

Cinenova Digitisation Project Commission Response to “A Question of Choice” Sheffield Film Co-op (UK, 1982. 18 mins)
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Text version 14 March 2024

“Who Cleans the World?” is the question at the beginning of activist and political scientist Françoise Vergès’ *A Decolonial Feminism*. In centering the contemporary labour struggles of black and brown low-paid facilities workers in the train station cleaners strike at Gare du Nord, Paris, Vergès unpacks the complexity of the power relations within bourgeois white feminisms that have enabled this fundamental question to be left ignored for so long. The extractivism that fuels contemporary global capitalism and its production of waste, and attention to those who clean away that waste form the basis upon which Vergès urges us to dissect and understand feminist struggle: “I want to understand cleaning and caring within that economy of extraction, ruination and exhaustion and the repressive norms of hetero-patriarchy” (2021, p.viii).

Stepping back in time by four decades, the Sheffield Film Co-op’s (SFC) *A Question of Choice* from 1982 examines working class women’s lives as cleaners (as well as a cook and a lollipop lady) at a school in Walkley, Sheffield UK. Sitting within the SFC’s wider output of feminist films grounded in women’s liberation movements (see: Martin 2014a & 2014b), the film provides nuanced insight into the featured women’s personal lives – their own thoughts and reflections on how they balance their work and home life, caring for their children and families, activities within the local community thereby bringing them to reflect on the life choices made by them or for them – or in fact revealing the inadequacy of the paradigm of ‘choice’. In a contemporary context this short film serves as a singular response to the question of ‘Who Cleans The World’ and lays bare the sacrifices made by those who carry out such work. The interplay between economies of extraction, which occur in the background in the film, supported by the domestic and reproductive labour of these women that is foregrounded, opens up the space for a contemporary re-visitation of the personal and work lives of cleaners today.

Given my work supporting cleaners organising for better working conditions and an end to outsourcing at Higher Education institutions I have worked in over past years (namely Goldsmiths and University of the Arts London), a lot of the content of the film resonated with me, thinking of the conversations I have had with cleaners in London over the years. A low-paid and undervalued profession in the 1980s has become exacerbated by decades of neoliberal political and economic policy which makes cleaning work today largely precarious, outsourced and undertaken by migrant populations. I felt trepidation and hesitation with some potential approaches to the commission due to my own positionality as a relatively privileged academic and artist. In my response commission I was keen to address the question of how this film from 1982 and the thematics it raises can open up discussions in the early 2020s.

The form that this commission took (after numerous false starts and attempts to connect the project more to Sheffield/Walkley as the location of the film), was in a series of

workshops in London and culminating in a screening event that took place at SITE Gallery, Sheffield on Saturday 9th December 2023.

The workshops took place at my workplace, London College of Communication with cleaners who were invited through my personal contact with them through the UAL End Outsourcing Campaign. The workshops happened in August, September and November 2023. Each cleaner was given a fee for their participation, offered a live translator (Spanish-English) if they requested it, and I documented the sessions with audio recordings and a few photographs after asking permission from the cleaners involved.

The first two workshops were based around screening *A Question of Choice* and asking the cleaners to respond in any way they wished to the film. This reflected my conversation with Jenny Woodley, one of the original members of the SFC, whom I interviewed on Zoom in January 2022. Jenny had described to me how activist films such as theirs were often screened at feminist events to spark discussions as part of the women's liberation movement. As part of my response, I had shared that the legacy of many of their films now falls under the purview of rarified 'art films', often quite removed from the context of activism or organising. The first workshop was attended by Luzmila, originally from Colombia but who had worked as a cleaner since she arrived in London aged 17 in the late 1990s. Luzmila responded positively and in a personal way to the film. She particularly appreciated how it depicted the work in a realistic and thoughtful way. I interpreted what Luzmila described of her arrival in the UK and starting working as a cleaner and the hardships that entailed as exemplifying a similar ambivalence to the notion of choice that the film brings up – there exist some choices, but mainly there are necessities to contend with. The second workshop was attended by three cleaners – Luzmila accompanied by Ann and Anisa. All three are part of the GMB union who have been supporting their workplace organising for several years now and thus, the conversation turned more towards specific injustices facing their work currently since the most recent change of hands to a new outsourcing company in December 2021. Some of these issues were: being paid incorrectly for several months and the company not responding or correcting mistakes despite being raised by cleaners and their union rep; the gradual increase in workload and decrease in staff numbers over the years despite the increase of student numbers in the building; unfair practices which put more physical strain on cleaners such as recently being instructed to carry heavy bags of waste to the bins (where previously this work was undertaken by a specified person); health issues such as arthritis causing strain on their bodies and insufficient sick pay to enable them to take time off to recover. Although it was not a union organising meeting, the space offered was more flexible to emotive responses and less bound by rules and dominated by the tensions of collective decision-making. It felt like an important space was created, even if it held no formal role in organising their struggle.

