bays explains that:

We've been touring *The Kindergarten Teacher* which is psychologically very powerful. So we've had child psychologists. It's about the relationship between a teacher and her pupil who she thinks is a gifted poet, a prodigy, and she becomes obsessed with him, she thinks he needs to be fed and nurtured, in a kind of Mozart type way, so she starts crossing all kinds of boundaries that she shouldn't be. So there's loads to unpack. So we had child psychologists as part of the discussions. Amazing conversations, because they could relate it to their practice. And we love using psychologists, and often we pair them with filmmakers. And we did it with *Pincushion* which is a wonderful British film about bullying and the after effects and trauma of bullying on a mother and daughter. And it comes from a real place for the film maker. And so we paired her, Deborah Haywood, with psychologists, so they weren't reviewing it, but they were talking about why the film was so interesting to them [...] and those conversations were absolutely fabulous. And the actress Joanna Scanlon who played the mother in the film and Deborah loved those

conversations because there were all these readings and real-world perspectives on the film.

With the two British films screened so far, *Pincushion* and *Been So Long*, Reclaim The Frame was able to facilitate the audience meeting the filmmakers and cast. Typically, audiences are not encouraged to meet filmmakers, even during Q&As, which take place on a stage. Although this was not an outcome envisaged at the planning stage, Haywood and Krishnan both benefited enormously from the experience of watching their films alongside an audience: ‘what landed, what worked with particular audiences. To hear it from the horse’s mouth, and not to just follow the reviews. Because those films had had some good reviews, but also some bad reviews, usually from idiot male reviewers who just didn’t get the film at all.’ Both filmmakers had experienced setbacks in terms of the film getting onto cinema screens. After *Pincushion* opened at the Venice Film festival, it didn’t get picked up by the London Film Festival and secure distribution in the UK. The BFI, who funded the film, invited Birds’ Eye View to view it, and they worked hard to help the film secure distribution. In the case of *Been So Long*, Netflix had acquired rights, but both Krishnan and producers Nadine Marsh-Edwards and Amanda Jenks were keen for it to get a theatrical release.¹⁴ It was a real coup for Reclaim The Frame to secure this, given the commercial sensitivities involved, and all events were day-and-date with the Netflix premiere, apart from the two London events which were previews. The tour for *Been So Long* expanded to eleven venues at the request of Netflix to help meet BAFTA qualification criteria, showing the significance of securing a theatrical as well as a streaming release for cultural visibility. When the films finally got to their intended audiences, their response was affirming and confidence building for Haywood and Krishnan: ‘both of them felt uncertain about what they’d created. And the tour as it went on completely revived them, it was this amazing like, like a creative vitamin shot [...] Both of them are creatively confident at the moment, and I’m really proud of that.’

Developing mutually supportive relations between female creatives recalls the discussion above about the significant role played by Navas and Keeble in bringing Reclaim The Frame to cinemas in Plymouth and Newcastle. While there is a necessary focus on the number (or lack thereof) of female directors, is this in the end an auteurist focus coming from an academic perspective rather than one alive to the collaborative and networked nature of the film industry? Reclaim The Frame highlights the importance of programmers, curators, distributors and critics in creating a better environment for female filmmakers. Birds’ Eye View is intervening to try to get more women into positions where they are the decision-makers. The Future Leaders in Distribution training is aimed at women with more than seven years’ experience in distribution. It aims to get more women into executive roles and raise their consciousness around the female perspective: ‘Because, of course, if they work for the distribution companies, they’re working on everything. And a lot of them work for the studios and some of them work in the indie sector, so what we do is ‘radicalise’ them, well make them aware, because a lot of them are not. You know, simply saying “you’ve been in distribution for ten years, how many films by women have you worked on?”, they’ve not thought about it, so we start by getting them to pay attention.’

Bays believes critics have a responsibility to realise their own view of film quality is not objective, but always from a place of inevitable bias. Generally, white male critics still dominate and have difficulty appreciating films that clearly do not target their demographic. As Bays explains,

We've got a female critic on our board, Kate Muir, and we work with a lot of female film critics, and we talk to them a lot about what we do with that problem. You can't give a great review to every film by a woman if you don't believe it, we've got to believe that we like it. But how much you notice the male perspective just doesn't get particular types of stories, and dismisses it as bad. That's what happened with *Been So Long*. It centres two black people falling in love, and that's really all that happens. And [rapper and activist] Akala did an intro saying this is the most political film of the year, because it's about black people falling in love and that's it, nothing else [...] A lot of white male critics dismissed it, that it wasn't very well made. And that's not just a thing you can level at it. And I know it's well made. I mean, you can not get it, and say, that's not really for me, but that's not one of the criticisms. There's such an issue around when a white privileged male does not see himself represented in a story, just then dismisses it on a craft level. There's a pattern to it.

It brings us back full-circle to the issue of confidence Bays brought up earlier in our conversation. Contrast the confidence levels of the young girl in Plymouth who is too shy to approach Haywood and claim her ambition to make films, to those of the critic happy to dismiss out of hand a film that is not designed to tell a story that will have particular resonance for him. Reclaim The Frame creates a small space within the vast film business where everyone's opinions and ideas have an equal value and weight. At the same time, Bays stresses that critics should be made aware of their disproportionate influence.

