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Rebuilding Britain: Women, Work and Non-Fiction Film, 1945-1970

The study of non-fiction film is a growing field of scholarship in film history. A suite of recent publications including *Useful Cinema* (2011) and *Learning with the Lights Off* (2012) testifies to the vibrancy of the field, publications which themselves have emerged from a number of conferences and symposia held since the turn of the twentieth-first century.¹ Scholars researching the flourishing of non-fiction film between the 1920s and the 1960s have analysed industrial films, training films, educational films, public-service films and other comparable forms. They have grappled with questions of genre, categorisation and audience, and critically reflected on the relevance of existing theoretical models and explanatory paradigms for analysis. How useful, for example, is the theory of the auteur or questions of aesthetics for analysing these films? Perhaps, as Thomas Elsaesser recently argued, critical attention to the *Auftraggeber* (commissioner), *Anlass* (occasion) and *Adressat* (addressee) is more relevant for the classification, reading and interpretation of non-fiction film, of the sponsored and public-service variety.² Devin Orgeron et al found in their study of educational film a historic reluctance to serious engagement by film scholars with these types of films on the grounds that they were perceived to offer little by way of formal or aesthetic innovation.³ As a result scholarship was initially undertaken not by film studies but by communication scholars and those interested in histories of education. And yet recent research has shown how non-fiction film could be a space for experimentation with, in the British context, directors such as John Krish and Derrick Knight demonstrating significant and varied aesthetic creativeness in their field.⁴ It is for these reasons that non-fiction film scholarship is credited with opening up not only what we think of as film history but equally fundamental questions about the ontology of film. Much of this research has been made possible through increased digital access to extant films and the tireless efforts of a small

band of archivists, librarians and amateur enthusiasts working across the United States, Europe and Britain. As the study of industrial, training and other forms of public-service film enters university curricula, there is a pressing need to reflect on how questions of gender are shaping these debates.

What does non-fiction film have to do with feminist media histories? Certainly women are relatively well-represented as makers of documentary film - both historically and currently - compared to their presence in the feature film sector. Amy Taubin estimated that over half of the documentaries supported by Sundance funds in the early 2000s were directed or co-directed by women.⁵ Women documentarians have been the recipients of major awards; Nancy Hamilton won an Oscar for her 1955 documentary *Helen Keller, In Her Story*, whilst women have directed many recognised classics in the documentary canon including *Harlan County, USA* (Barbara Kopple, 1976) and *Union Maids* (Julia Reichert, James Klein, Miles Mogeluscu, 1976). There is an established body of feminist scholarship on both the documentary form and feminist documentary films, with feminist scholars and documentary filmmakers recognising their shared commitment to social equality, counter histories and reflexivity about the politics of representation and the power dynamics between subjects and filmmakers.⁶ Key publications such as Diane Waldman and Janet Walker's *Feminism and Documentary* (1999) have played a central role in investigating and theorising the relationship between documentary and feminism's concerns with questions of gender, sexuality and ethnicity.⁷

Notwithstanding these developments, women are markedly less visible in the existing scholarship concerning other types of non-fiction film production: shorts produced for training, public-service, educational and promotional purposes, sponsored by governments, businesses and charities, and principally intended for non-theatrical distribution. This absence can be explained in part by the tendency to focus critical analysis on company film archives

(Renault for example) or film genres (natural history or surgical and medical film) rather than named individuals such as directors. But where case studies of individual filmmakers have been undertaken the scholarship principally focuses on men. The research by Scott Curtis on Frank B. Gilbreth, Rick Prelinger on Jam Handy and Charles Acland on Mark May are representative examples.⁸ Is it the case that women directors did not work in the sponsored non-fiction sector? Feminist scholarship has only recently begun to make in-roads into the debate, with two short pieces published in *Feminist Media Histories* in 2015 on directors Anita Boggs and Lee Dick (by respectively Laura Serna and Tanya Goldman). These are a welcome intervention, showing how women's contribution has been over-looked, and provide a platform to redress the wider critical absence around women's work in this sector of the film industry. And is it possible to look beyond the director, at women in roles such as editing, which played an essential part in the institutional structures that supported and sustained non-fiction film culture?

Perhaps, as Laura Serna argued in her research on Anita Boggs, the absence in film historiography of women working in the non-fiction sector is 'doubly determined: first by the relative invisibility of educational film, and second by ideologies of gender that obscured women's work in the film industry, broadly construed, behind that of their male collaborators'.⁹ And yet there is much to be learned through a focus on women's creative labour in this sector. As Tanya Goldman's research on director/producer Lee Dick testifies, the highly collaborative context in which she worked allows us to test out received notions of personal authorship which itself has wider implications for how we think about film and cinema.¹⁰

This article addresses the concerns of gender through a case study of women's contribution to British sponsored non-fiction film production in the years between 1945 and 1970. It examines the production roles women performed, the industry conditions which

shaped their participation as filmmakers and career trajectories. It explores the ways in which the institutional structures and cultures which supported non-fiction film-making were gendered, and asks what new histories and methods may emerge from this enquiry. Britain serves as an illustrative case study because of its long tradition of non-fiction filmmaking, widely-recognised in academic scholarship for its significance to film history. Within this history it is acknowledged that women documentarians such as Marion and Ruby Grierson, Evelyn Spice, Jill Craigie and Kay Mander amongst others played a significant role in non-fiction film production in the 1930s and 1940s, but not beyond.¹¹ Recent revisionist histories have illustrated that the non-fiction sector remained buoyant in the post-war period (1945-1970) with industrial/corporate sponsors joining the state in commissioning films. This development took place in the wider context of significant social change in Britain including the creation of the welfare state, the nationalisation of industries, growing consumerism and independence of the former colonies, all of which created both themes and markets for non-fiction films. As revisionist scholarship on this period emerges there is a danger of women's contribution to this sector being under-researched as histories are being laid down. A recent BFI landmark publication *Shadows of Progress: Documentary Film in Post-War Britain* (2010) is, to date, the only substantial body of scholarship on the topic but, with the exception of a welcome and much-needed short essay about the director Sarah Erulkar, women are largely absent from this revisionist history.¹² Whilst my own research is indebted to the scholarship in *Shadows of Progress* there is still a pressing need to better understand the full scope and range of women's work in non-fiction film, especially at a time when the production sector and British society were going through a period of growth and renewal.