In late September and early October 2023, there was a historic first at our workplace in that the UCU (University and Colleges Union) called a week of strike action on the first week of the academic year at the university. This coincided with a week of strike action taken by the cleaners on the second week of the term. The UAL End Outsourcing campaign linked up with the local UCU branch to organise a 'teach-out' event for students to learn more about the interlinking of struggles at the university. At this event *A Question of Choice* was screened, alongside *Precarity Story* (2020 directed by Lorena Cervera and Isabel Seguí) and a short

student film made about the End Outsourcing Campaign at UAL *Back In-House* (2022 directed by Sean McSweyn). Students responded thoughtfully in making connections between the neoliberalisation of higher education, the high fees they pay and the ensuing debt they accumulate, the increased precarity of university workers from academics through to cleaners, the use of outsourcing to enable universities to sidestep responsibility for cleaners' wellbeing and working conditions. Consequently, further meetings of the campaign took place which sought to connect up student struggles with cleaner struggles with other university worker struggles.

In November 2023, a third workshop took place in which we invited cleaners from other campaigns at other London universities to share their experiences. Consuelo from SOAS Unison, and Igbo from Goldsmiths Justice for Workers, both joined and contributed practical advice to help build the campaign and give strategic and tactical support. We watched the trailer of the film *Limpiadores* (2015, Fernando Mitjans) and discussed the brutal intersection of outsourced labour and the UK's hostile environment which led to the deportation of several SOAS cleaners, as documented in the film. The campaigners at SOAS fought for 12 years before achieving their aim of becoming in-housed and being directly employed by the university. Several other London universities followed suit such as LSE, Queen Mary's and Goldsmiths in 2018.

The event at SITE Gallery, Sheffield on 9th December 2024, which screened *A Question of Choice* and *Precarity Story* side-by-side and invited Jenny Woodley, as well as Isabel Seguí and Lorena Cervera, into a conversation afterwards, concluded this chapter of events. It was saddening but strangely relieving to hear from Jenny, that conditions for low-paid workers such as cleaners in the 1980s such as those featured in *A Question of Choice* conditions have clearly worsened in the past forty years. The UAL End Outsourcing campaign continues, led by students and supported by staff, to fight towards fair and equal pay and conditions for cleaners and maintenance workers at UAL.

List of questions that may have been asked (to the women in the film *A Question of Choice*):

When you were at school what did you want to be?

How does your family life affect your job choices?

Do you work full time?

How does your daily schedule fit around your family commitments?

What is the impact of your job on your family?

How did you get the (your current) job (at the school?)

How much do you earn? How do you feel about your wage?

Have you suffered health issues as a result of your work as a cleaner?

Why is your job important?

How much cleaning do you do in your own home?

How do you balance your work and home life?

Who are the important people in your life? Who are the people who are there for you if you need help?

How involved in your local community are you?

What commitments do you have to organise in your family?

Can you describe your average week?
Are you a member of a union? Do you think the unions listen?
Are you notified when there are meetings?
Are you scared of losing your job?
Do you feel your job is valued by society?
How valuable do you think your job is?

References:

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Filmography:

A Question of Choice (1982) dir. Sheffield Film Co-operative
Limpiadores. (2015) dir. Fernando Mitjáns
Precarity Story (2020) dir. Lorena Cervera and Isabel Seguí
Back In-House (2022) dir. by Sean McSweyn