

Learning to listen: histories of women's soundwork in the British film industry

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The study of sound has become established as a field of film scholarship over the last two decades. Early works on sound theory (Elizabeth Weis, John Belton, Rick Altman), the speaking voice (Michel Chion) and film music (Claudia Gorbman)¹ have been followed by research which ranges across contemporary Hollywood sound and genre and sound design.² Scholars have theorized the image–sound relationship, explored audiences and modes of listening, examined the impact of new technologies and interviewed sound practitioners. Sound in different historical periods has been interrogated, including the transition from silent to sound, the era of classic Hollywood, and the new Hollywood cinema of the 1980s. That the *Screen Studies Conference* in 2008 was devoted to ‘Sound and Music in Film, TV and Video’ testifies to the breadth and diversity of the field.

How have questions of gender shaped these debates? There is a significant body of scholarship that focuses on how music contributes to the gendered politics of a film;³ and the issue of speech preoccupied feminist film studies of the late 1980s, not least because questions of language were a central concern of second-wave feminism.⁴ In 1988 Kaja Silverman's *The Acoustic Mirror* offered one of the first sustained theorizations in film studies of the soundtrack and sexual difference. Silverman argued that the Hollywood soundtrack was gendered ‘through a complex system of displacements, which locate the male voice as the point of apparent textual origin, whilst establishing the diegetic

- ¹ Elisabeth Weis and John Belton (eds), *Film Sound: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1985); Rick Altman, *Sound Theory, Sound Practice* (New York, NY: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992); Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994); Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).
- ² See Gianluca Sergi, *Dolby Era: Film Sound in Contemporary Hollywood* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), and William Whittington, *Sound Design and Science Fiction* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007).
- ³ See *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2012), special issue ‘Gender and Sexuality’, ed.

Catherine Howarth, as a representative example of recent trends in this scholarly tradition. On the dominance of critical attention to music in film scholarship, see Michele Hilmes, 'Foregrounding sound: new (and old) directions in sound studies', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 48, no. 1 (2008), pp. 115–17.

- 4 See, for example, Helene Cixous, 'The laugh of the Medusa', trans. K. Cohen and P. Cohen, *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1976), pp. 875–93; Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1978); Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).
- 5 Kaja Silverman *The Acoustic Mirror, The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 45.
- 6 See Elizabeth Cowie 'Film noir and women', in Joan Copjec (ed.), *Shades of Noir: A Reader* (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 121–65, and Amy Lawrence, *Echo and Narcissus: Women's Voices in Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1991).
- 7 Kate Lacey and Michele Hilmes (eds), 'Women and soundwork', *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2015), pp. 1–2.
- 8 Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight (eds), *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinema Past and Future* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), p. 1.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

containment of the female voice'.⁵ Scholars such as Elizabeth Cowie and Amy Lawrence built on Silverman's work, illustrating how women's dialogue, narration and commentary in classic Hollywood cinema were contested by the image-text, which ultimately gave narrative authority to their male counterparts.⁶ The works by Silverman and others remain cornerstone publications in feminist scholarship, interrogating film sound from a gendered perspective.

Feminist research is now beginning to ask questions about women as cultural agents in the history of soundwork, and their roles as participants, contributors and makers of film sound. A 2015 special issue on 'Women and soundwork' for the journal *Feminist Media Histories* traced women's contribution as music directors, feminist filmmakers and radio performers across different national contexts, historical periods and media.⁷ In June 2016 the Women's Film and Television History Network, UK/Ireland, held a day-long workshop at the British Film Institute (BFI) in London, bringing together academics and practitioners to map the field of women's contribution to sound in British film and television. The Network itself is part of a wider community of scholars, activists, practitioners and archivists who investigate 'women's work in and around cinema across its histories as they play out in different parts of the world'.⁸ Recent interest in 'women's work', itself part of the now well-established historical turn in film studies, goes beyond recovery history; its goal is to interrogate what the forgetting of women film practitioners says about the dominant explanatory paradigms of film history, and in doing so to reconceptualize how film history is conceived and written. As Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight have argued,

the questions that asking about women pose to traditional ways of doing film history demand new ways of thinking cinema itself. Insofar as these challenge the dominance of the director, recognise co-creation and collaboration, refuse dominant conceptions of cinematic essence, and reorganise notions of aesthetic value, it is not only women who stand to gain.⁹

Much of this scholarship to date has prioritized those at the top end of the production hierarchy, such as directors, producers, writers and composers, particularly in silent cinema. This essay marks a step-change in approach, focusing on a broader range of production roles than has typically been of interest to feminist film historians, and connecting that to the burgeoning interest in women's work as sound professionals in the history of cinema. Using Britain as a case study, I address three questions: the extent to which the field of historical British film soundwork is structured by gender; whether women and men occupy distinct roles and how these have changed over time; and how research about women's soundwork might illuminate wider questions about film historiography. I position this research in relation to Kate Lacey and Michele Hilmes's recent work on sound, which asks us to focus not only on women as soundmakers but also on 'the power dynamics that framed

10 Lacey and Hilmes (eds), 'Women and soundwork', p. 2.

11 See Melanie Bell, *Julie Christie* (London: BFI Publishing, 2016).

12 'Trade secrets: listening in to the work of a Foley artist', *Broadcast*, 11 June 1999, p. 10.

13 Helen Hanson, 'Behind the scenes, below the line: female sound technicians, creative labour and constraints in Hollywood's studio system', paper delivered at the Doing Women's Film and Television Histories Conference, De Montfort University, May 2016.

14 David Samuelson, 'Magic boxes', in *Action! Fifty Years in the Life of a Union* (London: Pear Publications, 1983), pp. 51–59.

and continue to frame both women's impact on media and their presence in the historical record'.¹⁰ It is this attention to gendered power and how power structures institutions, their working practices and cultures that characterizes much recent work in feminist historiography, including my own.¹¹

This essay is the first sustained academic analysis of women's contributions to soundwork in the British film industry. In the first half I draw a microhistory of women's work as sound editors, camera operators and recordists, amongst other roles, in the years between 1930 and 1985. Using a range of sources, including oral histories, personal correspondence, union membership records and trade journals, I map women's presence and absence in the professions, tracing the roles and grades in which they found work as sound technicians and those from which they were excluded. I examine their work not only in the feature-film sector but in documentaries, shorts and film-processing laboratories – sectors typically absent from standard film histories but which have potential to revise the wider frame within which British film production is understood.

The second half of the essay is a case study of the role of the Foley artist, or 'footstepper' as they were known in the British film industry: a professional who specializes in a particular branch of sound effects. This role is chosen for detailed analysis because women historically were over-represented as Foley artists relative to other male-dominated sound grades. I examine the career of the British Foley artist Beryl Mortimer (1928?–2001), who was active in the profession between approximately 1955 and 1998 and is widely acknowledged by British industry professionals as 'the mother of Foley'.¹² I outline the functions of the role and its meanings in the context of British film soundwork, before focusing on Mortimer's career and a case study of her work on *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962). Attending to an area of production in which women enjoyed relatively high levels of representation allows us to open up a question of central importance for feminist historiography: what is the value and status of this role, both within the industry and within film history?