What sources can help reconstruct women's creative labour in non-fiction film? The challenges of researching women's film history are well-documented, with scholars utilising fan magazine gossip, novelistic representation, shipping records and family history to piece

together women's work in the film industries.¹³ In a similar manner this study draws on oral history interviews, extant films and critical reviews, whilst broadening the scope to include evidence from a newly-available dataset of trade union records for the British film and television industries. By working with both quantitative and qualitative material I am able to examine women's work in greater detail than has previously been possible. This article will first draw a historical mapping of women's work in the sector using numerical data before developing two case studies which focus on the professions of editor (Monica Mead, Kitty Wood and Kitty Marshall) and director (Sarah Erulkar), chosen because they represent both above and below-the-line roles and typical and atypical career pathways for women. Between them these women edited and directed in excess of two hundred shorts with Erulkar in particular having a high-profile career which garnered many national and international awards. These case studies examine the women's own reflections on their creative practice and the working cultures in which they functioned before opening out to reflect on questions of aesthetic expression and creative agency. This article thus opens up new pathways in British film history and makes a gendered intervention in the scholarship on non-fiction film.

Women and Non-fiction Filmmaking: Mapping the Field

The British non-fiction sector of the post-war years had its own distinct production culture consisting of specialist companies, publications, membership organisations, and distribution networks. The sector's workforce was represented and regulated by the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT), the film and television union, which controlled employment and negotiated pay for its members. It had a specialist Shorts and Documentary Branch and regularly published articles for that Branch in the union's journal *The Cine-Technician*. As the British economy grew in the 1950s the demand for non-fiction shorts increased exponentially. Corporations such as ICI, Unilever and British

Petroleum looked to film to communicate new ideas, products and services to domestic and global markets. The newly-created National Health Service used short films to promote, recruit and train its expanding workforce, as did Britain's growing education sector. This rich and multi-faceted film culture also supported the proliferation of annual film festivals, film libraries and a range of specialist publications including *Film User*, *Visual Education* and *Look and Listen* amongst others.¹⁴

Researching non-fiction film and women's work in the sector presents particular challenges. Extant films are scarce (only a small proportion are held by national archives such as the British Film Institute) and paper records do not survive for specialist companies such as *Realist* or *DATA*. Denis Gifford's *British Film Catalogue*, is a core resource for film historians but his *Non-Fiction Film, 1888-1994* covers only 35mm films released for theatrical exhibition, whilst much British sponsored documentary was released on the non-theatrical circuit.¹⁵ The BFI hold copies of trade/specialist publications including *Film User*, *Look and Listen* and *Industrial Screen* and, whilst these give invaluable access to documentary film culture, there are limitations as individual directors are only mentioned occasionally in reviews and editors not at all. In the light of these constraints I have drawn on oral history testimony and trade union data, alongside more traditional forms of documentation, to sketch women's presence into the historical record. What follows is necessarily a provisional mapping, with gaps still to be filled, but it does represent a long-overdue development of the slender body of existing work in this area.

Trade Union Records: Labour, Gender and Grade

One of the key sources informing my research are the records of the ACTT, the British film and television trade union. Formed in 1933, the ACTT regulated employment in the British film industry through what were known as 'closed shop' agreements with employers. All

technicians had to join the union to secure regular employment, a rule which extended to both above and below the line workers, and by 1943 those in short film production were sufficient in number to warrant their own branch, the Shorts and Documentaries Branch.¹⁶ The union holds a complete run of its membership application forms; approximately sixty-seven thousand in total for the years between 1930 and 1991.¹⁷ These forms record the name, gender, rates of pay, job title and employer of film and television technicians applying for union membership and, as such, give the researcher unique insight into the media production workforce. Because of the comprehensiveness of the collection the data set allows us to quantify, for the first time, the total numbers of women, and men, applying for union membership, a prerequisite for employment in the industry.

Methods

The most effective way to identify women working in short film production is to search the database by employer. I compiled a list of forty production companies using sources identified in the BFI's *Shadows of Progress* study and then organised the data into four groupings which the *Shadows* research suggests broadly reflected the mixed economy of post-war documentary production: the Independents; State-Sponsored Units; Film Units of Transnational Corporations; and the Film Producers Guild (FPG) (see Appendix 1 and 2). The Independents were a self-identifying group of commercial companies associated with the Federation of Documentary Film Units (FDFU) and were ideologically in-step with the socialist values of the Documentary Movement aligned with John Grierson from the 1930s through to the 1940s. They included companies such as Basic, Realist and the animation studio Halas & Batchelor. State-Sponsored Units such the Crown Film Unit and the National Coal Board were linked to ministerial departments or nationalised industries, whilst Corporation Film Units were a feature of large industries such as oil and companies like

Shell. The FPG, more commercially-attuned and astute than the FDFU Independents, included companies such as Verity and Publicity Films alongside smaller operators such as Wallace and Rayant. Collectively the FPG was especially skilled in attracting private finance and secured much of the work on offer in the post-war period.¹⁸ After initial inquiries I discounted Pathe and Rank primarily on the grounds that the variety of output associated with these companies (including newsreels and film processing laboratories) made it difficult to identify union applications that were specifically connected to short film production. A secondary consideration was these companies are better known in film history and there is a greater contribution to be made to scholarship targeting under-researched employers.¹⁹ By adapting the framework used by the BFI's research team it allows a picture of women's work to emerge which complements and enriches the Shadows scholarship.

A date range of 1939 to 1970 was chosen to identify numbers recruited during the Second World War, therefore providing contextualisation for the post-war data. The figures presented here must be interpreted with care and there are two caveats. One is that the list of employers cannot be claimed as fully comprehensive, although any production companies missing from the search should not be of sufficient weight to skew the sample. Second, what follows is an analysis of the number of technicians who applied for union membership in the Shorts and Documentary sector. There will have been technicians with union tickets already in the industry prior to 1939 who continued to work throughout the post-war years. What the membership application figures do illuminate is the film industry's demand for skilled, technical workers, and from that we can extrapolate the relative economic health of the sector, the buoyancy of the film economy and patterns in the gendered structure of the workforce.

