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An Interview with Terry Wragg on the Work of the Leeds Animation Workshop

ABSTRACT Based in the city of Leeds in the north of England, Leeds Animation Workshop describes itself as a “not-for-profit, cooperative company, which produces and distributes animated films and films on social and educational issues.” The organization was formally established in 1978 following a collaboration by a group of women on the film *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* In this interview Terry Wragg, a member of the group since that founding period, talks with Yvonne Tasker about funding patterns, filmmaking, the women’s movement, and the significance of the workshop movement in the United Kingdom. **KEYWORDS** animation, feminist filmmaking, Leeds Animation Workshop, Terry Wragg, women’s movement

YVONNE TASKER: Why did Leeds Animation Workshop choose to focus on animation, rather than live-action filmmaking?

TERRY WRAGG: Animation was much more accessible, in a couple of different senses. Mostly, we didn’t have access to cameras. I didn’t even have access to a still camera at the point when I started making animated films. It’s difficult for people nowadays to understand just what limited access there was then to the technology of making pictures. Whereas with animation, all you really needed was pencil, paper, and paints, which was familiar territory. The technique we were using was cel animation—*cel* is short for celluloid. We would fill these packing boxes with cels, all arranged into scenes and sequences, and take them down to London on the train to be shot by the rostrum camera people near Soho Square. After they shot it, we would take the film ’round the corner to the labs in Meard Street for developing, and then they would send it back to us via Red Star British Rail parcel service. Then we’d review it on a projector, or we would go into the film labs and look at it on their viewer, and edit it all together.

With the first film, we didn’t make any attempt at editing. We just stuck it together—rather to its detriment as a finished work of art, in my humble opinion. I would really like to chop a lot of it out now. But anyway, that was how we made the first few films: taking loads of cels down to London to be shot by the rostrum camera people.

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FIGURE 1. Terry Wragg, founding member of Leeds Animation Workshop.

YT: At what point were you able to produce work here in Leeds?

TW: Although we didn't get any revenue funding from Channel 4, they gave us an equipment grant: we got our rostrum camera and our fantastic Steenbeck editing machine, which is very, very nice. Both of them are still here, and working. Initially we housed our rostrum camera at Yorkshire Arts. We got one of the two or three rostrum camerawomen in the world, Begonia Tamarit, to give us a crash course in how to work it and we started shooting our own stuff (fig. 2). Bingo, we had our own means of production.

YT: Your films aren't just educational, but they can be used in that way. They seem designed to promote discussion.

TW: That is one of the things that animation can do well—to return to my earlier observation, it's another sense in which the medium is very accessible. Because animation is so condensed, and uses symbols instead of real people, it helps you understand different points of view very succinctly. We have always been pleased that our work has been used in certain kinds of training. And we never wanted to make training films that were all about pie charts.

One of the things that *Give Us a Smile* (fig. 3, 1983) achieved is that it has been used a lot in police training, and so hopefully contributed to many real improvements in the way women are treated by the police. There is a live-action strand that is the story of a woman reporting a sexual attack and the police questioning her. All the things the police say in the film are direct quotes. We had phone calls from