The chief obstacle to writing about British film sound is the paucity of historical documentation. Whilst all film historians face this challenge it is particularly acute when researching sound because it has so often taken second place to the image. Helen Hanson makes the point that the 'hierarchies of Hollywood's production cultures' in the studio system afforded primary importance to visuals and the film's 'look'.¹³ A similar hierarchical structure obtained in the production cultures of British film, where sound from its early days was aligned with technology and placed in opposition to creativity, which was claimed as the preserve of cinematography.¹⁴ These hierarchies have been duplicated in archival collections, with the result that film histories have relegated sound to footnote status due to a lack of archival sources. In the context of British film history, for example, producers, directors and writers dominate the

15 For a full list of interviewees, see <<http://historyproject.org.uk/>>.

16 Roy Perkins and Martin Stollery, *British Film Editors: The Heart of the Movie* (London: BFI Publishing, 2004).

17 See Scott Anthony and James G. Mansell (eds), *The Projection of Britain: A History of the GPO Film Unit* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan/BFI, 2011).

18 Any assessment of British film sound would need to include the sound work of John Cox, Peter Handford, Harry Miller and Winston Ryder, amongst others. Hollywood's sound history has fared only slightly better, with Helen Hanson's forthcoming *Hollywood Soundscapes: Film Sound Style, Craft and Production 1931–1950* promising a much-needed illumination of sound in the classic period. Hanson makes the point that the majority of scholarship has focused on contemporary sound design at the expense of the Hollywood studio era, an oversight which she attributes to the dominant discourse of 'New Hollywood' as a renaissance era in terms of technology and creativity. See Hanson, 'Sound affects: post-production sound, soundscapes and sound design in Hollywood's studio era', *Music, Sound and Moving Image*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2007), pp. 30–31.

19 Formed in 1933 and initially the Association of Cine-Technicians (ACT), the union changed to the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) in 1956 following the introduction of commercial television.

Special Collections of the BFI. Only a small number of sound technicians have been interviewed as part of the BECTU History Project – twenty-five from a cohort of over 600 interviewees – but their testimonies are especially welcome given the lack of sources available elsewhere.¹⁵ The pioneering soundwork of individual filmmaking units has been singled out for critical attention – the GPO Film Unit is a case in point – but to date there are no publications for sound that are on a par with Roy Perkins and Martin Stollery's *British Film Editors*,¹⁶ which writes a history of British filmmaking from the perspective of the editor and editing, and includes archival sources and invaluable interview material.¹⁷ The 'British Silent Cinema and the Transition to Sound 1927–1933' project promises to provide much needed scholarship on the subject, but the focus on the transitional years leaves the period following the establishment of sound under-researched. There is a pressing need for a history of British film sound, which remains a largely uncharted territory, though that is regrettably beyond the scope of this essay.¹⁸

The limited availability of documentation pertaining to sound is exacerbated by gender, with women doubly sidelined in a field already marginalized in production hierarchies. Of the twenty-five BECTU interviews, for example, only one is with a woman, the sound recordist Christine Collins, whilst roles such as Foley artist, for which women were employed, did not receive screen credits until the mid 1980s. Thus one of the key mechanisms through which women's historical labour was recorded and can be traced is elided. To draw a map of the history of women's soundwork therefore raises methodological challenges for the feminist historian trying to craft a narrative for female sound technicians. This situation is all too familiar to those engaged in researching areas of women's film history in which women's participation is often undocumented through official mechanisms, requiring the researcher to move laterally and look obliquely in the hunt for evidence. In this essay I draw across a range of historical sources, including the traditional (industry journals) and the less conventional (oral histories and trade union data). The map offered here is partial and provisional, with gaps and absences that have yet to be filled, but it does represent a long overdue starting point in the history of British sound and the role of women within that field.

The key source I use to trace historical women's work in British film sound are trade union records. Sound technicians in Britain were members of the Association of Cine-Technicians (ACT, later renamed ACTT), the union which organized and regulated employment in the British film industry.¹⁹ Until the 1980s the film industry was a closed shop, which meant that all technicians had to join this union in order to secure regular employment. This included not only negative cutters and clapper loaders but directors, producers and other above-the-line roles. The union holds a complete run of its membership records, which number approximately 67,000 for the years between 1930 and 1991.

These records cover film technicians and, from 1955 onwards, those working in commercial television. They record members' names, gender, rates of pay, job titles, employers and departments, thus providing a unique insight into a core sector of the media production workforce across a wide range of roles, grades and historical periods. As part of my AHRC-funded project mentioned above, I have been working with a small team in partnership with the union and the organization Learning on Screen to digitize these records and create a research database; it is material from that database, currently under development, that I draw on in this essay.²⁰

20 Learning on Screen is a UK charity and membership organization (formerly the British Universities Film and Video Council), concerned with the use of the moving image in education. The research database will be widely available through its platform from 2018 onwards.

21 ACT Sub-Committee Report (1947) formalizing grades and inter-union disputes (ACT, ETU, NATKE).

Sound technicians were members of the union's sound recording department, which listed eight grades in its 1947 handbook: supervisor; sound recordist (mixer); sound camera operator; boom operator; assistant boom operator; laboratory contact; sound loader; sound effects.²¹ The database contains the records of 4050 sound technicians who were granted union membership in British film or commercial television between 1930 and 1991. Of these, 3800 are men and 248 are women, a clearly significant imbalance of gender. Half of the 248 women came into the profession in the 1980s across a wide range of sound roles, including recordists, assistants and effects librarians, and for a variety of employers and/or media outlets such as television, the grant-aided sector, features, commercials and sound equipment hire. Of the remaining 124 women, only one was granted union membership in the 1930s (as a sound cutter in 1936) but fifty-five were taken on during World War II, with a further ten in the immediate postwar years (between 1946 and 1949). From the 1950s onwards the numbers of women granted union membership in sound grades settled at one or two per annum, until the upturn in the 1980s.

These records show that sound as a field of production was deeply gendered and masculinized, not an area of the industry in which women regularly found employment. In fact their recruitment during World War II highlights that it was only under the conditions of dire social emergency that the industry would tolerate women in sound roles, a pattern that was consistent with other technical grades such as camera and lighting, which were similarly closed to women. Looking more closely at the sound roles women undertook during wartime highlights clear employment pathways. Of the fifty-five women recruited during this period, the majority were employed in the film-processing laboratories, principally in semiskilled roles such as sound wave operator, a grade that involved quality control for the soundtrack. Smaller numbers were employed in the laboratories in more skilled or supervisory roles such as sound printer, sound track inspector and sound control examiner. Although these were responsible jobs that required meticulous attention to detail, they were at the technical rather than the creative end of the sound production spectrum.

Only a handful of women were taken on during the war as recordists, editors, loaders and camera trainees, and there is little evidence to suggest

22 See *Grace's Guide to British Industrial History*, <http://www.gracesguide.co.uk/British_Acoustic_Films> accessed 4 September 2017.

that their careers were longlived. Jeanne Polden and Blanche Gregory were taken on in 1941 and 1943 respectively as sound recordists for British Acoustic Films Ltd²² – a subsidiary of the Rank Organisation that specialized in developing 16mm and 35mm sound recording equipment – but I have not yet been able to find any evidence of their work for the company. Hannah Levy joined the sound department of Gainsborough Studios in 1942 as a film loader, having previously spent two years working in the offices of British Acoustic Films Ltd, with Una Johnson taking up a film loader post for Rock Studios, Borehamwood in the same year. Again, I have so far been unable to find any further evidence of their film work. Edith Kanturek, a Czech national, gained union membership in 1941 when she joined the staff of Twentieth Century Fox as a sound camera trainee. It is likely that Kanturek was the widow of Otto Kanturek, an Austrian cameraman and cinematographer who was professionally active from about 1915 onwards in Paris, Vienna, Berlin and then London, where he died in a plane crash in 1941. Edith Kanturek has two film credits as a Sound Camera Operator to her name – *We Dive at Dawn* (Anthony Asquith, 1943) and *It's That Man Again* (Walter Forde, 1943) – after which the historian's trail goes cold.