Results

A total of 1,084 technicians were granted union membership between 1939 and 1970 across the forty companies specialising in Shorts and Documentary production. Of these, 72% were male and 28% female. This compares favourably with the numbers of women across all sectors combined (i.e. including features, laboratories etc) where on average they represented 23% of applications.²⁰ There is some numerical variation by gender between the war and post-war periods, with women representing 26% of all Shorts and Documentary technicians processed during 1939 and 1945, and 29% during the post-war years (1946-1970). The numbers of women granted union membership were relatively stable when compared to applications by women across all sectors, which varied noticeably from 32% during the war to 20% during the 1960s. The data suggests that, notwithstanding the special circumstances of wartime production, women were a remarkably stable and visible presence in the Shorts and Documentary sector. Interestingly, unpacking these figures in more detail shows some variation both by company and across the four groupings which gives an insight into the relative progressiveness, or not, of individual employers.

Grouping 1: The Independents

There were eight leading independent documentary production companies: Realist, Basic, World Wide Pictures, DATA, Paul Rotha/Films of Fact, Seven League, Merlin and Halas and Batchelor. Between 1939 and 1970 a total of 334 technicians applied for union membership through these companies with 59% of applications from men and 41% from women. The greatest numbers of applications were processed through Britain's leading animation studio Halas and Batchelor - 145 in total – of which 46% came from women, far higher than the average for the sector. Of the applications received through World Wide Pictures 27% were from women, with 35% of the Realist applications coming from women. Proportions were higher at Paul Rotha/Films of Fact (40%), Basic (46%) and DATA (53%). Seven League and

Merlin were small companies with only a dozen staff between them applying for union membership. The complete figures are appended.

World Wide Pictures processed the smallest number of applications by women technicians, as a proportion of its total applications, and the majority of those came in the post-war period when women joined the company's animation department as painters and diagram artists. Women were well-represented in the DATA workforce but these were almost exclusively in secretarial roles (clerks, typists and telephonists), a pattern which was repeated at Basic where women's applications were primarily for secretarial grades, with only a few applying as animation painters and trainees. At Realist five women joined during the war as assistant directors, production assistants and negative cutters but in the post-war period applications only came through secretarial routes. Despite the visibility of women in the sector the workforce of these companies was highly gendered: men in camera or sound grades, women in secretarial.

Women fared better at Paul Rotha's Films of Fact in terms of role variety with the applications showing women applying in grades as diverse as animator, set designer, production trainee and scriptwriter in the period between 1939 and 1947, the year the company folded. Amongst the Independent companies, Halas & Batchelor was unique in employing women in a wide variety of roles over a sustained period of time. Established in 1940 the company quickly built a reputation for its promotional and instructional films and its success in the post-war years created a high demand for skilled technicians. An analysis of union applications reveals that women were not only recruited to 'ink and paint' roles (the traditional 'feminine' role in animation) but also as animators, editors, model-makers, colourists, tracers and in-betweeners. The figures must be interpreted with care as there was gender discrimination at the company. It was men, not women, who were recruited to camera grades and employed in the more prestigious roles of Background Artist and Layout

Assistant. But there does seem to have been greater opportunities for women, certainly more than Kristin Thompson found in her study of the US animation industry where women were ‘almost entirely restricted to the Inking and Paint department.’²¹ Whilst a detailed study of the company is beyond the scope of this paper, I would speculate that the presence of not only the company’s co-founder Joy Batchelor but also several high-profile women in key creative roles including Rosalie (Wally) Crook, Vera Linnecar, Stella Harvey and Kathleen Houston (nee Murphy) played some part in normalising greater opportunities for women.²²

Grouping 2: State-Sponsored Companies

Alongside the Independents were production units which were funded through state sponsorship; the Crown Film Unit, the Colonial Film Unit and the Central Office of Information. Here again there was some role variety for women. Of the 151 technicians granted union membership through Crown, 26% were women who applied as librarians, studio managers, art apprenticeships, stills assistants, negative cutters, researchers and production secretaries.²³ Opportunities for women however only extended so far, with the editor Vivienne Collins recalling that her attempts to get into the Camera Department at Crown were quashed by the men in the charge who deemed women ‘not capable’ of handling the camera equipment.²⁴ Nevertheless Crown was a more hospitable place than the Colonial Film Unit which recruited only one woman – a typist - out of a total of 24 technicians, although her temporary status suggests that even here the company was hedging its bets. Of the 97 applicants received from Central Office of Information employees, 32% were women, most of whom applied from the mid-1960s onwards in roles such as production assistant, editor or researcher.

A small number of women applied through the production units of the newly-nationalised post-war industries: British Transport Films (BTF) and the National Coal Board (NCB). They recruited modest numbers of film staff as the business model was to have a

small cohort of permanent employees with larger numbers on either rolling contracts or working freelance.²⁵ Only one of the 18 technicians who applied through BTF was female; Chief Librarian Elizabeth Wallis. This was a highly-responsible position requiring specialist knowledge and expertise to meet the demands of the increasingly diverse audience for sponsored films which included ‘motoring clubs ... Women’s Institutes ... holiday camps, [and] ships at sea’ alongside the usual schools and universities.²⁶ Wallis’ expertise was well-remunerated; her salary of thirteen pounds per week in the mid-1950s was comparable to the average wages for men working as camera operators in independent television at the time. Whilst Wallis was a lone figure at BTF, women fared better at the National Coal Board where 26% of applications came from women, principally editors. NCB’s long-running cine-magazine *Mining Review*, which reported on life in the collieries and mining communities, enjoyed both theatrical and non-theatrical distribution and provided a steady flow of work for film technicians, especially freelance women editors, who I will return to in the second section of this article.