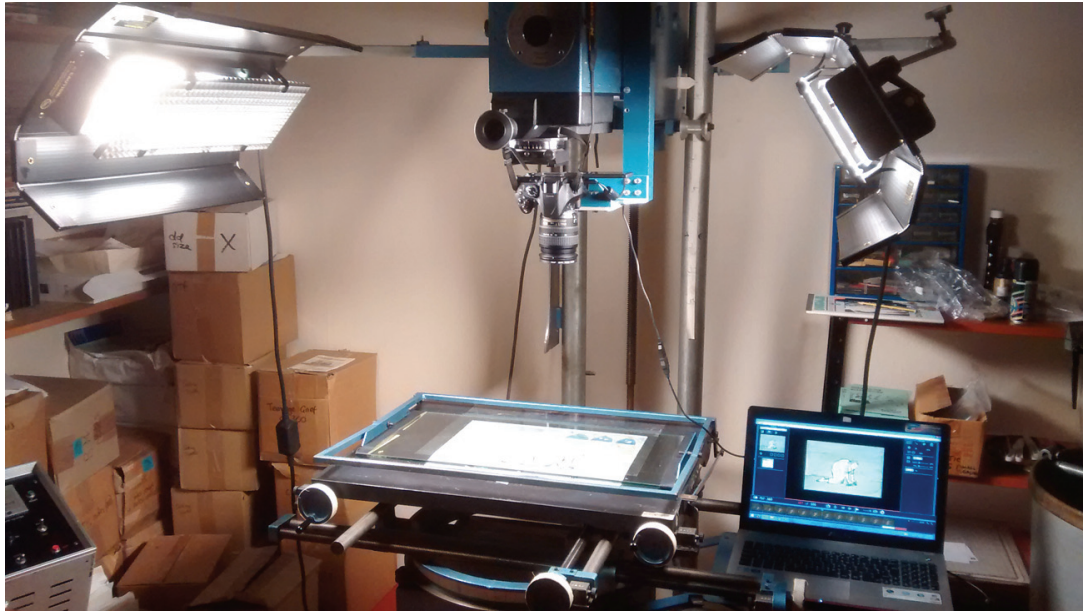


FIGURE 2. Animating *They Call Us Maids: The Domestic Workers' Story*, 2015, with the rostrum camera. (© Leeds Animation Workshop)

people who train the police, saying how our film was helping to change attitudes. They were really supportive of our work.

YT: *Give Us a Smile* is still a powerful film about the sexual harassment of women in public places. Can you talk about the ideas behind the work and the context for its production?

TW: *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* (1978) and *Risky Business* (1980) each took us a couple of years, and then we made *Pretend You'll Survive* (1981), which came out of a lot of our activities and interests then; we were very involved with nuclear disarmament. *Pretend You'll Survive* was selected for the animation section of the 1981 London Film Festival. The festival had two animation programs, the British program and the world program. Gillian Lacey and I went to see both of them. We were the only women directors of any of the featured animations, and our character in our film was the only female main character. She was also the only woman character in any of those films who had clothes on. Some of the others had female subsidiary characters, but they were naked or wearing bikinis. Well, one or two of them were dressed but pushing a Hoover—in one case wearing a bikini and pushing a Hoover! Those were the entire sums of the representation of women in film at the time, it seemed like, and it was most noticeable in the animation programs.

Also this was the period of the so-called Yorkshire Ripper. We were living through several years of basically a reign of terror. We lived in Chapeltown in Leeds and some of the murders were happening right there. A body would be found in a certain street and police would go house to house, interviewing