The short career of another sound camera trainee, Joan Salter, gives a glimpse of how women were recruited into the more prestigious reaches of the profession. Salter was taken on in the sound department of the well-established film company Gaumont-British Pictures in 1942. A single woman in her mid twenties, she had trained as a science teacher and had been working at a girls' school when war broke out and she registered for war work. The head of Gaumont, Maurice Ostrer, was looking to recruit women with science training and Salter joined the sound department under the dubbing mixer William Salter (no relation). But her career in film sound did not extend beyond the war years and she returned to teaching in 1946.²³ That her brief career in sound was exceptional rather than ordinary is evidenced by her receiving special mention in the union's journal *The Cine-Technician* in 1946.

It is clear, then, that professional opportunities for women in sound were exceptionally limited in the mid twentieth century and did not significantly improve until the 1980s. A pattern of vertical and horizontal segregation is evident. The majority of women's war work was confined to laboratory processing, whilst the small numbers employed in more prestigious and creative sound roles – often as a result of education and/or family connections – had careers that were shortlived. Things improved slightly in the 1950s and 1960s when women were taken on as sound loaders, sound boom operators, sound librarians and sound assistants, but numbers were still low. Only seven women in total were granted union membership in sound roles between 1950 and 1959, compared to the over 100 men during the same period.

23 'Women's work', *The Cine-Technician*, vol. 12, no. 58 (1946), pp. 11, 18.

This is not to say that women were entirely absent as soundmakers in the British film industry, and two women, Elisabeth Lutyens and Daphne Oram, are especially noteworthy. Between 1946 and the late 1960s Lutyens made a major contribution to British cinema sound. Whilst her professional interest was in modernist, avant-garde composition, she used film work to pay her household bills, scoring documentaries for the Crown and Gold Coast Film Units in the 1940s before specializing in scores for horror films in the 1960s. Lutyens was widely recognized both at the time and subsequently for her significant creative contribution to horror sound. In a 1974 interview for the film journal *Sight and Sound* she reflected on her craft, describing it as ‘a form of musical journalism which can be excellent of its sort, like an enormously good and interesting article in a paper’.²⁴ Her musical compositions for films by Freddie Francis such as *Paranoiac* (1963), *Dr Terror’s House of Horrors* (1965) and *The Skull* (1965), for example, are wonderfully experimental and modernist, using dissonant elements to build a sense of the sinister and unease.

24 Lutyens, cited in Sue Harper, *Women in British Cinema* (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 5.

Less prolific but equally important is the film work of the pioneering composer and electronic musician Daphne Oram. Cofounder of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, she developed a system of electronic sound synthesis known as ‘Oramics’ through the 1950s and 1960s. Oram is a major figure in the history of electronic music, scoring for television, radio, commercials and occasionally film, with her credits including *Birthingright* (Sarah Erulkar, 1958), a short documentary produced by Basic Films for the Family Planning Association. Oram worked on the film as sound advisor and included live-action and recorded sound, which she processed creatively through the use of ‘filters, time delays and reverberation’, pushing the documentary’s sound towards the expressionistic rather than realistic.²⁵ She also contributed to the remarkable sound of the feature film *The Innocents* (Jack Clayton, 1961), an adaptation of Henry James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). The film is widely acknowledged as a masterclass in cinematic horror, with its use of cinematography rightly singled out for praise, but its soundwork is similarly inventive. The composer Georges Auric wrote the score and collaborated with Oram, whose contributions were uncredited. The score is highly effective in the way it takes seemingly everyday sounds such as birdsong and children’s laughter and manipulates them to uncanny effect, generating what Louis Niebur describes as the film’s ‘atmosphere of unease’.²⁶

25 Tim Boon, ‘*Birthingright* (1958)’, *BFI screenonline*, <<http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1402554/>> accessed 2 September 2017.

26 Louis Niebur, *Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 72.

Lutyens and Oram made significant contributions to British film sound but they are atypical in the history of women and sound. As composers and musicians their principal work lay outside the British film industry, and they were hired for their specialist skills on a film-by-film basis rather than being part of the institutional fabric. Their careers leave unchallenged the emerging narrative around women and sound which locates women – where they feature at all – in ancillary rather than supervisory roles.

27 Laraine Porter, 'From silence to sound: women working on the transition to sound in the British film industry 1927–1933', paper delivered at the Doing Women's Film and Television Histories Conference, De Montfort University, May 2016.

28 *Patterns of Discrimination Against Women in the Film and Television Industries* (London: ACTT, 1975).

29 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 9.

32 Sarah Benton, 'Women's work: dubbing bird song or battle scenes?', *Film and Television Technician*, March 1974, pp. 22–23.

How did women's participation in sound work come to be so gendered? Importantly, their initial exclusion from the majority of sound roles stems from practices laid down in the 1930s following the introduction of cinematic sound. Laraine Porter has demonstrated how, as the film industry made the transition from silent to sound cinema, it drew on expertise from the BBC, whose sound technicians were all 'men in brown coats'.²⁷ They established and then dominated the habits of production that came to characterize the feature film industry's sound departments. Once an all-male environment was established, women were unlikely to be admitted and indeed were excluded at the point of entry, a pattern that was consistent with technical grades in areas such as camera and lighting. In 1975 the ACTT union published a comprehensive report on gender discrimination in the film and television industries that highlighted current and historical practices.²⁸ It identified how girls were taken on by film and television companies at eighteen as clerks, whilst boys were employed in the post-room. From here they progressed through gendered pathways: male post-room workers into editing, camera and sound, where they would receive on-the-job training, gain experience and move up through the ranks; female clerks into secretarial and production assistant roles.²⁹ This system made it extremely difficult for women to either gain a toe-hold or make a lateral move. In addition, employers had a set of assumptions relating to technology that favoured men. One recruiter expected his sound trainees to have 'fiddled around with radios or tape recorders a lot' as evidence of being 'mechanically or electrically minded'.³⁰ These skills and competences were widely assumed to be the natural preserve of men. In the union's report, for example, a male sound recordist expressed concerns about women's physical strength and their inability to 'get on' with machinery, comments that were indicative of a wider set of social and cultural habits, beliefs and practices that worked against women's full participation in sound production.³¹ This gendered belief system also extended to the types of sounds that were deemed appropriate for women to handle. When women did manage, in the 1970s, to get a toe-hold in sound grades such as dubbing, they found restrictions placed on their work. A female dubbing editor reported being denied the opportunity to dub a battle scene because the subject matter was deemed by her male employer to be 'man's work'.³² These were the power dynamics, manifest in a web of habits, beliefs, practices and traditions, that framed women's participation as sound technicians in the British film industry in the decades between the 1930s and the 1980s.

In light of these systems and structures, such opportunities as there were for women to work in sound in more comprehensive and ambitious ways lay outside the feature film industry, in the less prestigious sectors of documentaries, shorts, industrial and educational films. The professional profile of Christine Collins, the only female sound technician to be interviewed for the BECTU History Project, sheds light on a particular type of career pathway for women in sound in the mid

33 Christine Collins, BECTU interview no. 345 (1995), BECTU History Project, transcribed by the AHRC-funded project 'Histories of Women's Work in the British Film and Television Industries, 1933–1989'.