Grouping 3: Film Units of Transnational Corporations

Outside of state-sponsored production were the internal film units of major corporations such as Shell and ICI. The Shell Film Unit, which started in 1934, was active throughout the war and post-war period. Just under one third of the 49 applications it processed were from women. Roles were quite varied at Shell with women applying as editors, production trainees, scriptwriters, researchers and assistant directors. The director Sarah Erulkar, discussed in section two, gained her union ticket through Shell in 1944 and remembered it as a ‘very exciting’ place to work as a woman, at least before she was married.²⁷ ICI, a leading sponsor of industrial film, had a small in-house Film Unit through which six technicians

applied for union membership including two women listed as assistant directors in the Publicity Department.

Grouping 4: The Film Producers Guild

The final grouping are those companies who operated under the banner of the Film Producers Guild (FPG). Russell and Taylor's description of the FPG as a 'many-headed hydra' captures the complex nature of what was the largest single outfit producing sponsored film in the post-war period.²⁸ The commercially-astute FPG initially drew together seven companies: Verity, Publicity Films, Merton Park Studios, Technique Film Productions, Greenpark Productions, Gryphon Films and Sound-Services. A total of 280 technicians applied for union membership through these FPG-affiliated companies but only 18% of applications were from women, a noticeably smaller proportion than the numbers applying through the Independents. Most of these were made during the 1940s, mainly through Merton Park Studios where women were recruited during the Second World War to work on propaganda shorts as editors and animation artists, with a few librarians and continuity assistants joining in the post-war years. Only a handful of women gained their union ticket through other companies such as Verity, once again as editors, production and scenario (continuity) assistants, with most of these joining during the war when Sidney Box ran the company. In sum the data shows that whilst the FPG played a significant role in the post-war Shorts and Documentary sector the employment opportunities it afforded women technicians were limited.²⁹ This might be explained by the fact that by the 1950s companies like Verity were operating with bigger budgets than the average for the sponsored film sector which may have worked against employing women in anything other than traditionally feminine secretarial/supportive roles.

Reflections

Four key features emerge from this mapping exercise. First, women were a remarkably stable and visible presence in the Shorts and Documentaries workforce. Second, the proportion of women varied significantly by company, with data for Halas and Batchelor indicating they were more progressive in employing women. Third, employment pathways were gendered; many women gained their union ticket in typically ‘feminine’ roles such as secretary and clerk. Finally, and notwithstanding role segregation, role variation for women is a noticeable feature of the sector. The data highlights their employment as editors, librarians, researchers and animators; skilled grades which made a significant contribution to the output of the Shorts and Documentaries sector.

In sum the trade union data is invaluable in mapping women’s entry into the industries and the early part of their careers but, valuable though that picture is, the records do have their limitations. Point-of-entry data can only ever present a partial picture and other sources are needed to trace women’s longer-term career pathways and shed light on the working habits, practices and cultures in which they operated. In the next section I will focus on the careers of several women after they joined the union, examining both typical and atypical career pathways. I will look first at three freelance editors before turning to the director Sarah Erulkar, all women who forged long careers in the Shorts and Documentary sector. Editors were selected because of women’s visibility in this grade and the availability of a small number of archived oral history interviews which provide sufficient qualitative data from which to draw a more nuanced picture of women’s work. Erulkar provides an interesting case study because of her more extensive archival trace in the form of extant films, oral history interviews, trade commentary and other forms of documentation. These materials illustrate not only the constraints women encountered working in a male-dominated industry but also the opportunities they took for creative expression and the premium they placed on professional autonomy.

Women Editors: 'I've been a temporary worker for thirty years'³⁰

Editing has long been characterised as a feminine skill due to commonplace understandings of it as a supportive function which provides assistance to the (typically male) director's creative vision. The proportion of women editors in Britain was, by the 1930s, sufficiently high to attract the attention of industry commentators who proclaimed that women were 'numerically powerful' in London's cutting rooms.³¹ The demand for labour during the Second World War brought even more women into the profession with cutting room crews described as 'at a premium ... [and] generally they were 100% female', a profile which continued into the 1950s and beyond.³²

In the space available I want to focus on three women editors whose long careers in the British industry stretched between the Second World War and the 1980s: Kitty Marshall, Kitty Wood and Monica Mead. Collectively their editorial work contributed to the production of several hundred shorts, children's films and second features, although the exact number is impossible to quantify. The women were interviewed as part of oral history projects and their testimony is invaluable to the historical record. Their voices and recollections give us insight to the experiences of rank and file women, illuminating working practices and cultures which are rarely recorded in official archives. The longevity of their professional lives means they are steeped in the production culture of British non-fiction filmmaking and are well-qualified to speak about it, their testimony helps us understand its working culture from a female perspective. The women came from broadly similar middle-class and educational backgrounds and spent much of their professional lives as freelancers providing contract editing services in the 1950s and 1960s for companies such as the National Coal Board, World Wide Pictures, British Transport Films, Basic, the BBC and others. I will look in detail at three topics: routes into editing and training; how the women understood their creative

practice as editors; their reflections on being women in the industry. Collectively these topics illuminate career profiles and pathways of typical women in this profession as well as providing a methodology from which narratives of other types of professional work may be traced.

The women came into editing after a spell working as a general assistant to a director. As Kitty Marshall described it, this ‘jack of all trades’ role, introduced her to different aspects of filmmaking including editing, location scouting, organising crew and continuity work, functions commonly deemed appropriate for women. The early years of their careers were characterised by variety; Marshall did animation drawing, Mead cut film and worked as a production assistant and Wood took continuity work when editing was in short supply. All three freelanced extensively. Kitty Wood recalled ‘[t]here were a lot of little jobs you could get then in ... children’s films or second features’.³³ Mead similarly moved from job to job; initially knocking on doors ‘on spec’ and then surviving on short term contracts ‘bit by bit’.³⁴ Marshall, who had a long-standing association with the Coal Board, nevertheless described herself as a ‘temporary worker for thirty years’ who sustained her career through a series of short-term contracts. None of the women served formal apprenticeships as editors rather they learnt on the job usually by working as an assistant to someone more experienced. These experiences illustrate the typical work avenues available to women in the mid-twentieth century film economy.³⁵

Kitty Wood felt that working in what she characterised as ‘the very bottom rung of the feature world’ gave her a type of training that worked to her advantage when she later moved into documentaries and commercials. In her estimation directors of second features were used to working very quickly and were therefore well trained and very efficient. She felt that working alongside them had ‘sharpened me up’, and left her well-placed to take advantage of work in the new commercials sector in the mid-1950s which needed editors who

could turn things around quickly.³⁶ Marshall and Mead likewise recalled that working quickly was a highly-regarded skill and those who could work accurately at speed were in great demand by the industry.