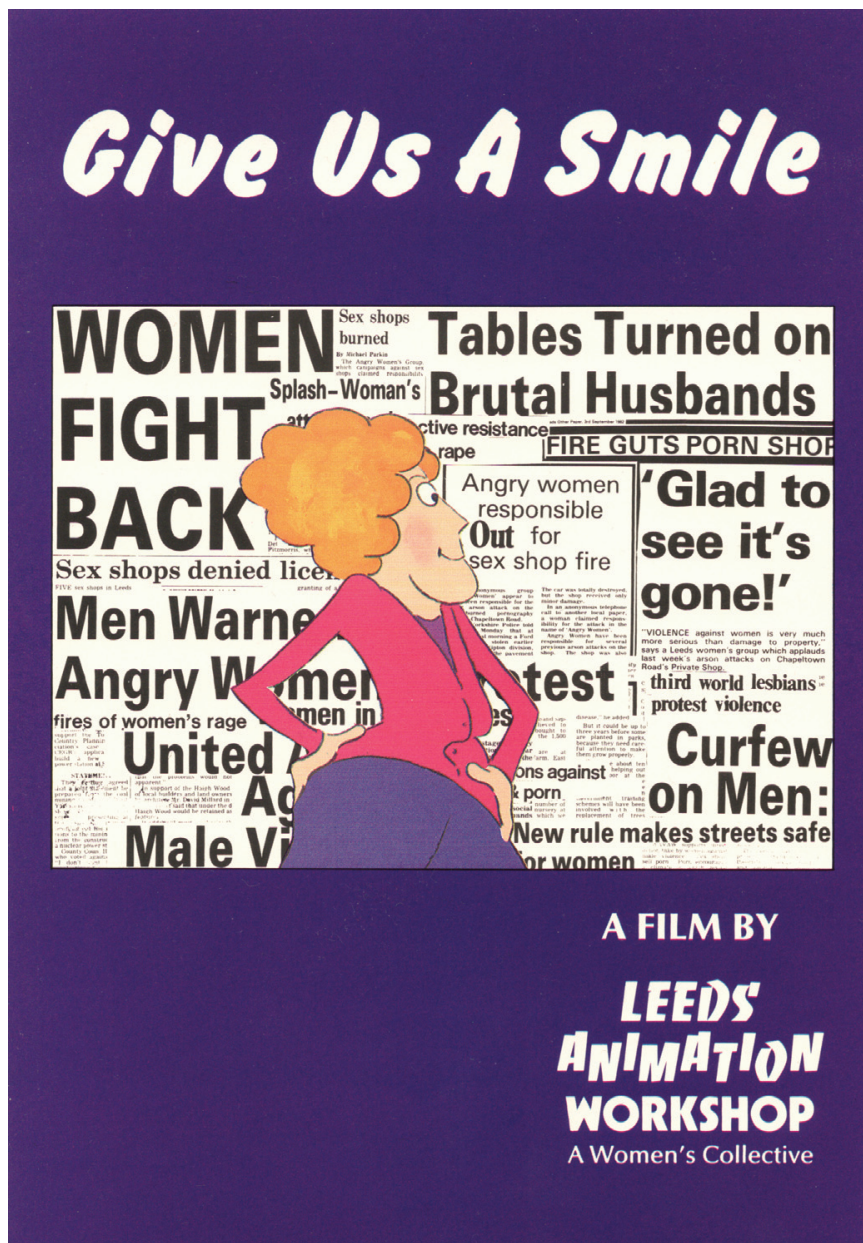


FIGURE 3. *Give Us a Smile*, 1983, confronting media stereotypes and sexual violence. (© Leeds Animation Workshop)

people. Every time you were out at night—we were going a lot to meetings, plays, and concerts—at the end someone would say, “Have all the women got someone to go home with them?” “Do any women need a lift?” Wherever you were, people were checking that women weren’t out on the street alone after dark. It was very, very oppressive, and not only were you constantly being surveilled by men, but you were also constantly expecting someone to come up behind you with a hammer. The police were openly saying that women must not go out on their own after dark. This was the message we were being given all the time.

We were in women's groups and we had our own alternative newspapers because the media were horrendous. The local newspaper never mentioned a woman without specifying whether she was blonde or brunette, and how many children she had. Everything was so stereotyped; there were no stories about women that did not include some type of putdown or stereotyping. All these things contributed to what became *Give Us a Smile*. We wanted to do something with this absolute rage we were feeling.

YT: Was it difficult gather the resources to make it?

TW: Materially it became possible because of the coming together of the workshop declaration and the recognition of the workshop style of production. We were able to access funding from the BFI that supported us to do a program of work that would involve research and the development of various strands of activity. It wasn't just project by project, and that made a huge difference.

YT: You must have felt a lot at stake.

TW: We knew that this was a very, very rare opportunity, in the sense of having the funding available to deliver a radical perspective on issues of representation and equality. So we thought, all right, we are going to throw everything we can at this. We are going to throw everything we can at sexism, we are going to go all the way through and hit absolutely everything, from things they say to you in the street to cartoons to films, the media, everything all in. It was controversial all the way through. Some of the people working on it in the labs started saying that it was anti-men. Then we finished it and one of the funders—possibly Yorkshire Arts or the BFI—sent out a press release that was picked up by the local media. The first we heard of it was a news placard saying “Leeds Fun Film About the Ripper” and a front-page story in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*. They had picked up that it was an animated film, and concluded that therefore it must be a comedy—a local group making a comedy film about the Ripper. They rang up the mother of one of the murdered women and asked for a reaction.