34 Ibid.

35 Christine Collins, interview with Martyn Harries, *Wild Film History*, 17 March 2010, <<http://wildfilmhistory.org/oh/67/Christine+Collins.html>> accessed 4 September 2017.

36 Ibid.

37 Collins, BECTU interview.

38 Collins, interview with Martyn Harries.

39 Caroline Boucher, 'Michaela Denis', *The Guardian*, 13 May 2003, <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2003/may/13/broadcasting.guardianobituaries>> accessed 4 September 2017.

40 Collins, BECTU interview.

twentieth century. Collins started work in 1956, aged fifteen, as a Girl Friday for Armand and Michaela Denis, a husband-and-wife team who made pioneering animal wildlife films for cinema and the BBC, including their trademark show *On Safari* (BBC, 1957–59, 1961–65). As a small, independent outfit, the Denises had a support team of just four. Collins started out sweeping the floor but was soon trained up on all aspects of production, from lacing the projector to dubbing and mixing music and sound effects for the films' soundtracks.³³ Working to tight deadlines and in a small team meant that, in Collins's words, 'everybody had to learn to do everything', and she quickly became skilled as a sound technician. When the editor David Garner left the company, Collins became head of the *On Safari* team.³⁴ This meant taking full responsibility for the programme's soundtracks, with Collins recalling that Armand Denis, as a producer, took a hands-off approach: 'He was never there when we were doing it'.³⁵ Armand would provide a track of commentary and occasionally one of non-synched location sound effects, although his tendency to 'just record anything' meant that Collins might be left with material ranging from 'five minutes of flamingos at Lake Naivasha' to 'dogs barking and mongooses'.³⁶ To these Collins would add music and material from 'primitive records of sound effects ... usually birds, water'.³⁷ Under her leadership, *On Safari* evolved from early programmes using only recorded music to later ones with soundtracks that she describes as 'much more up to date and much more real ... they got much more sophisticated'.³⁸ The programmes proved so popular with audiences that the BBC increased the Denises' broadcast slot from fifteen to thirty minutes.³⁹ *On Safari* established many of the genre conventions of the animal wildlife programme, and Collins played a major part in developing its sound style.

When the BBC ended its contract with the Denises in 1967, Collins moved to Gateway Film Productions, a bigger outfit that specialized in industrial and educational films and commercials. Collins joined as assistant editor in the sound department under the supervision of the company's sound engineer and recordist, but when the engineer became ill she stepped into his role, taking responsibility for mixing, dubbing, managing the effects library and location sound recording. As she recalls in her BECTU interview, 'after about two or three years I suppose I was totally in charge'. The company's client list was diverse – including Imperial Tobacco, the National Children's Home, charities and religious organizations – and Collins's work varied from recording sound in a steel foundry to deciding how best to mic-up the novelist Barbara Cartland, who was wearing a pink evening dress and ermine stole for a promotional film about health foods.⁴⁰

Collins worked as a sound recordist and dubbing editor from the mid 1950s into the 2000s, her fifty-year career indicating that greater opportunities existed for women in nonfiction film than in mainstream features. There is more work to be done to establish how representative

41 See Melanie Bell, 'Rebuilding Britain: female creative workers and non-fiction short film production', in *Feminist Media Histories* (forthcoming, 2018).

42 Collins, BECTU interview.

Collins's experience was, but research I have conducted elsewhere on women working as directors and editors indicates that the nonfiction film sector, which flourished in Britain between 1950 and the 1970s, did indeed offer more employment opportunities to women filmmakers than the features sector.⁴¹ Certainly there are tantalizing references in Collins's interview to other women members of the *On Safari* team who contributed to sound, including Mrs Winnie Dunn, whom Collins describes as 'a whiz' at mixing voiceover commentary.⁴² This suggests an as yet uncovered history of women's soundwork, although whether the documentation exists to write that history is uncertain. It is worth noting that despite her eleven years as a sound technician, Collins only received union membership when she joined Gateway Film Productions, presumably because the Denises' company was so small it operated under the radar of union administration. This highlights one of the limitations of union records as a source through which to trace the work of film technicians. Whilst this observation applies to both men and women, it is likely to be gendered if, as seems feasible, more women through necessity worked for small production companies. It is through these types of recording mechanisms and documentation processes that women's labour is doubly hidden and their contribution to British sound history elided. This occlusion paradoxically brings into view how the processes of writing women's film history can also revise our perspective on how we understand British film production, widening the frame to include non-features and smaller companies.

Women continued to look beyond the features sector for soundwork in the 1970s and 1980s, although now opportunities were filtered through the lens of second-wave feminism. Some women elected to work outside the mainstream in either avant-garde or collective practice, others took the feminist principle of women-only groups and applied it to film training. In 1974 a 'Day School for Women' was held at the newly formed National Film School, with the remit of giving women in the film industry opportunities to learn about professional equipment, including cameras, sound recording equipment and a dubbing suite.⁴³ The Day School and similar subsequent training events arose as women became increasingly vocal about their exclusion from the film industry and its restrictive employment and training practices. By organizing collectively they were able to develop initiatives offering an alternative to the 'on-the-job' training traditions that had historically excluded women.

Some of the new pathways into soundwork for women were steeped in the old prejudices of production hierarchies that privileged the visual over sound. The sound recordist Elaine Drainville, who worked for the Amber Film Collective in the 1980s, recalled that her first introduction to sound on a 1970s student film happened when she was left with the role because 'nobody else wanted to do sound. It's not the most popular grade.'⁴⁴ Similar prejudices were echoed by the documentary filmmaker Melanie Chait, who recalled being treated as 'just a technician' by some directors when she worked as a sound recordist in the early 1980s – the

43 *The Film and Television Technician*, November 1974.

44 Elaine Drainville (2015), interviewed for the AHRC-funded 'Histories of Women's Work' research project.

45 Melanie Chait, personal correspondence with author, 9 May 2016. Indeed when starting her career in the mid 1970s Chait was advised to take up sound 'as a way of having access to filmmaking', indicating its status as a stepping-stone grade rather than an end in its own right. Melanie Chait interview, in Anne Ross Muir, *A Woman's Guide to Jobs in Film and Television* (London: Pandora, 1987), p. 289.

term used pejoratively to indicate the lower status of sound relative to camera on set.⁴⁵ It was through a combination of greater training opportunities and production hierarchies – which took place against a backdrop of increasing levels of media production after the economic recession of the 1970s – that the number of women working as sound technicians increased in the 1980s. Records from the union database show that half of the total number of female sound technicians registered with the union (124 of 248) came into the profession in this decade, in roles such as sound recordist, sound assistant and sound effects librarian, working for television and commercials companies, the grant-aided sector and in sound equipment hire. Of the twenty-eight women registered with the union as sound recordists in the 1980s, some freelanced, others worked for small outfits specializing in non-broadcast video, and many were employed by the grant-aided workshops that flourished in Britain from the 1970s onwards, such as the Sheffield Film Co-op (Moya Burns, Christine Bellamy), Four Corners (Elisabeth Rhodes), Cinema Action (Julia Fricker) and Amber (Elaine Drainville). These groups had a distinct political agenda, worked collectively and operated outside mainstream production, distribution and exhibition structures.

