



BY THE FILM AND HISTORY PROJECT
A FILM IN THREE PARTS

THE SOUND OF THE SHIRT

"Amid the Establishment's conflicting definitions, The Song of the Shirt begins to construct the women's own position. It's a film which is very exciting and also very demanding."
Jane Clarke, Socialist Challenge.

"In the acted reconstructions, great use is made of video, several screens often representing different points of view, and the line structure of the video sequences giving an almost eerie impression of lithographs come to life. All in all a rare conjunction of scholarship and imagination."
Clare Kitson, London Film Festival Programme.

In short, a film which as the Project's name suggests, boldly investigates both cinema and history."
Mandy Merck and Helen Mackintosh, Time Out.

The Song of the Shirt grew out of a video project on women and the Welfare State. We wanted to examine why the status of working women had deteriorated from the time of the Industrial Revolution, and how it was that women living and working outside the family came to be seen as a challenge to the social order.

The film looks at the origins of philanthropy – and resistances to it – by examining as a group women working in the 'sweated' clothes trade in London in the 1840s – a new trade, overflowing with poor often unmarried women from the country, for whom employment was seasonal and prostitution often the only alternative. The film refuses to credit any historical source as the 'truth' about these women, but turns the tables and looks at the motives behind what was written, from Mayhew's sensational accounts of their domestic lives, to hysterical comparisons in Parliament with the 'festering and mouldering discontent' of the 1848 Paris Revolution, and the absurdly

impractical schemes to get those '500,000 surplus women' to emigrate. These conventional sources are repeatedly played off against arguments and criticisms from the radical publications of the Chartist and Cooperative movements.

The film is episodic, using short sequences of still photographs, graphics and acted reconstructions. Central to this structure is a popular sentimental novel, first serialised in a Chartist newspaper, which is repeated in different forms throughout the film – first, read by a young Victorian debutante, then presented in still photographs with ironically romantic music, and later read and satirised by a group of women in the lowest ranks of the trade.

The music, researched and composed by Lindsay Cooper, is wittily reworked from original lyrics and melodies. It is used in the film not just to comment on the images and narratives, but significantly to transform them, bringing together themes and ideas by a layering of sounds, instrumentation, and musical references.

Directors: Susan Clayton, Jonathan Curling. Camera/Lighting: Jonathan Collinson, Anne Cottringer, Ieuan Morris. Sound: John Anderton. Editor: Fran McLean. Music: composed, researched and arranged by Lindsay Cooper; recorded by David Vorhaus at Kaleidophon Studio. Cast: Martha Gibson, Geraldine Pilgrim, Anne McNiff, Jill Greenhalgh, Sally Cranfield, Paul Bental, Fraser Cains, Edward Clayton.

The Song of the Shirt is 16mm B/W, and made in four parts. It can either be shown as one continuous programme (135 minutes) or in three separate programmes- Part One 44 minutes; Part Two 33 minutes; Part Three and Postscript 44 minutes and 15 minutes.

Sales and Rental enquiries to: The Other Cinema, 12-13 Little Newport St, London WC2. 01-734-8508/9.

Posters and background materials are available.

Other enquiries and requests for speakers direct to: The Film and History Project, 68 Montagu Mansions, Crawford St London W1H 1LH

Made with the financial assistance of the Greater London Arts Association, the Arts Council of Great Britain, and the British Film Institute Production Board, and with the contribution in time and skills of all who worked on the film.

"Distressed needlewomen? Who are these women? As well call them Distressed Astrologers as Distressed Needlewomen! There are no Distressed Needlewomen. . ."
Carlyle 1850

"Trelawney looked upward, and did he not see a trembling little hand move back the blind at the garret window, and the milliner's two soft loving eyes gaze after him? Anna loved the student"!

Novel serialised in Chartist paper 1851

"As regards females who are employed much in needlework, . . . a state of congestion of the blood vessels is induced, which causes confusion in vision, and sometimes the appearance of various beautiful colours before the eyes. This is followed by total loss of sight."

1842 Medical Commission