We didn't speak to the press for years after that. The straight newspapers, we just hated them so much. Eventually we agreed to speak to a journalist from the local newspaper only on the proviso that we got to see the article before it was printed.

YT: *They Call Us Maids* (figs. 4 and 5, 2015), your most recent film, was made in collaboration with another group. Has that been a feature of your work over the years?

TW: Yes, pretty much every film we've made has involved working with organizations and individuals who are experts or activists on the issue at hand. We have made approximately forty films. They all come from slightly different places, but we never made one that didn't chime with our own interests.

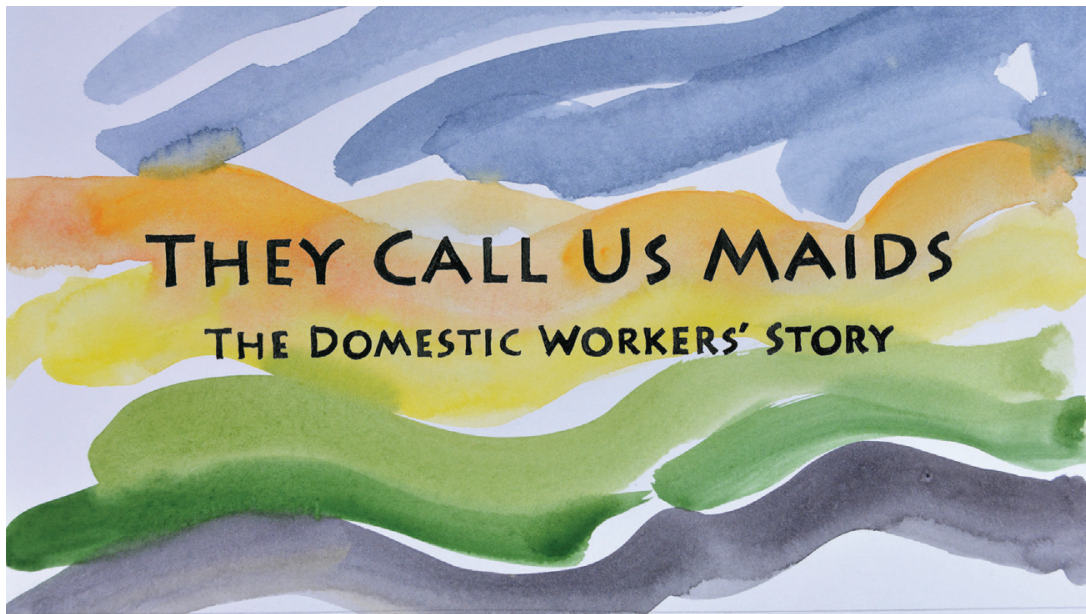


FIGURE 4. Still from *They Call Us Maids: The Domestic Workers' Story*, 2015. (© Leeds Animation Workshop)



FIGURE 5. Still from *They Call Us Maids: The Domestic Workers' Story*, 2015. (© Leeds Animation Workshop)

They Call Us Maids is about migrant domestic workers. We have been working for a couple of years with Justice 4 Domestic Workers, which is an autonomous group organized by the domestic workers themselves. We started working with them via other arts organizations that we are in touch with locally. We ended up

collaborating with the Leeds group of Justice 4 Domestic Workers on creative activities they were doing once a month; they only get one day off a week, and once a month they were getting together and doing something creative. They asked us to do some workshops with them, perhaps some animation. It led naturally to making an animated film about their campaign, about their situation, to raise awareness. Pavilion managed to raise a very small amount of money by our standards, £4,000. We had never made a film for less than five or twelve times that.