The experience of Burns illustrates the type of career pathways that were open to sound women in the 1980s. After a degree in photography and film at Sheffield Art College, Burns worked in the BFI's Bradford-based resource centre, recording music and developing an effects library. From here she worked as a sound recordist on a range of feminist shorts and documentaries, including *Doll's Eye* (Jan Worth, BFI/Channel 4, 1982), *Bred and Born* (Joanna Davis and Mary Leece, Four Corners, 1983) and *Red Skirts on Clydeside* (Jenny Woodley and Christine Bellamy, Sheffield Film Co-op, 1984). With this experience behind her she was well placed to take advantage of the opportunities for filmmaking that were being offered by new independent production companies in Britain such as Channel 4. In a 1992 interview Burns reflected that 'independent filmmakers ... didn't have the old traditional attitudes towards women, and were very flexible'. Changes to financing and genre preferences made the feature-film industry more open to women. Burns found that 'there are not so many hard-boiled areas, like big budget features [... and that] Channel 4 ... have a different emphasis on the type of film they want to make, and this filters right down to the type of crew they want to employ'.⁴⁶ Burns subsequently made the shift from documentaries and experimental work into independent features, working on Terence Davies's *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (1988) and *The Long Day Closes* (1992).

The experience of Burns is echoed by the director and sound recordist Melanie Chait (*Bred and Born*, *Veronica 4 Rose* [1983]) who describes making a conscious decision to work in the independent sector because 'the people who employ me often have some tenuous understanding of women's issues'.⁴⁷ This relatively more hospitable

46 *In Camera*, Spring 1992, p. 4.

47 Muir, *A Woman's Guide*, pp. 291–92.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Adele Fletcher, 'Exploring the film industry through the ears of a woman', paper presented at the 'Breaking the Sound Barrier: Women Sounding Out in British Film and Television', symposium held at the BFI, London, 18 June 2016.

51 Jack Stew, quoted in 'Trade secrets'. For Jason Swanscott she was 'The greatest Foley artist in Great Britain' (ibid.).

environment still presented challenges, including 'scepticism about my abilities and the feeling that you have to prove yourself in a way that men don't'. It was preferable, however, to shooting abroad, where Chait found she was often the only female crew member and regularly had to deal with sexual harassment.⁴⁸ The onus was on her to 'get out of it in as delicate a way as you can, because you have got to live with these people for three weeks and you don't want the whole crew dynamics to go sour'.⁴⁹ These examples highlight the gendered power dynamics and production contexts in which women sound technicians worked at this time.

The 1980s was a time of modest success for women sound technicians in Britain, with more entrants into the profession than in previous decades and across an increasingly diverse range of roles. Nonfiction and independent feature films afforded women opportunities for soundwork, but commercial, big-budget features remained the preserve of male sound technicians. No sound women worked on the decade's most high-profile British films, such as *The Killing Fields* (Roland Joffé, 1984), *Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough, 1982) and *A Passage to India* (David Lean, 1984). More research is needed to establish whether this trajectory continued into the 1990s and beyond, and how women negotiated changes to the production landscape such as the demise of the workshop sector and the film production branch of Channel 4. That is, however, outside the scope of this essay and the statistical data available to me through the ACTT database. Provisional work by the sound editor and academic Adele Fletcher promises to provide much needed scholarship on this contemporary history of women and British sound.⁵⁰ Where sound women did prosper in feature film production was in the role of the Foley artist, and it is to this, and to the career of 'the mother of Foley' Beryl Mortimer, that I now turn.

Mortimer worked as a Foley artist in the British film industry from the mid 1950s to the end of the 1990s. By the time she retired her professional reputation was so well established that younger Foley artists credited her as 'the mother of us all. She was the most creative and had staying power'.⁵¹ During her forty-year career she provided Foley effects for a significant number of feature films – the exact number is difficult to establish, as Foley artists did not receive screen credits until the mid 1980s, but my research suggests a conservative estimate of at least fifty. These include many films widely acknowledged as central to film history, from epics such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (David Lean, 1962), *2001, A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, 1968), *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978), *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989) and the *Alien* and James Bond franchises, to non-mainstream classics including *The Gold Diggers* (Sally Potter, 1983), *Caravaggio* (Derek Jarman, 1986) and *Welcome to Sarajevo* (Michael Winterbottom, 1997). She was recognized nationally and internationally by her peers for her professional contribution to the field, winning a BFI Award for Sound Effects in 1981 and a nomination

52 Stan Fiferman, Beryl Mortimer obituary, *Stage, Screen and Radio*, September 2001, p. 22.

53 Credits listed here are indicative rather than comprehensive.

54 See Whittington *Sound Design and Science Fiction*; Benjamin Wright, 'Footsteps with character: the art and craft of Foley', *Screen*, vol. 55, no. 2, (2014), pp. 204–20; Matt Lewis, 'Ventriloquial acts: critical reflections on the art of Foley', *The New Soundtrack*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2015), pp. 103–20.

55 Vanessa Theme Ament, *The Foley Grail: The Art of Performing Sound for Film, Games and Animation* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2009), p. xiv.

56 Whittington, *Sound Design and Science Fiction*, p. 140.

57 'Trade secrets', p. 11.

for a Motion Picture Sound Editors Golden Reel award in 1995 for her work on *GoldenEye* (Martin Campbell, 1995). Appreciation of Mortimer's skills as a craft specialist extended beyond the film industry to the visual arts, and in 1996 she was the subject of Tacita Dean's sound installation *Foley Artist*, hosted at the then Tate Gallery. Known within the industry as 'Beryl the Boot' for her skills as a footstepper (the term historically used in Britain to describe Foley work), when she died in 2001 the trade press described her as 'an icon in her field'.⁵²

My research for this essay suggests that Mortimer was not alone as a woman working in this area of the industry. To her name we can add those of Jean Sheffield (*Oliver!*, *Carry On* films, *Brassed Off*), Jennie Lee Wright (*Shakespeare in Love*, *Die Another Day*), Pauline Griffith (*Waterland*, *Evita*), Pam Finch (*Hilary and Jackie*), Diane Greaves (*Orlando*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Billy Elliot*), Felicity Cottrell (*Sexy Beast*, *28 Days Later*, *Troy*), Sue Harding (*Quantum of Solace*, *Mission Impossible*, *Rogue Nation*), Andie Derrick (*The King's Speech*, *Casino Royale*, *Band of Brothers*) and Andrea King (*The Martian*, *Jason Bourne*).⁵³ As Foley work is a niche area of production, with the British industry generally supporting between ten and fifteen professionals working at any one time, the relatively high proportion of women in the workforce is suggestive. The body of scholarship on Foley work, both in its own right or as an element of a film's sound design, is small and focuses on contemporary Hollywood.⁵⁴ This leaves unexamined the historical development of Foley in British cinema and what seems to be the gendering of the role in the British context. It is useful to examine the role and its function, focusing on skills, training and career trajectories, before moving on to analyse in more detail Mortimer's career and her Foley work on *Lawrence of Arabia*. My aim is to construct a microhistory of the role through the career trajectory of one of its founding figures, and from that to reflect critically on questions of gender and film history.

The American Foley artist Vanessa Theme Ament describes Foley as 'the art and craft of designing and recording performed sound effects in sync to the film [...] the footsteps, props and cloth movement of all the characters'.⁵⁵ Historically footsteps were the most common effect made by a Foley artist, but the scope of Foley now extends to cover almost all aspects of onscreen action, from character movements to armaments.⁵⁶ The British Foley artist Sheffield outlines the process and some of the skills required:

It can take several tracks to build up a Foley sequence – first you do the footsteps, then you might do the clothing noises before going back to do the effects – kettles boiling, cutlery clattering etc. You've got to be quick and sometimes you're required to do dance steps. You almost have to feel like the character and you can't get that from digital samples. A lot of Americans use libraries of footsteps but they're not practical and always going out of sync.⁵⁷

58 Ibid., p. 12.

59 Of the nine British women mentioned above, five come from a performing arts background.

60 Interview with Diana Greaves, in Barbara Baker, *Let the Credits Roll: Interviews with Film Crew* (London: Aston House Press, 2003), p. 225.