MB: Last year over two hundred British films were made and two per cent of them were made by women of colour. So *Been So Long* was probably that. So when you, a British critic dismiss that...OK, you may not know that statistic, but you know you don't watch many British films that centre black experience in that way, you certainly know that, and when you see the name Tinge Krishnan you know it's been directed by a woman, and you don't see her perspective very often. Not her individual one, but that woman of colour perspective. And you would know that, you get the production notes. We centre and idealise our filmmakers enough, you would have done your due diligence. So to dismiss all that, and to just say the film's bad. You're being racist. You're actually being racist. You don't have to like the film. But recognise that those stories are so rare, so acknowledge that, and that it's not for you. Otherwise you've just help close a door that's been hard fought for, and hard won. And so much is riding on that one film. And Michaela Cole – the star of that film – so much rests on her shoulders. They are so few black female British stars [...] Actually, I got angry [laughs]. There was one critic who just dismissed it and I just said 'no-one cares what you think!' I just went back, and

Michaela Cole told me off, because she said you're doing all this amazing work creating inclusive spaces, and then you just shut someone down. And I just said 'well, it's because, here I really think...

FH: Well, there are just moments, aren't there?

MB: There are moments.... Yeah. Yeah! That was the only thing I thought to say. And you know interestingly, when I saw him a couple of months later, he said sorry. He said 'you were right.' So it did make him think, he just didn't need to say it. He was doing a review tweet, it wasn't an official review, so it felt really spiteful and pointless. So part of the job is to say we all have a responsibility. And you, a white male, I don't know if you're privileged, but you have stories made for you all the time, and maybe this just isn't for you, and that's part of why you've dismissed it. What's that all about? Ask yourself that question. Don't make the film answer that question for you.

In Bays' strikingly articulate discussion of a moment of real anger and frustration, where she felt her only recourse was to tell someone to shut up, we might recognise a moment of 'feminist snap'.¹⁵ According to Sara Ahmed, feminist snap is 'a moment when you just can't take it anymore' and 'feminism can be what happens in those moments [...] black feminism and feminism of colour, when amidst the hustle and bustle of everyday life, something is revealed to you about a world you had assumed as accommodating'.¹⁶ Equally, Ahmed reminds us, snap is also what we say when we say the same thing at the same time. Snap can be a moment of recognition. In Bays' anecdote, and my reaction to it in the interview, we have both examples of snap – Bays' anger as she experiences the sexism and racism of the film critic, and the culture he represents, and our shared moment of recognition as she recounts the story that anger is a necessary tool; that feminism has to have moments at least where it is difficult, where it jams the system. Bays' snap moment also forced a moment of recognition from the critic of his own assumptions. Bays explains that:

post #MeToo and #TimesUp, the whole conversation around gender equality, how women are seen, how women are represented, how women are treated, accelerated. You don't have to convince anybody about what we're doing. There was lots more resistance before. There's still questions about how things are framed. Like 'hasn't the woman thing gone far enough?' [laughter]. I love that one. You get that from audiences, you get it from industry too but much more subtly.

The thorny issue for feminism remains. Is the better strategy one that encourages women, seeks out positive stories of success, and celebrates female achievement? Or should feminism remain angry, pointing out injustice and oppression, and seek justice and recompense? Bays responds that:

It's hard. You have to really evolve. The language changes so quickly, the language around feminism, and a lot of the conversations we're participating in

are on social media, which is an extreme space. And we're living in polarised times anyway, so you have to find a way to fit into that. What is your tone of voice? We can be quite punchy, and we certainly call things out. We identify as agitators, but maybe a little more playful. But we also own that we are industry too. The balance there.... I don't find that too difficult. We're not campaigners...well we are, we're running a campaign, but we're not asking the industry for change. We're not being specific about what the ask is. I think for us it's more actions not words, that suffragette slogan, and lead by example.

In this account of Reclaim The Frame, the 'leading by example' is happening at the moment. It is feminist film history happening before our eyes, alive and slippery, and reminds us of the ongoing nature of the work being done, as women – with difficulty – reclaim the frame.

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¹ 'Women and Hollywood' (2018). Report available at:

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² Shelley Cobb, Linda Williams & Natalie Wreyford, 'Calling the Shots: Women Working as Directors and Cinematographers on British Films Since 2003' (2018), 1. Report available at: <https://s25407.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Calling-the-Shots-Report-Feb-2018-Women-directors-and-cinematographers.pdf> [accessed 20 November 2019].

³ Audiens and the Centre Nationale du cinema et de l'image animée, 'La place des femmes dans l'industrie cinématographique et audiovisuelle' (2018, 2019). Reports available at: <https://www.cnc.fr/documents/36995/927212/La+place+des+femmes+dans+l%27industrie+cin%C3%A9matographique+et+audiovisuelle.pdf/80d9741a-dbbf-c8b6-5fb6-545272bcc393> [accessed 20 October 2019].

⁴ Kate Muir quoted in Andrew Pulver, 'Cannes in Crisis: Has the Festival Learned the Lessons of Weinstein', *Guardian*, 4 May 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/may/04/cannes-crisis-lessons-weinstein-scandal> [accessed 20 November 2019].

⁵ 'Le Collectif 50/50', 17 May 2019: http://collectif5050.com/docs/COLLECTIF_50_50-PressKit_Friday-May-17th.pdf [accessed 20 November 2019].

⁶ Sarah Franklin, 'Sexism as a Means of Reproduction: Some Reflections on Feminism in the Academy', *New Formations*, 86 (2015), 14–33.

⁷ *Ibid.* 31

⁸ <https://www.raisingfilms.com> [accessed 20 November 2019].

⁹ 'RECLAIM THE FRAME PHASE II: Interim Report BFI + Board Report', 15 May 2019.

¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (trans. H. M. Parshley), New York: Knopf, 1997, p. 3.

¹¹ Shelley Cobb and Linda Williams, 'Histories of Now: Listening to Women in British Film', *Women's History Review* (forthcoming 2019).

¹² Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 5.

¹³ RECLAIM THE FRAME PHASE II: Interim Report BFI + Board Report', 15 May 2019.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, 'Snap!', 21 May 2017: <https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/05/21/snap/> [accessed 20 November 2019].

¹⁶ *Ibid.*