YT: Did you have some doubts about whether you could do it in the way you wanted for that amount?

TW: Yes, to start off with, but I had made films by myself before. That is why I am still here, part of the group! I was the one who used to make films for fun in my spare time, for literally nothing, and some of them have even been shown at festivals. So if nothing else, I knew it was possible to do it with animation and a bit of software and come away with at least the sort of thing I do in my back bedroom, small scale.

With the last few films we made before this, I had been writing applications for more than £100,000 to cover a whole project that would include research, scripting, production, postproduction, distribution, sometimes international partnerships, translations, written materials, sign-language versions, et cetera. These were big amounts of money and everybody was paid—not excessively, but enough so that we all could survive. We produce broadcast-standard stuff, with all the sound recorded in a proper studio with proper rates, and with the technicians paid £500 a day or whatever.

YT: Tell us about changes in funding over the years in which Leeds Animation Workshop has been in operation.

TW: The funding landscape has changed several times since we started. Leeds Animation Workshop was preceded by an ad hoc group of women in the women's movement making an animated film about one of their demands, which was for free child care. That was *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* The film took two years to make and was already under way when I joined; there was a rough group of maybe three or four people who were pretty solidly there and a few others who were coming and going. I fell into it by accident because I knew the people through local women's groups, and as soon as I heard they were making a cartoon film and actually getting paid to do it, I never looked back.

All the time it was done on the basis that it's not voluntary work, but proper work. We were dialectical materialists in that sense. We didn't want to be middle-class dilettantes. It was great to be doing creative artistic activity, but we felt quite distant from, say, the London Film-Makers' Co-op, which we saw as making art-for-art's-sake stuff that didn't mean anything to most of the population. We were making something with a message, and we wanted it to be accessible to people.

The design concepts were partly based on *Daily Mirror* cartoons, *Andy Capp* and stuff like that, and partly on Disney and on the idea that it was made from a child's point of view, so all the grown-ups are only seen at knee level most of the time.

YT: So *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* started the workshop off. How did the group develop after that?

TW: We finished the nursery film as Leeds Nursery Film Group and then renamed ourselves Leeds Animation Workshop. At that point we were all part-time; simultaneously I had been working part-time as a trade union studies tutor and so I happened to know that the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act was about to be introduced. As part of the regulations to be implemented, every workplace had to have a trade union health and safety representative. There hadn't been anything done about training these reps. So I had been going to some induction courses for tutors. We made a few inquiries and found out that it would be a good idea to make a film about it, and so that is where the next project—*Risky Business*—came from.

YT: Did you frequently interact with other film groups or workshops?

TW: Yes, we did, but not right at the beginning. We knew that there had been one or two groups in London, including the women's film group that made *The Amazing Equal Pay Show* (1974), but they had been and gone by the time we set up.¹ But we knew there were some people in the northeast, Amber, and we knew other people in London and elsewhere doing different things, and by the mid-1980s we were organizing projects with the other groups.

YT: Did you perceive your work as a women's collective as bound up with the trade union movement and radical groups of all kinds?

TW: Absolutely, it was a movement, and it was a movement of young people. Those were the days when you didn't trust anyone over thirty. When I first started working with the Leeds Animation Workshop most of us were in our twenties and there was a fantastic network of people—a world wide web avant la lettre—all done through print and landlines. Alternative newspapers were absolutely crucial. To organize an event or a campaign or whatever, there would often be a telephone tree: the person organizing would have five people to ring to tell them of changes in the start time or whatever. Then those five people would have five people to ring. If I was organizing, I could make five phone calls and that would cascade to reach five hundred people.

We had one main paper in Leeds, *Leeds Other Paper*, which was crucial to all our organizing, plus up to a dozen other alternative newspapers in different areas of Leeds. There were loads of printed, carbon copied, duplicated little newsletters all over the place that you would get information from. I suppose the hours that people now spend on Facebook, they would have spent then reading fuzzy copies of those newsletters, or writing them, or duplicating them.