61 Ibid., p. 228.

62 Kevin Brownlow, *How It Happened Here* (Bristol: UKA Press, 2005), pp. 179–80.

63 'Trade secrets', p. 12.

64 Whittington, *Sound Design and Science Fiction*, p. 140

65 Richard Cork, *Breaking Down the Barriers: Art in the 1990s* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 149.

Character identification is a recurring motif in descriptions by Foley artists of their work. Derrick explains it as 'not just about creating a basic sound, it's also about getting into the characters ... if there are a lot of cuts (or bad cuts), that can change the rhythm and, if the actors' movements go out of sync you can feel it'.⁵⁸ To perform a character's sound effects you have to understand both the character and the rhythms of performance, which suggest strong links between Foley and acting, and indeed many performers come from a background in theatre, music or dance.⁵⁹ Foley artists emphasize skills in improvisation, creativity, timing and versatility. They might have to walk like an eighteen-stone man and tap-dance like a twelve-year-old boy, as Greaves did in *Billy Elliot* (Stephen Daldry, 2000).⁶⁰ They have to, in her words, 'learn how to create sounds', and she uses the example of recreating skateboard sounds in a studio:

Blades on their own don't make a noise so you have to work at creating a sound which makes the film sound exciting. Sounds have got to be believable, even though they are not the real sounds – that is the difficulty of the job.⁶¹

Directors recognize the contribution that good Foley sound makes to the finished film. Kevin Brownlow, who worked with Mortimer on his 1965 film *It Happened Here*, described how she 'supplied the noises with uncanny precision: the little hesitations on the edge of the pavement, the flatter sound on the steps', concluding 'these simple noises brought each shot alive'.⁶² As a director Brownlow is well aware of the ways in which craft specialists such as Mortimer make a significant creative contribution to the collaborative process of filmmaking.

In accounts of Foley work, many performers draw a hierarchical distinction between library sound and the live action sound that they provide. Jack Stew (*Slumdog Millionaire*, *Jason Bourne*) explains, 'you can find car crashes on CDs ... but libraries of sampled sounds and sampled effects could never replace what we do ... [which] is specific to the picture'.⁶³ Stew's comments, like Derrick's on 'basic sound', suggest that Foley artists understand their own practice as more than merely replicating the sound of screen images. For them it is an artistic practice where they produce a bespoke sound that contributes to the narrative in a more subtle and responsive way than library sound. In his research on sound design, Whittington describes Foley as giving 'the two-dimensional image greater depth and credibility', rounding out and layering the soundscape of the story world.⁶⁴ The art critic Richard Cork, on encountering Mortimer's work for Dean's *Foley Artist*, described it as 'a form of sonic sculpture [... with] an astonishingly three-dimensional impact'.⁶⁵ These descriptions and definitions point to the creative contribution Foley and its artists bring to the filmmaking process, and how attending to their work can add a new dimension to our understanding of film and how meaning is created.

66 Whittington makes a similar point in *Sound Design and Science Fiction*, p. 149.

67 Wright, 'Footsteps with character', p. 207.

68 Ibid.

69 *Action! Fifty Years in the Life of a Union*, p. 127.

70 Jack Stew, personal correspondence with the author (2016). See also Lionel Selwyn, 'Stepping out', Association of Motion Picture Sound (AMPS) newsletter (2003). This practice was certainly the case when working on film rather than digital production.

71 Ibid.

72 The former dates from the 1930s, the latter from the 1960s, thus both cover time periods where Foley performers were an active part of the filmmaking process. It is only with the creation of AMPS in the mid 1980s that Foley began to have a voice in industry publications in Britain.

There are methodological challenges to studying Foley, however, especially when researching historically. Practitioner interviews and memoirs are an invaluable source, particularly as the kind of empirical materials that document Foley work, such as cue sheets and sound logs, are rarely retained by producers or studios, and therefore seldom make it into archives.⁶⁶ Nor are Foley artists represented in the ACTT union database, despite their contribution to British film sound. This is explained by the delay in recognizing the job as a distinct occupational category, the timeframe for compiling screen credits and the hierarchies of film production cultures. In the USA, for example, it was 1962 before the practice of direct-to-picture recording was referred to as 'Foley effects', and some years later before Foley performers were inserted into the labour structure of the Hollywood sound production team.⁶⁷ Some Foley workers were members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and others of the Editors Guild, yet many had no union or guild affiliation at all.⁶⁸

Britain followed a similar pattern. Foley performers or footsteppers could not be easily accommodated in the dubbing editor grade, whilst the sound effects role was used in the industry to refer to on-set technicians who provided 'gunpowder and smoke' – explosions, firearms and cloud machines.⁶⁹ Foley performers were not part of the sound recording department that worked on the film shoot, but were hired by a dubbing or sound editor who managed postproduction work. This put them in an ancillary role, and their invisibility relative to the production team was compounded by the practice of compiling screen credits before postproduction work was completed.⁷⁰ Or perhaps, as the British sound editor and Foley artist Lionel Selwyn astutely observed, 'could it be that their contribution is not considered sufficiently important to justify that recognition?'⁷¹ Their absence from trade union records means that key information about numbers of practitioners and rates of pay is missing, and raises wider questions about which forms of craft work were acknowledged within the industry and by whom. Foley performers do not have a presence in the kinds of professional publications one might reasonably expect: the union's own trade journal *The Cine Technician*, for example, or the *Journal of British Kinematograph, Sound and Television Society*.⁷² These are the types of absence from official documentation that frame how we research and write film history. In my discussion of Mortimer I have drawn on the correspondence and memoirs of her coworkers, as no extant written material or commentary by Mortimer herself has thus far come to light. I supplement this with an analysis of a key scene from *Lawrence of Arabia* to which Mortimer contributed Foley sound. From these sources I piece together a speculative narrative about her professional career and her soundwork.

Searching for Mortimer in the BFI's database shows her first entry for uncredited Foley work on *Lawrence of Arabia*, but a memoir written by

73 Selwyn, 'Stepping out'.

74 Fiferman, Beryl Mortimer obituary, p. 22.

75 Personal correspondence with the author.

76 Ament, in *The Foley Grail*, p. 10, comments that historically women were employed for footsteps and prop sounds in the USA, with many recruited from a dance background, a tradition which grew out of post-sync work on Hollywood musicals. In the UK there was a tendency for men to do 'heavier' sounds and women 'lighter' ('Trade secrets', p. 9).

77 Jennie Lee Wright, Pauline Griffith, Dianne Greaves and Andie Derrick came into Foley from a performing arts background.

the sound editor Selwyn describes her as 'the footstepper [...] of the fifties'.⁷³ Selwyn recalls meeting Mortimer at Ealing Studios, where he worked from 1953 onwards, and his description of her suggests she had a well-established career and was already widely-known as a Foley professional. Selwyn's account includes hearsay evidence that Mortimer had entered the film industry as an actress, working as an understudy for Helen Cherry. There is some corroboration to support this. The sound editor and Foley artist Stan Fiferman, who was one of Mortimer's Foley partners for many years, claimed that Mortimer was 'Discovered by the famous Harry Miller (sound editor) at Pinewood Studios' where she was doing location work.⁷⁴ The only film which Cherry and Miller worked on together was *They Were Not Divided* (Terence Young, 1950), which dates Mortimer's acting career as late 1949/early 1950; Stew, a fellow Foley artist who worked with Mortimer in the 1980s, dates it to 1948 and a small uncredited speaking part on *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1948). According to Stew, Mortimer claimed she had been a member of the Rank Charm School in Britain, a training ground for aspiring young actors in the late 1940s and early 1950s, whose famous alumni include Diana Dors and Joan Collins.⁷⁵ As Rank typically recruited young actresses aged between eighteen and twenty-two, Mortimer would have been approximately twenty in 1948, which would place her date of birth at around 1928. From these scraps of information, a biography and pre-Foley career for Mortimer begins to come into view.

