

## **Girls\* Riot: The Radical Act of Asking Teenage Girls What They Want**

*A workshop report by Rosa Lynch, aged 19*

The Girls\* Riot workshop, started in 2018, takes place annually as part of the KUKI / Interfilm programme curation process. Ten girls aged 15-19 spend a week watching short films and discussing them and at the end of the week they curate the hours and hours worth of short films into a seventy minute programme to be presented by the girls as part of the festival later in the year. The workshop is completely free to attend and snacks and a free lunch are provided every day. That it is free and accessible is key to the ethos of the workshop, bringing together and empowering girls from all backgrounds.

The Girls\* Riot programme is different from other programmes in the festival. The curators are given free reign to develop a three hour presentation however they like. Previous programmes have included live interviews with filmmakers and discussion between the girls and the audience on particular films and why they chose them.

In doing this, in holding the workshop, Girls\* Riot is doing something truly radical. It asks teenage girls what they want to see in film and what is important to them. It isn't a lecture, it isn't a workshop on feminism, though it can be described as a feminist workshop, it's not about teaching teenage girls. It's about listening to them. It's about asking their opinion on art and giving them full power to make their own decisions.

One of the girls this year asked at the introduction of the workshop 'who are we to make these decisions? What do we know about film?'. But it doesn't matter if they know anything about film, some of the girls do and some of them don't, what matters is that they know everything about being a teenage girl, and that is what the programme is about. It's about sharing who they are and what they care about, and giving them the stage to do that.

Throughout the week two or three mentors, among them women who work in film, actors and directors, to feminist theorists and activists- and often those who are all at once, are invited to talk to the girls about something close to their hearts. Like everything else in the workshop, this is a collaborative process, they sit on the floor together.

One of this year's mentors, Felipa Goltz, holds a presentation on Intersectionality and asks the girls for their idea of a utopia and how to achieve it. One calls for the end of capitalism, for decolonisation, for dismantling the system rather than just integrating marginalised people into it and calling it progress. They discuss the importance of solidarity and finding common ground, the difference between equity and equality, criticise greenwashing and pinkwashing and argue that a female billionaire is no different from a male billionaire, they both feed into a system of exploitation that harms those who are more marginalised, crucially, it harms other women.

The second mentor, poet and writer Elisa Aseva, asks them to describe their ideal skin. If it could have any texture or colour they wanted, what would it be? The girls are enthusiastic to share and listen, describing skins that are changing like the colour of the sky, that are thick and scaly like a dragon's, or like a mermaid's tail, skin like neoprene, allowing them to swim in cold water. Many of the girls describe skin that blends into the background, allowing them

to go unseen or to escape uncomfortable situations, skin that is invulnerable. They consider what the type of skin they want says about them, they want to be useful to others, they want to be respected despite their vulnerability, they want to be safe. One of the girls jokingly expresses a wish for skin that is like hers only with smaller, less visible pores but she also joins in the exercise, eventually, none of the girls want skin that conforms to beauty ideals, they want skin that is useful, that serves a purpose to them. The purpose of this exercise was to get them out of their heads, rather than turning inwards, looking outwards, thinking about their tactile interactions with the world, with their bodies. At the end of the day they said it had prompted them to think in new ways, see new perspectives and they felt they had learned new things about themselves and the others in the group.

This year, in lieu of a third mentor, the girls watched Nina Menkes' documentary *Brainwashed* about the male gaze in cinema and its effect on hiring discrimination and sexual abuse, specifically within Hollywood. Though many of the girls were already aware of the basic principle of the male gaze, they said that the film was like lifting a veil, and that they would never watch anything the same way again.

The rest of the week was dedicated to watching and talking about short films submitted to the festival from all around the world which featured the stories of women and girls. Films about menstruation, sex, romance, queerness, complicated friendships, grooming, familial relationships, forced marriage, mental health, abortion, sexual assault and more. Films that were joyful, stressful, and exciting, sometimes all at once. In discussions about the films the girls were respectful of each other and made sure that everyone had said what they wanted to say. When there were interruptions or disagreements they would check in on each other and make sure everyone had said their piece.

When it came to curating the seventy minute programme out of 280 minutes worth of film, they considered things they'd discussed and learnt over the course of the workshop, excluding films they felt were out of the perspective of the male gaze, highlighting films they had both enjoyed and thought were educational, on topics that were relevant to them but also the wider sociopolitical landscape to create a programme that represented what they wanted to say.

Beyond the official structure of the workshop, perhaps most importantly, is that Girls\* Riot is a space for teenage girls to come together, to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Sometimes using films as jumping off points to discuss things that had happened to them or that bothered them, and sometimes sharing stories from their own lives, things that had happened to them just that morning. In this space they shared times that they had lost male friends to online right wing radicalisation. Boys in their schools, brothers, who use misogyny to wind them up just to see them get angry. How difficult it is to argue with someone who doesn't care about what you have to say, when the topic is so personal to you and affects you so deeply. They shared advice, about how sometimes you just have to walk away, you have to prioritise yourself and the people who support you. How you have to find support and community, there is strength in numbers. How you should always focus on the victim rather than the perpetrator, help the person who has been hurt. They shared times they felt they had said the wrong thing, held themselves accountable and interrogated their own biases.

And the workshop isn't just important for the girls who take part, and in fact it isn't just important to teenage girls. Girls\* Riot exposes what is lacking from the film industry, it allows girls to name the stories that aren't being told, aren't being told enough, or aren't being told right. Over the now five years that Girls\* Riot has been running there has been an influx of short films geared towards teenage girls featuring the topics that the girls in the first workshop thought were missing, some directly inspired by the workshop and the insights of its participants. Girls\* Riot highlights how much can be gained by sitting down and listening to teenage girls, how much can be learned by giving them a microphone and a stage.

I took part in the first Girls\* Riot workshop when I was 14 and though I have always been outspoken and identified loudly and proudly as a feminist, it was a revelation to be given a space where everything I said mattered. Most impactfully, it was a space where my ideas and opinions didn't feel combative or disruptive, and where people who disagreed with me were willing to hear me out. I was given the opportunity to speak on a stage to a hundred people, many of them adults, and listened to not just in spite of being a teenage girl but because of it. That kind of empowerment sticks.

Coming back five years later as an intern to assist the running of the workshop I was deeply moved by the work that happens here, the love and care and effort that goes into running it, but also by the participants, their eagerness to understand each other, to share ideas and hold space for each other. Being a part of Girls\* Riot as a teenager was so formative for me and I'd never quite understood how much until this year, watching other girls have the experience I had. I have a confidence and understanding of myself and my place in the world that I can trace back to sitting in a circle with four other girls and talking about films.

Over a week, under the guise of a workshop about short films, Girls\* Riot becomes a truly radical space where teenage girls are not only listened to and respected, but given complete control.