Kitty Marshall's reflections on her experience at the National Coal Board sheds light on what the role offered women in terms of creative input into filmmaking. The NCB produced *Mining Review*, its premier in-house cine-magazine which was shown in miners' welfare halls and pit canteens as well as commercial cinemas and profiled the collieries workforce and the technicalities of the mining process. It was a highly-regarded cine-magazine with good production values which had a reputation for turning out some 'crisply fluent little movies' which were popular with audiences.³⁷ Marshall recalled that as an editor for the Coal Board she was given 'something like 30,000 [feet] of 35mm material on the sinking of shafts for a certain pit, highly technical ... shot higgledy-piggledy ... and trying to work out what the exact process was ... in what order it would come'.³⁸ With no more than a one page outline of the film's general story to guide her Marshall's first challenge was to decipher the technical processes behind mine-shaft sinking before deciding how to edit the filmed footage. A chance encounter with a Coal Board engineer on the London Underground confirmed her technical assessments were correct and she went ahead and edited the footage accordingly. The finished film, likely to have been *Bevercotes New Mine Part 2 Sinking the Shaft* (1958, Prod. Donald Alexander), will have been widely distributed, both domestically and overseas. Marshall embraced what she saw as the creative potential of editing reflecting, 'your most exciting times as an editor are when you get this material [that] hasn't been connected ... and putting it together yourself, it's great fun'.³⁹

Marshall's experience is echoed by Monica Mead who reflected that the creative input she had working on documentaries was 'enormous' because 'they'd go off to a factory or a location somewhere and they'd shoot everything in sight and then come back ... and say

“Make something out of it”⁴⁰ The opportunity to ‘make something’ out of raw footage in non-fiction production provided women like Marshall, Mead and others with scope for considerable creative licence, something which they actively embraced. Kitty Marshall’s reflections on the editor’s role are insightful, likening it to ‘a glassblower’ i.e. someone who responds to another’s design brief but who ‘would have quite a bit of effect on the design, and he [sic] was an artist craftsman’.⁴¹ Equally valued was professional autonomy and control over one’s work. Good editors were in high demand and rather than being secondary to the director could expect a more equal working partnership. Kitty Wood recalled that when the well-known documentary director Mary Field was late for a pre-booked editing session Wood ‘put her work away and got out somebody else’s work’, much to the consternation of Field who lost her place in Wood’s schedule.⁴² This small anecdote is revealing, giving insight into how freelancers like Wood regarded both their own time and their position in the creative hierarchy.

The scope to manage one’s own time was especially important for women with children. By the early 1960s Monica Mead had three children and, with a cameraman husband away on location, had sole responsibility for care. She managed this over the years through a combination of home working, part-time work and employing live-in help. When the children were small she worked from home ‘doing tiny little jobs in the spare bedroom’ for small companies, which ‘didn’t require elaborate equipment’.⁴³ As the children got older she worked on *Mining Review* as a contract editor for the Coal Board, hired out cutting rooms on an ad hoc basis and found that by working quickly could finish ‘two weeks’ work ... in about three or four days if we were clever’.⁴⁴ She found contract working on ‘short-time jobs’ fitted with family life and would ‘work for four or five weeks, and have a few weeks off’.⁴⁵ Mead’s preference for what she characterised as ‘episodic work’ is echoed by the feature film

editor Anne Coates who chose editing because it afforded a degree of flexibility: ‘if one of the children was ill and I went in a couple of hours later, it didn’t really matter’.⁴⁶

Whilst editing was more open to women than other technical grades it was not immune to gender-based discrimination. Women reported being refused work or feeling that they had to work harder than men to prove themselves. Kitty Wood recalled how her gender ambiguous name (Kitty/Kit) would get her an interview only to then be turned down for work when the male employer discovered she was female. She experienced a generational divide in the profession of the 1960s with some older men from a features and shorts background ‘very much against ... employ[ing] women as editors’ whilst she found that ‘the commercial people’ had no such reservations, suggesting how emerging production sectors could create new professional openings for women.⁴⁷ Conversely Wood found that some male directors preferred women editors if only because there was an implicit belief that they must be good to have survived in what she described as a professional ‘atmosphere of not liking women’.⁴⁸ Monica Mead similarly struggled to get a toe-hold with some companies who were more suspicious of women in the role and less inclined to offer work. She described the head of editing at Movietone News as ‘a bit horrified at the idea of a woman’ on the team, because they were ‘an alien species to him’, and was only persuaded to give her a chance because a male colleague vouched forcefully on her behalf.⁴⁹ It was for this reason that Mead felt that ‘women had to be that much better ... [whereas] men could busk it a lot more’.⁵⁰

These women’s oral history testimonies illustrate that, despite their visibility in the editing workforce they operated in professional circumstances which brought challenges because of their gender. In some contexts cutting crews might be female-dominated, in other contexts such as Movietone News women were in a minority. To succeed in an ‘atmosphere of not liking women’ they needed to be tenacious, highly-skilled and extremely professional; there was no ‘busking’ for women in the industry. Despite these challenges editing in Shorts

and Documentaries seems to have afforded these women a high degree of creative agency. Women took the opportunity to exercise professional autonomy and by ‘mak[ing] something of it’ took the creative lead in a way which challenges the privileged position afforded the director in much film scholarship. Editing work also enabled women, where necessary, to combine paid work with family responsibilities. Topics such as mine shaft sinking may have been less obviously glamorous than feature filmmaking but the sector had its compensations. This may explain why women’s recollections of the mining industry are so enthusiastic; Marshall describing it as ‘marvellous ... I adored it’ whilst for Wood it was ‘really extraordinarily interesting’.⁵¹ In the final part of this article I want to extend the question of gender and creative agency into the director’s role and the career of Sarah Erulkar, one of the leading figures in British Shorts and Documentaries.