There are two accounts of how Mortimer made the transition from aspirational actress of the late 1940s to established Foley artist of the mid 1950s, although they are not mutually exclusive. Fiferman, in his obituary notice for Mortimer, credits the sound editor Harry Miller with introducing Mortimer to Foley work. In contrast, Stew claims that Mortimer worked as an assistant to Fred Bell and 'Laddie' Ladbrook, two BBC sound effects men who moonlighted in the British film industry in the early 1950s. The assistant role would have given Mortimer plenty of opportunity to watch the men at work and learn Foley techniques. Sound effects men would have been interested in having a woman as part of the team, as historical accounts suggest that Foley artists were hired in twos, with a preference for teams of one man and one woman. In Ament's account of Hollywood, she suggests that women were thought to be 'more coordinated' than men, which may suggest a belief in superior skills in synching sound to image, whilst in the British context men were expected to provide 'heavier sound effects such as smashing doors'.⁷⁶ What happened in practice in the sound studio may not have fulfilled these gendered expectations, but the industry preference for mixed Foley pairings where possible would have assisted Mortimer and other women into the role. Mortimer's segue from acting into Foley, and her on-the-job training, is a fairly typical mode of entry into the Foley profession in Britain, and one which is still in evidence today.⁷⁷

78 Gledhill and Knight (and other scholars) make the point that nontraditional forms of evidence are central to women's film history, in *Doing Women's Film History*, pp. 3–5.

79 Cynthia Moody, interview no. 176 (n.d.) BECTU History Project. Indeed working on the film made a deep impression on Moody and she credits the experience as a key moment in her professional development.

80 Selwyn, 'Stepping out'.

81 Similarly the documentation held in the Lean archive at the University of Reading does not pertain to *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Due to the lack of screen credits, the full extent of Mortimer's work in the 1950s, and indeed those who trained her, is not yet known, although evidence in the form of a 'chance mention' is revealing.⁷⁸ Cynthia Moody, who worked as an assistant editor on the feature-length documentary *The Queen in Australia* (1954), recalled vividly in an oral history interview her first meeting on the film with 'Beryl the footsteps lady', and Mortimer's professionalism in post-synching 'Queenie's footsteps'.⁷⁹ Moody's testimony suggests that by 1954 Mortimer's Foley work must have been of sufficient quality for her to be trusted with a high-profile production. Whilst the number of fellow performers in competition for employment is not known, film production levels were buoyant in the 1950s, meaning that work was readily available. Miller, the sound editor who 'discovered' Mortimer, worked on between three and four films per year in the decade, all of them 'A' features, and if Mortimer became the preferred Foley artist for Miller and others like him she would have been kept busy. We can be sure that by the early 1960s her professional reputation was such that she could secure Foley work on prestige productions such as *Lawrence of Arabia*, and I want to examine her soundwork on this film in more detail.

It is not known how much of *Lawrence of Arabia* was Foleyed. According to sound editor/Foley artist Selwyn, the practice in British studios in the 1950s had been to use footsteps 'only where strictly necessary', but the 1960s saw a change in industry practices, with distributors requiring a separate music and effects track for every English-speaking film that was dubbed for foreign markets.⁸⁰ *Lawrence of Arabia* was a big-budget film and, with its perfectionist director (Lean) and a producer ambitious for worldwide sales (Sam Spiegel), it is likely that the Foley work was considerable. Mortimer is the only Foley performer listed on the film's BFI database entry, although Fiferman, in his obituary notice for Mortimer, claimed he worked with her on the film. The precise mechanics of how the pair worked together is unknown, and sources such as the David Lean papers at the BFI do not contain any documentation pertaining to Foley sound on *Lawrence*.⁸¹ This is one of the challenges to teasing out individual levels of creative contribution in roles that are highly collaborative and poorly documented.

What type of Foley work did *Lawrence of Arabia* need? The film is a three-and-a-half-hour historical epic following the literal and metaphorical journey of soldier T.E. Lawrence across the Arabian desert. As the action ranges from battle sequences to scenes in the officer's mess, Foley sounds include footsteps on marble and sand, the cloth movements of stiff military uniforms and gossamer Arabian robes, innumerable armaments (swords, guns, daggers), ice in glasses of lemonade, and animal sounds, principally camels. I want to focus here on the scene in which Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif) first meets Lawrence (Peter O'Toole) at a desert watering hole. In long shot and with a long take, Sherif appears mirage-like on the horizon and gradually comes into the

82 Melanie Williams, *David Lean* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), p. 166.

83 Brownlow, *How It Happened Here*, p. 179.

84 In Kevin Brownlow, *David Lean: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 474.

85 It is for these reasons that David Lean's papers contain no archival traces relating to the creative work of Foley artists.

86 Wright, 'Footsteps with character', pp. 214–15.

foreground, watched by a mesmerized Lawrence and his nervous friend Tafas. The scene is without music, has minimal dialogue and is based around Sherif's dramatic shooting of Tafas, and a tense exchange between the two remaining men. Frequently singled out as 'the film's most celebrated sequence', critical commentary typically focuses on Lean's direction and the cinematography of Freddie Young.⁸² Mortimer's Foley work, however, adds significant dramatic tension. It signals the footsteps of the men on the sand, and their variety in tone and texture – from quick steps to cautious footfalls and stumbling trips – suggests conflicting emotions of fear and curiosity. Foley sound illustrates the wordless desperation of Tafas, his hand scrabbling at the cloth saddlebag to wrench out a gun, whilst his death is indicated by the heavy thud of his gun falling to the sand. The most striking Foley effect is the sound of the camel's hooves as it makes its way into the foreground of the scene. Elegant and lightly trotting, they carry a dramatic weight in the scene, announcing Sherif as an impending threat and signalling his arrival with a 'harrumph' of breath when the animal stops, its body sinking to the ground as Sherif disembarks to confront Lawrence.

According to the director Brownlow, the Foley sound is Mortimer's work. Describing her as 'the best known effects expert' in the field, 'a wizard' and 'a miracle worker', Brownlow recalls that before he worked with her in 1965, Mortimer had recently 'padded on all fours in a box of sand, recording the hoof-beats of camels for *Lawrence of Arabia*'.⁸³ The significance of the scene was recognized by the director Lean, who recalled that

when Omar Sharif comes out of the desert, Win Ryder put in the pad, pad, pad of the camel's feet. It wasn't a real sound, but it added immeasurably to the silence of the desert, the size of it all [...] the soundtrack ... is almost as important as the pictures.⁸⁴

It is no surprise that Lean should credit Ryder with sole creation of the scene's sound, because as a director he would not usually meet the Foley artist in person. Mortimer would have been hired directly by Ryder in his capacity as sound editor and head of the post-sync department.⁸⁵ Lean's comments about the feet not being 'real sound' but adding immeasurably to the scene are astute, instinctively identifying one of the recognized characteristics of the best Foley work as its capacity for 'emotional resonance', to communicate the feeling behind an action or sound.⁸⁶ Performers of Mortimer's calibre were invaluable, adding the kind of depth and dimension to a film that could lift a soundtrack from the ordinary to the memorable. Her efforts were rewarded when *Lawrence of Arabia* won an Oscar for sound, although it was John Cox who received the honour as 'sound director' for the film.

