

Caroline Spry: COW (Cinema of Women). Commissioning lesbian and gay filmmaking at Channel 4. "Out" on Channel 4. The Gateways.

CAROLINE SPRY

Clare (CL) interviewing Caroline Spry (C)

Extract 1: 7.38 – 13.54

CINEMA OF WOMEN. COMMISSIONING LESBIAN AND GAY FILMMAKING AT CHANNEL 4.

C: So part of what we did in ... in Cinema of Women, was particularly to sort of promote lesbian filmmaking. So it was something that I was already, kind of, quite involved in, through my work as a filmmaker and someone involved in film, but also, you know, being a lesbian involved and interested in lesbian politics. So when I went to Channel 4, you know, I was working in all sort of different kinds of films, but all with a kind of, continuing that notion of oppositional filmmaking both in Britain in ... elsewhere.

But one of the things that started to happen at that time was a kind of push for there to be much kind of more presence of gay men and lesbians on television for us, to have our, own programmes, and it was ... it was at that particular moment of ... we were in the kind of, still in the early years of ... years of Aids, so gay politics was very sort of um, present, and it was also, as we were also heading towards Clause 28. So, you know, there were lots of ... I mean, I think it was a very sort of interesting political moment in terms of gay and lesbian history, and there was also a report done that I can't remember the name of, but it was about kind of the representation of gay men and lesbians on British Television, at which ... unsurprisingly it was abysmal, you know? It was ... there was very little representation and the representation there was, was overwhelmingly stereotypical and negative.

So there were kind of lots of things happening outside of Channel 4 around political groupings and individuals who were trying to push for the opening up of television to gay and lesbian sensibilities and lives, and ... and Channel 4 was in a sense the obvious place for it to happen because, part of its remit was to ... provide a space for unheard voices, you know? Interests that weren't catered for by the existing channels: BBC and ITV, and, the irony being that it was set up, of course, by the Thatcher government and Norman Tebbit was ... once Channel 4 started, he was ... he was kind of shocked and outraged, 'cos his idea of interests not already catered for were things like train-spotting and stamp-collecting and ... as opposed to, you know, all these kind of radical, so-called Leftie things that immediately, ... certainly the Right wing press and the government accused Channel 4 of doing.

So, anyway, Channel 4 was the sort of ... an obvious home for, if we're going to have um, programmes made by, and seeking an audience that, you know, gay men and lesbians, that was the place for it to happen, and in a sense I was the kind of obvious person to do it. Partly, well, partly 'cos the little bit of Channel 4 that I was involved in, you know, that's almost all we did was working with these kind of unheard voices, and we had a particular set of politics within, you know, there were three of us commissioning programmes, which was to bring women's voices, Black voices, all of those things, and to discuss the issues. And also at the time I think certainly I was probably the only out gay man or lesbian at Channel 4. I mean clearly there were loads ... loads, but I was the most, sort of obviously out. So that sort of became one of the things that I said "Right, this is an opportunity to do this," and I started to kind of run with it in terms of kind of trying to, you know, get quite clearly defined and identifiable gay and lesbian programmes on television and it was a battle. It was a real battle.

You know, lots of kind of erm, a lot of resistance to it from ... both in terms of just homophobia but also dealing with – I mean this was a point in history where Mary Whitehouse was still, quite a powerful force. I mean it's hard to believe it these days but she was, and her, together with the Right wing press, there was a lot of pressure to say, you know, "We shouldn't be having any of this on television". There was also ... within Channel 4 a lot of kind of "Oh, we don't want all these kind

of ... programmes that are directed towards, you know, particular audiences. That's kind of ghettoising. It should be all over British television." Which, of course, I completely agreed with. The fact is, it wasn't, and they weren't proposing anything that was going to change it, so of course there are issues about whether ... all sorts of issues about whether you really can make gay and lesbian television. What is it? You know, all of those things. But it seemed like a strategy to try to get something moving, you know? To try and actually make an impact on the representation of gay men and lesbians.

Extract 2: 18.24 – 22.02

OUT on CHANNEL 4

C: So what I did was, once In the Pink had happened, I then started moving forward to try and get this weekly series idea off the ground, and I started sort of consulting with just people on the outside who I knew who worked, you know, worked around film and television, and also just trying to kind of get as many perspectives as I could from gay and lesbian activists to get a sense of what people wanted to see, rather than it just being me! "What's my idea of what I want to see?" And then eventually kind of found, sort of brought together a whole set of filmmakers to make the first series of Out, we all ... deciding it was going to a magazine style programme with lots of kind of different film ... different filmmakers making different styles of films, different, you know, news reports. All those kind of things to make it something which was trying to bring in different perspectives and different visions of gay and lesbian life. 'Cos, I mean the notion that there was a gay and lesbian sensibility or a set of interests of course is nonsense. Lots of difference between what gay men and lesbians wanted to do, but also even within that, just completely different sets of interests. So trying ... working with lots ... different filmmakers, I felt was the best way to try to bring in those differences.

So, that's the first series kind of was ... this kind of a set of films made by different people and kind of woven together by one production company into something that sort of worked as a magazine programme, and it was, again, incredibly successful.

CL: What years did those go out?

C: It ran ... it started in 1989, and it ran until, I think the last series was '94, but I can't swear to it. I've forgotten. It was '93 or '94, and yeah ... it sort of evolved over the years in terms of the things that were being talked about, as ... I mean it's interesting, the more ... the first sort of programmes were partly about just – blurrh, you know! Because it had never happened before it was getting everything out there, and it then sort of evolved as gay and lesbian politics evolved and became ... and also became more present in other areas, you know? 'Cos I think one of the things it did is ... it sort of ... started to open up television to the fact that you can have this sort of stuff on television, you know? So, you end up some years later with Queer as Folk, you know, which I don't know, I ... I mean who knows what might have happened if Out hadn't happened, but lots of things started to become possible ... nowadays of course it's ... it's a kind of a given, isn't it? You have gay and lesbian filmmakers, you have ... there are representations in a much more kind of diverse way than there were sort of 20 years ago.

Extract 3: 34.30 – 36.39

THE GATEWAYS

C: I mean coming to London was absolutely partly about wanting a career in film, but it was also, you know, "Where else were there going to be lots of lesbians?"

CL: And where did you find the lesbians?

C: Well I have to say, rather stereotypically, the first lesbians that I found were in Gateways.

CL: Brilliant. Tell me about that.

C: Erm ... 'cos in fact where ... 'cos I lived just over the ... Battersea Bridge when I first came to London and, realised it was walking distance, so I ... that's where I went for a relatively short period actually, 'cos I had kind of discovered feminism by then, but I hadn't kind of worked out what the relationship between feminism and lesbians quite might be, and also how ... quite how ...

quite how to get involved in that world, whereas at Gateways all you had to do was turn up really, and, I mean you were supposed to be introduced by somebody, but by the time I was going, they were letting almost anyone in.

CL: Did you go on your own then?

C: Um.

CL: What was your first impression?

C: Er, well kind of dark and rather small and terror, you know, terror, really, kind of, 'cos I had no idea really ... and it was ... I then kind of thought "Well this is what it's like. This is ... all lesbians are like this and this is how, this is how you live as a lesbian in London." But that was alright, you know? It wasn't completely dreadful, um ...

CL: What ... what was it that you saw that you thought you had to live like?

C: Well, that's ... that's ... you socialise all the time because that's the only context in which you meet people. It was quite ... it was slightly less, butch/femme, I think than it had been, if one talks to lots of other people and reads things, but it was still there.

CL: What sort of year would this have been?

C: This would have been '75, '76.