Turning ‘the ordinary into the exquisite’: Sarah Erulkar

Erulkar’s career is characterised by its longevity and professional standing. She worked in the film industry for almost 40 years (between 1944 and 1983) with her shorts winning prizes at Venice (1952, 1971) and Bafta (1970). Indian-born and Jewish her family moved to Britain in 1928 when Sarah was a child. Taken on as a trainee at the Shell Film Unit in 1944 she initially operated projectors in schools and learnt to edit film before progressing to writing and directing. In 1950 she married Peter de Normanville, also a director of short films and the couple had two children. A short article by the BFI non-fiction curators Ros Cranston and Katy McGahan provides a useful overview of Erulkar’s career and its notable films including *Lord Siva Danced* (1946), *District Nurse* (1952), *Physics and Chemistry of Water* (1965), the award-winning *Picture to Post* (1969) and *The Air My Enemy* (1971).⁵² As these titles suggest, Erulkar’s output was wide-ranging in its subject matter, encompassing traditionally ‘feminine’ topics such as birth control, nursing and cooking alongside more technical

subjects such as helicopter mechanics and water molecules. Working freelance for much of her career Erulkar's practice combined social purpose with a highly-developed aesthetic sensibility. Her choice of projects was motivated by a desire to, in her words, 'be doing some good', whilst simultaneously relishing the creative freedom she thought unique to the short film sector; turning down opportunities to work in television in the belief that its filmmakers were more tightly bound by institutional rules.⁵³

A cursory glance at Erulkar's extensive screen credits - almost 80 in total – may suggest a smooth, upward career trajectory from junior recruit at Shell to the Bafta-winning director of *Picture to Post* (1969), but the reality is more complex and reflects the many obstacles women faced as film-makers in mid twentieth-century Britain. Challenges ranged from institutional discrimination to social pressure. Upon her marriage Erulkar was forced to leave the Shell Film Unit as her husband also worked for the same company and the Unit would not employ married couples, with the policy being that the woman would leave: an experience which Erulkar recalled as 'very painful'.⁵⁴ After leaving Shell it was two years before she directed another film – *District Nurse* in 1952 – and in fact her output as a director slowed considerably in this decade. The couple's two children were born and Erulkar turned first to writing and then freelance editing for the Coal Board for much of the 1950s. So few opportunities to direct came her way – she recalled being 'unemployed for some time' - that she was 'very tempted' to accept a commission to make a film for the South African diamond company De Beers although, ultimately, she refused.

For a woman, especially one with children, keeping going as a filmmaker in any capacity was challenging and it was gender rather than racial discrimination which Erulkar attributed as the main obstacle to her career.⁵⁵ Whilst some colleagues were supportive – regular collaborators such as cinematographer Wolfgang Suschitzky and the producer Anne Balfour-Fraser – Erulkar found location shooting abroad almost impossible. Directing

Korean Spring (1969) she recalled the male producer was ‘treated with enormous respect, none of which I got’, and bathroom facilities for women were none existent; ‘that’s where women ... really do suffer, it was not easy’.⁵⁶ As a working mother she experienced considerable social sanctions, especially from some of her peers, recalling that the wives of documentary directors ‘thought I was terrible ... everybody disapproved of me ... it was quite a struggle.’⁵⁷ Acutely aware of the tension between motherhood and creative practice, Erulkar reflected in her oral history interview that ‘having children ... [is] very difficult. When I [had the] first ... I thought I’d give up ... [but] it’s all I wanted to do, was to make films’. In a manner similar to the editor Monica Mead, she hired au pairs, worked in the more ‘child-friendly’ role of editing, relied on a supportive husband, and took short periods of time off, strategies which provide a vivid portrait of the working lives of middle-class professional women in mid twentieth-century Britain. Why she continued in the face of these obstacles can be attributed to the principles of social justice which fuelled her professional drive. What emerges strongly in her oral history testimony is the value she placed on other people finding her work socially relevant. She recalled letters of gratitude from parents who had educated their children in personal safety using her public information films and impromptu feedback from teachers on her training shorts, commenting ‘that was great ... a lovely feeling. I sort of felt good on that one.’⁵⁸

Her commitment to social value was matched by an artistic inventiveness which was widely-recognised by her peers. Although many of her films are lost, some titles are extant and these, alongside contemporary critical reviews, provide a tantalising glimpse into Erulkar’s creative practice. She returned to directing in 1958 with *Birthright for the Family Planning Association* but her floruit period was the 1960s with films such as *A World of Difference* (1963) and *Something Nice to Eat* (1967) garnering lavish praise and widespread distribution on the non-theatrical circuit. The films are about domestic topics, respectively

household washing and cookery, but Erulkar approached the quotidian subject matter with creative flair. *A World of Difference* was a 23 minute, 35mm, colour film sponsored by Unilever and intended to introduce domestic science students to the correct techniques for washing household fabrics such as woollens and man-made fibres. No print has yet been located but contemporary reviews suggest how it communicates technical information through a combination of animation and studio photography including ‘close-up ... imaginative composition and colour, startling lighting effects and so on’.⁵⁹ Reviewers delighted in the film’s cinematic qualities, commenting ‘[n]o where in the film are kitchens, people or washing machines seen; everything happens in a world that belongs only to the cinema and the deeply-involved viewer. The approach is both successful and breathtaking’.⁶⁰ The tone of the review expresses surprise – ‘[w]ho could expect a subject like this to yield the scope for creative film-making?’ – whilst praising the film for being ‘outstandingly successful in combining useful information with elegance of presentation’.⁶¹