All of that was going on. And then there were the cultural networks—theater groups, some film groups. There were other film workshops around the country trying to work in a similar way.

YT: Were there tensions between the women's movement and the trade union movement?

TW: In some ways, yes. The trade union movement was not one animal, though. I had been a shop steward in NUPE,² for instance, the hospital workers' union, the public employees' union. When it became time to join the ACTT—which is now BECTU, but at that time was the Association of Cinema, Television, and Allied Technicians—it was more or less diametrically opposed to NUPE in every aspect. In NUPE, you spent your time trying to recruit people. In ACTT it felt like they were spending their time trying to keep people out. NUPE had very little power except its pure mass, whereas ACTT had a closed shop, absolute power. And they were a boys' club with a few token women.

We were in the same position. Being women didn't help, but what was much more important in separating us from most of the people in ACTT was the fact that we were working differently. We were a new generation. We didn't want to work within their conventions, so there were lots of things we did that they were deeply suspicious of. For instance we didn't want to have designated jobs, whereas in ACTT there was very strict job demarcation. All the other groups that were rising up around the country had similar attitudes as us about these things. We wanted to have equal pay. We wanted to do cross-grade work because we wanted to learn about the different aspects of filmmaking. We wanted to share out the camerawork and the sound. We wanted to have control of what we were doing. We didn't want to be second focus puller every day on a lot of different films; we wanted to do something that we were thoroughly involved with and keep copyright control. The only way that we managed to get into the union was in a special category, which they invented for us. First we were called grant-aided technicians. They still seemed quite high pay grades to us, but compared to working in television they were nothing.

YT: Was your way of working always collective?

TW: With that first nursery film we had received a script from a radical theater group, Red Ladder, but all the time while we were sitting around in a room painting those endless cels, we were discussing it and working it out together, and that has been the way ever since. We talked about whether this character should be black, that one should be elderly, and so on. We were making an effort to reflect a multicultural society back in 1976, 1977, 1978.

YT: So it was important to you to reflect on the work while you were making it in terms of where it was going to be seen and its audience.



FIGURE 6. Still from *Through the Glass Ceiling*, 1994, addressing cultures of inequality. (© Leeds Animation Workshop)

TW: Oh yes, very much so, and its context and its meaning. As we went on we would go around screening the films and be invited to talk about them to different groups. Especially in the beginning, we were very utilitarian about our art. We saw ourselves as workers. We weren't working for no money; we worked for a wage, not a high wage but a wage you could live on, and we wanted to be doing something we felt was worthwhile and would help people and mean something to people. At certain times through our history we have been somewhat looked down upon for that, but the current generation seems interested again in politics and in bringing art into other aspects of life and vice versa. So at the moment I feel it's a lot easier to communicate with audiences.

YT: Do you think the workshop played a part in changing women's position in the industry?

TW: Absolutely. That was part of our entire *raison d'être* and our whole mindset: equal working and skill sharing. ■

TERRY WRAGG is a founding member of Leeds Animation Workshop, which had its beginnings with a group of women who began working together in 1976 on the film *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* The workshop was formally established in 1978 and has since then produced and distributed almost forty short films. Still active after three and a half decades, it remains a dynamic independent nonprofit feminist collective organization making films about violence against women, imperialism, sexism, racism,

equality at work, child care, sexuality, and many other issues. The films have been shown all over the world, and many have been translated into other languages. The most recent, *They Call Us Maids: The Domestic Workers' Story*, was released in 2015. All Leeds Animation Workshop films are available on DVD; send queries to info@leedsanimation.org.uk.

YVONNE TASKER is a professor of film studies and dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of East Anglia. Her research and teaching is concerned with the work of women filmmakers considered through a feminist frame.

NOTES

1. *The Amazing Equal Pay Show* (1974) made by the London Women's Film Group. See Barbara Evans's reflections on the film in this issue.

2. NUPE was the National Union of Public Employees. Following a merger in 1993, NUPE became UNISON.