Despite the lack of official screen credits there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Mortimer worked regularly throughout the 1960s and 1970s, notching up Foley credits on many films that used British studios at Shepperton, including *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Superman*, *Alien* (Ridley

87 Stew, personal correspondence with the author, and 'Trade secrets'.

88 Stew, personal correspondence with the author.

89 Ibid.

90 Melanie Williams, 'The continuity girl: ice in the middle of fire', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, vol. 10, no. 3 (2013), pp. 603–17, and Miranda J. Banks, 'Gender below-the-line: defining feminist production studies', in Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John Thornton Caldwell (eds), *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), pp. 87–98.

91 Wright also makes this point in 'Footsteps with character', pp. 207–8, as does Ament in *The Foley Grail*, p. 7.

Scott, 1979), *McKenna's Gold* (J. Lee Thompson, 1969), and many films in the James Bond franchise.⁸⁷ By the 1980s, with the expansion of independent filmmaking through Channel 4 and the BFI, Mortimer was providing Foley sound for experimental filmmakers such as Peter Greenaway (*Drowning by Numbers* [1988], *The Belly of an Architect* [1987]), Sally Potter (*The Gold Diggers* [1983]) and Derek Jarman (*Caravaggio* [1986]), in addition to animation sound for *The BFG* (Brian Cosgrove, 1989). Her range as a Foley performer was considerable, moving across the body genres of *Alien*, with its iconic sounds of frenzied footsteps, male birth and disintegrating synthetic bodies, to the precise dance sequences that fused cabaret tap and classical ballet in Potter's experimental film. By now she had been working in the profession for over thirty years and had established her place as its doyenne, revered by her peers for her creativity and her ability to quite simply 'do anything' in Foley work.⁸⁸ Yet the fact remains that someone who achieved so much in her professional life has no presence in existing film histories.

Nor was she alone as a woman in this field. Stew, who started his Foley career in the 1980s, remembers feeling he was 'unusual' in a profession which was dominated by 'elderly women who'd been doing it for a while'.⁸⁹ Alongside Mortimer were women such as Pam Finch, Jean Sheffield, Jennie Lee Wright and Pauline Griffiths, who collectively were, in Stew's words, a 'formidable' presence who had cornered the market. The industry preference may initially have been for mixed teams, but in Stew's account it was often the case that a team of two women did all the Foley sound for a film, a characteristic of the British film industry that he dates from the 1970s. More research is needed to corroborate this account and to identify the push and pull factors that might explain it (changes in production levels, greater professional opportunities for men, and so on) but the relative dominance of women demands our attention, as does the critical neglect of their role in film histories.

It is likely that women's over-representation in the role contributed to its under-representation in film history, as scholars have found this to be the case in other female-dominated areas such as continuity and costume.⁹⁰ In addition to gender, and indeed imbricated with it, are four factors that have played a part in obscuring Foley work. First is the industry's delay in recognizing it as a distinct occupational category. As late as 1985, for example, Mortimer was still receiving credits as a 'sound effects editor' and a 'dubbing editor' for what I understand to be her Foley work, a peculiarity that is explained by the classification systems the industry used for sound work.⁹¹ This lack of industry recognition has similarly blinded film historians to the role. Second, Foley is a postproduction role whose function, like that of editing, is to work with and amend the existing production track. This gives it secondary status in production hierarchies. Interwoven with this are a set of commonly held beliefs that its function is more imitative than creative, its principal goal being to accurately sync sound to image and reproduce sounds in a 'realistic'

manner – a misconception that has only recently been challenged through practitioner interviews and a greater understanding of what the role entails. Third, the industry practice of Foley artists working in pairs presents a challenge to traditional film histories. Filmmaking processes are, as Gledhill and Knight acknowledge, ‘essentially collaborative [in] nature’, but practices such as ‘partnerships’ and ‘co-creation’ fit awkwardly with conventional notions of authorship, and this leaves them vulnerable to marginalization in scholarship.⁹² Finally, the lack of documentation through which to research Foley work illustrates not only questions of role value and status but reveals something about us as historians. Mapping Foley work specifically, but also women’s soundwork more generally, means piecing things together from scraps of information including anecdotes and hearsay, and being prepared to engage in a greater level of speculation about their significance. As a research process this is something that can be professionally uncomfortable for historians used to dealing with more robust forms of evidence and processes of verification. As the scholar of early Russian cinema Michelle Leigh has shown, when faced with these circumstances we gravitate towards the visible and the verifiable, which has profound consequences for the film histories we produce.⁹³

In the opening to this essay I drew on Lacey and Hilmes’s call to investigate the power dynamics that frame women’s impact on media and their presence in the historical record. In the case of Foley, women’s absence from the historical record is explained by industry classification systems, production hierarchies and the notions of authorship at play in film scholarship, all of which are sharply gendered. The relative invisibility of sound women like Collins is due to the low status of genres such as nonfiction shorts in which she and others worked. These genres have received relatively little attention in film scholarship, although this is gradually changing.⁹⁴

What does the history of women’s soundmaking in British film tell us? When I started this research, the results of my initial union database enquiries were disheartening if not entirely unexpected, which itself reveals something of how women’s participation in the post-silent filmmaking era has been understood.⁹⁵ The numbers of sound women in the database were so low it seemed there was nothing to be said on the subject other than noting that women had made small, temporary inroads during World War II into what was a male stronghold. From this unprepossessing start emerged the long careers of Mortimer and Collins, who made significant creative contributions to British film sound. Importantly it seems plausible they may not be atypical or exceptional women – as were the composers Oram and Lutyens – but representative of a larger cohort, although more research is needed to establish whether this constitutes a tradition of women soundmakers. It seems that the story of women’s creative input to British film sound history – from Foleying classic scenes in Oscar-winning films to laying down the sound

92 Gledhill and Knight (eds), *Doing Women’s Film History*, pp. 6–7.

93 Michele Leigh, ‘Reading between the lines: history and the studio owner’s wife’, in Gledhill and Knight (eds), *Doing Women’s Film History*, p. 49.

94 Landmark publications such as Haidee Wasson and Charles R. Acland (eds), *Useful Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), and Patrick Russell and James Piers Taylor, *Shadows of Progress: Documentary Film in Post-war Britain* (London: BFI Publishing, 2010) have significantly extended our understanding of nonfiction film and appropriate research methodologies for its excavation and analysis.

95 The assumed exclusion of women from sound-era cinema (in anything other than low-status or noncreative roles) has become a well-established narrative in film scholarship, one which has only recently begun to be challenged by the research on Hollywood by Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), and on British film by Sue Harper, *Women in British Cinema: Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* (London: Continuum, 2000).

characteristics of the wildlife genre – is only just beginning to be heard. But the significance of this research extends beyond histories of soundwork. Thinking methodologically, this study has illustrated that absence of documentation does not necessarily amount to absence of women’s (or indeed men’s) creative labour, and that writing history from fragments – for all its historiographic challenges – has the power to significantly revise our thinking of film production beyond the features sector that dominates film discourse. Its further value for future scholarship lies in its potential to bring into view the professional careers and creative lives of historical below-the-line workers – many of them women – who have thus far been absent from traditional cinema histories.

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