Something Nice to Eat is similarly innovative in its formal qualities blending studio photography with the specialist techniques of schlieren photography, animation sequences, tight close-ups of food items, cooking techniques shot in silhouette, superimposed images and imaginative shot compositions through fish aquariums. The 21-minute Technicolor short was written and directed by Sarah Erulkar with the high-profile Sunday Times cookery columnist Margaret Costa as adviser and featuring the model and actress Jean Shrimpton in a handful of scenes. The film was sponsored by the Gas Council who wanted a film which, through cookery, promoted the virtues of gas as a modern fuel but beyond that remit they gave the director free rein. Erulkar recalled ‘we were just given a free hand with that film ... we were just allowed to do anything and we did anything’.⁶² In terms of subject matter the film is a love letter to French food, introducing audiences to the delights of cooking with garlic, olive oil, spices and herbs, how to make a cheese soufflé and flambé a Steak au Poivre. In

presenting the topics Erulkar recalled ‘we used a lot of trick work ... [which] we worked out ourselves ... [it] was one of the first documentaries to use the wide angle [lens] ... the 9.8 which I fell in love with’. It was techniques such as these – choosing an ultra-wide angle lens to film a domestic subject - which illustrate her formal inventiveness and led one critic to praise her ability to ‘turn the ordinary into the exquisite’.⁶³ Grasping the opportunity for creative freedom Erulkar also experimented with playful sequences such as superimposing the film’s neatly-suited presenter on a giant expanding soufflé. Recalling that she and her cinematographer Wolfgang Suschitzky went ‘over the top ... on our ideas’ the film captured the imagination of critics who described it not only as ‘a beautiful visual study’ but praised its cinephilic capacity to ‘convert some of your non-film-minded friends to the medium’.⁶⁴ The film went on to win national and international awards, paving the way for Erulkar’s hugely-successful *Picture to Post* (1969) which was selected for commercial release, accompanying the world distribution of MGM’s feature-length *Alfred the Great* (1969).

[Figure 1 here]

Something Nice to Eat (1967, dir. Sarah Erulkar).

As with editors Monica Mead, Kitty Marshall and others, Sarah Erulkar found in non-fiction film a space to flourish creatively and where ‘ordinary’ topics could, by dint of imagination, be elevated to the ‘exquisite’. Professional success as a woman was by no means easy and Erulkar had to navigate both institutional discrimination and social censure. Given this context her success as a director is remarkable. More typical are the relatively short directorial careers of Erulkar’s peers Yvonne Fletcher, Mary Beales and Mary Francis who worked intensively in the 1940s before ‘retiring’, either through choice or external pressure.

The then 17-year-old Mary Beales for example was one of the women taken on as a Production Trainee at Paul Rotha Films in 1943 where she went on to direct some notable films for DATA including *Fair Rent* (1946) and *Dover, Spring 1947* (1947), alongside shorts for Mining Review, before retraining as a sculptress. She worked intermittently in film, editing *March to Aldermaston* (1959) and co-directing a children's film *The Secret Pony* (1970) with her more well-known documentary director husband Michael Orrom, but for the rest of her professional life channelled her creative energies into sculpting and teaching, which perhaps could be more readily combined with raising the couple's children.⁶⁵ There is more work to be done to research the careers of these and other women including the editor Luisa Krakowska, whose creative input on *Sunday by the Sea* (1953) helped the film win the Grand Prix at the Venice Film Festival, and documentary producer Anne Balfour-Fraser, who reflected in 1962 that 'women can achieve everything but it's appallingly hard work and it shouldn't be as difficult as it is'.⁶⁶

Concluding Remarks

Perhaps unsurprisingly the union data has shown how the Shorts and Documentary sector offered greater opportunities for women; the sector's low status, relative to features, meant gaps and interstices opened up where women's careers could gain traction. They still had to prove themselves with greater determination, relative to men, in order to rise up the ranks, but women could reach more senior roles than in the film industry at large, whilst those in below-the-line roles had scope to take the creative lead. And women like Sarah Erulkar, Monica Mead and others grasped the opportunity, making significant contributions to the sector's body of work as it stimulated, and sustained, the appetite of film audiences in the new, post-war British society. As a gendered history of sponsored films this study has illuminated not only women's contribution to film but provided a methodology by which narratives of other

types of professional work may be traced, and from this may come new ways of thinking about film history.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

The 40 companies searched were Realist; Basic; World Wide Pictures; DATA; Paul Rotha (Films of Fact); Seven Leagues; Merlin; Halas & Batchelor; Central Office of Information; Crown Film Unit; Colonial Film Unit; Shell Film Unit; British Transport Films; National Coal Board, ICI; Verity; Publicity Films; Merton Park Studios; Technique Film Productions; Greenpark Productions; Gryphon Films; Sound Services; Technical & Scientific Films; Larkins; Derrick Knight; Wallace; Rayant; Samaritan; British Films; Anthony Gilkison; Pelican; Anvil; Horizon; Film Workshop; Ford Motors; Unilever; Strand Films; RHR Productions; Films of Today; Cygnet.

Figure 2: Data tables for British production companies specializing in non-fiction film
[insert tables here]

¹ See also Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau, ed., *Films That Work, Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009). For conferences see *Other Cinemas, Screen* (2012) and the biennial Orphan Film Symposium (NYU) which has played a central role in recovering orphaned and non-theatrical film.

² Thomas Elsaesser, "Archives and Archaeologies: The Place of Non-Fiction Film in Contemporary Media" in *ibid*, 19-33 (23).

³ Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron and Dan Streible, "Introduction" in *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, ed. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron and Dan Streible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3-14 (3-4).

⁴ For discussion see Patrick Russell and James Piers-Taylor, ed. *Shadows of Progress: Documentary Film in Post-War Britain* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

⁵ Amy Taubin, "Documenting Women" in *Ms Magazine* (2004), accessed December 8, 2017, <http://Msmagazine.com/summer2004/womenonfilm.asp>

⁶ For discussion see Diane Waldman and Janet Walker, ed., *Feminism and Documentary* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁷ Waldman and Walker's anthology suggests new theoretical approaches to documentary around themes of Self/Other, Filmmaker/Subject etc.

⁸ See *Films That Work*, 2009.

⁹ Laura Serna, "Anita Maris Boggs, Historical Invisibility and Gender in the History of Sponsored and Educational Film", *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 2 (2015): 135-143.

¹⁰ Tanya Goldman, "Picturing Lee Dick, A Non-Fiction Pioneer", *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 2 (2015): 125-134.

¹¹ See Jo Fox, "To Be a Woman: Female Labour and Memory in Documentary Film Production, 1929-50", *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 10, no. 3 (2013): 584-602.

¹² Ros Cranston and Katy McGahan, "Science and Society: Peter de Normanville, Sarah Erulkar" in *Shadows of Progress* (230-245).

¹³ See Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight, ed., *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

¹⁴ *Shadows of Progress* (14-15).

¹⁵ *Ibid* (21).

¹⁶ Above and below the line are terms used in Anglophone film industries. The former negotiate salary on a film by film basis whilst workers' salaries in the latter are standardised by union contract wage scales. In the British film industry all film technicians in the period under review - from directors to negative cutters and production secretaries - were represented by the same union, the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians.

¹⁷ As part of an AHRC-funded project, I have been working with a team to digitise these records, bringing them into the public domain for the first time through the creation of a searchable database. See the 'Histories of Women in the British Film and Television Industries, 1933-89' at [Learning on Screen.ac.uk/womenswork](http://Learning.on.Screen.ac.uk/womenswork)

¹⁸ *Shadows of Progress* (43).

¹⁹ I would encourage others to use the database to explore Rank and Pathe's contribution to short film production.

²⁰ In total, just over 30,000 workers were granted union membership between 1939 and 1970 with 23% of those applications (7,025) coming from women.

²¹ Kristin Thompson, "'Quick-Like a Bunny!' The Ink and Paint Machine, Female Labor and Color Production", *Animation Studies Online Journal*, 9 (2014), accessed December 14, 2017, <http://journal.animationstudies.org>

²² For a more detailed gender analysis of the Halas and Batchelor workforce see the author's forthcoming *Female Technicians: Women, Work and the British Film Industry, 1933-1989* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

²³ The Crown Film Unit closed in 1952 and some of its technical staff may have transferred over to Anvil which was established by three of Crown's leading directors, Ken Cameron, Richard Warren and Ralph Nunn May (*Shadows of Progress*, 33). This seems plausible as, despite producing in excess of 350 shorts, only one application for union membership was made through Anvil which suggests they were using established technicians on either long term contracts or a freelance basis.

²⁴ Vivienne Collins (1997), interview 398, BECTU History Project, [Learning on Screen.ac.uk/womenswork](http://Learning.on.Screen.ac.uk/womenswork)

²⁵ *Shadows of Progress* (75).

²⁶ C. E. Tiffin, "The Non-Theatric Audience", *Industrial Screen* (October 1963): 388-390.

²⁷ Sarah Erulkar (1991), interview 187, BECTU History Project, [Learning on Screen.ac.uk/womenswork](http://Learning.on.Screen.ac.uk/womenswork)

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- ²⁸ *Shadows of Progress* (42).
- ²⁹ This gender profile is consistent across the miscellaneous other small production outfits working in the sponsored-film market such as British Films, Wallace, Rayant and Derrick Knight whose workforces included women editors, researchers, librarians, and production secretaries.
- ³⁰ Kitty Marshall (1988), interview 31, BECTU History Project, Learning on Screen.ac.uk/womenswork
- ³¹ Alison Selby-Lowndes, "Women and the A.C.T.", *The Cine-Technician* (July-August, 1938): 58.
- ³² Freddie Wilson cited in Roy Perkins and Martin Stollery, *British Film Editors: The Heart of the Movie* (London: BFI, 2004): 178.
- ³³ Kitty Wood (1987), interview 6, BECTU History Project, Learning on Screen.ac.uk/womenswork
- ³⁴ Monica Mead (2015), History of Women in the British Film and Television Industries project, Learning on Screen.ac.uk/womenswork
- ³⁵ Whilst working freelance also characterised men's experiences in the industry, the opportunities available were highly gendered with men having access to a greater number of grades including camera, sound and lighting which were closed to women.
- ³⁶ Wood, BECTU interview.
- ³⁷ *Shadows of Progress* (80-1). Exact audience figures are hard to determine although one estimate put it at 13 million people per issue in the late 1950s.
- ³⁸ Marshall, BECTU Interview.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Mead, History of Women interview.
- ⁴¹ Marshall, BECTU interview.
- ⁴² Wood, BECTU interview.
- ⁴³ Mead, History of Women interview.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid. The buoyancy of the sector meant there was plenty of work for those like Mead who had a reputation for quality and reliability.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Anne Coates quoted in Anne Ross Muir *A Woman's Guide to Jobs in Film and Television* (London: Pandora, 1987): 107.
- ⁴⁷ Wood, BECTU interview.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Mead, BECTU interview.
- ⁵⁰ Mead, although she later qualified that this was 'too broad an answer'.
- ⁵¹ Marshall, BECTU interview; Wood BECTU interview.
- ⁵² See Cranston and McGahan, *Shadows of Progress* (230-245).
- ⁵³ Erulkar quoted in *ibid* (236).
- ⁵⁴ Sarah Erulkar (1991) interview 187, BECTU History Project, Learning on Screen.ac.uk/womenswork
- ⁵⁵ Ibid
- ⁵⁶ Ibid
- ⁵⁷ Ibid
- ⁵⁸ Ibid
- ⁵⁹ *Industrial Screen* 7, no. 5 (May 1963): 209.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ *The Film User* 17, no. 200 (June 1963): (292).
- ⁶² Erulkar BECTU interview.
- ⁶³ The lens was later most famously used by Stanley Kubrick in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). For review see *The Times*, October 2, 1967 (24) quoted in Cranston and McGahan, *Shadows of Progress* (236).
- ⁶⁴ Alec Hughes, *Movie Maker* 1, no. 9 (November 1967): 681.
- ⁶⁵ It is highly likely that she continued to have some creative input into her husband's long filmmaking career, even if that cannot be evidenced through formal recording mechanisms such as screen credits.
- ⁶⁶ Balfour-Fraser, undated, quoted in Patrick Russell, 'Anne Balfour-Fraser', obituary, *The Guardian*, August 21, 2016.