Feminist histories of costuming film: Gordon Conway, 1930s British cinema and the collaborative world of Mayfair sewing

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In an interview conducted in 1974, the actress Jessie Matthews singled out a dress she wore in *The Good Companions* (Victor Saville, 1933) as one of her all-time favourites. Worn for the film's 'Three Wishes' song-and-dance sequence, the actor vividly remembered the dress for its 'dazzling sequinned neckline, and cloud upon cloud of floating transparent chiffon, covered in ostrich feathers' (figures 1 and 2).[1] The costume was designed specifically for the sequence that required Matthews – as Susie Dean, a junior member of a touring theatrical troupe – to perform a solo dance on stage. In the actor's words, 'For a dancer, it was a dream of a dress. When I left the piano and began to dance, the dress danced too, almost independently, giving the illusion that I was floating through the air.'[2] In some respects it is a curious choice for an actor who became one of the most fashionably dressed stars of the 1930s. As the decade progressed, Matthews's screen costumes became increasingly ambitious, and in later box-office hits – Victor Saville's *Evergreen* (1934) and *First a Girl* (1935) – she was dressed by Berleo and Coco Chanel, leading couture designers of the day. That Matthews was so effusive about the 'Three Wishes' dress, singling it out from many other costumes, therefore says much about the calibre of its designer, Gordon Conway. During Conway's short but prolific career in British film (1927–33) she designed for many of the industry's key stars,

1 Jessie Matthews, qtd in Virginia Raye Allen, *Gordon Conway: Fashioning a New Woman* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1997), p. 201.

2 Ibid.

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Fig. 1. Costume sketch by Gordon Conway for the ‘Three Wishes’ dress. Gordon Conway Papers, Performing Arts Collection PA-00019, Series 1, Subseries A, Production Materials, Container 26.8-9, Harry Ransom Research Center.

Fig. 2. Jessie Matthews performing in *The Good Companions* (Victor Saville, 1933).

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and is credited with attempting to establish the first specialist costume department at leading studio Gaumont-British. For Matthews, Conway's designs played a crucial role in building her confidence as a performer:

> Gordon had the most important gift a designer can possess: the ability to express a person's essential character and personality through their clothes [...] I loved Gordon's designs for me. I was very unsure of myself [...] if it hadn't have been for [her], I don't know how I would have got through it all.[3]

3 Ibid., p. 217.

I open this essay with Matthews's reflections because they illuminate two key concerns for feminist film studies: the power of women's accounts to challenge historiographic orthodoxies, and the importance of costume to an understanding of film. On the first point, Matthews's readiness as a star to bring Conway the designer into her story subverts the idea of the director as solo auteur creator, a concept that has done so much to elevate the figure of the male director in film history to the detriment of other production roles and ways of working. The star's reflections point instead to the collaborative nature of filmmaking. Feminist film critics have been at the vanguard of scholarship tackling the intellectual problem of solo authorship through the development of methods to excavate collaborative working in film production. Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight have used terms such as 'co-creation' and 'partnership working' as critical frameworks to recover women's film work, whilst Kimberley Tomadjoglou adapts the concept of *metteur-en-scène* to analyse director Alice Guy's creativity and the 'generative role' she took in managing her studio.[4] Similar debates are evident in literary studies, where recent scholarship by mediaevalist Diane Watts fundamentally rethinks the concept of authorship. Watts shows how women participated in English literary culture, as patrons, editors, agents and mentors, through sharing 'diplomatic feedback on drafts', asking 'the right pointed question', and 'handing down an idea'.[5] Watts's reframing of mediaeval authorship as 'fundamentally collaborative' and writing 'as a collective exercise' has much in common with feminist film scholarship in addressing the problem of authorship as conceived through the lens of the solo creator.

Indeed, Watts's focus on forms of collaboration, patronage and public relations is part of an on-going cross-disciplinary tradition in the arts, humanities and social sciences that is developing increasingly nuanced understandings of work from a feminist perspective. This ranges from Arlie Hoschchild's concept of the 'emotional labour' of public-facing service roles, to Ann Oakley's recent focus on the intellectual contributions made by the wives and sisters of high-profile men, and its minimization by biographers and historians invested in the stereotype of male genius.[6] In film history, Liz Clarke adapts the concept of 'creative labor' in her research on women scenario writers to open up 'the work

4 Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight, 'Introduction', in Gledhill and Knight (eds), *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Present* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, Press, 2015), pp. 7–8. Kimberley Tomadjoglou, 'Alice Guy's great cinematic adventure', in ibid., pp. 95–109.

5 Irina Dumitrescu, 'The Flower and the Bee', review of Diane Watts, *Women, Writing and Religion in England and Beyond, 650–1100*, *London Review of Books*, vol. 43, no. 8, 22 April 2021, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v43/n08/irina-dumitrescu/the-flower-and-the-bee>, accessed 9 February 2023.

6 Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983). Ann Oakley, *Forgotten Wives: How Women Get Written Out of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

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that goes on between the films: the negotiations, the meetings with producers, and the search for work between contracts', highlighting how business acumen was central to women's professional endeavours.[7] As I have argued elsewhere, Raymond Williams's definition of skill-as-art is a potent tool with which to re-imagine aspects of women's production labour as 'forms of creative endeavour'.[8] My focus on women in below-the-line roles not only brings some of the most marginalized workers into film history for the first time, but also challenges the dominant norms through which such history has been written.

The move to put collaboration centre-stage and recalibrate what counts as work requires an engagement with the particular forms through which women's accounts are expressed. Although they are under-represented in official records and archives, women's autobiographies and personal memoirs are central to feminist film scholarship. Research by Amelie Hastie and Debashree Mukherjee has made a significant intervention in this respect by recuperating gossip, anecdote and miscellany as important forms of evidence.[9] Unfairly derided in other critical traditions as subjective or hearsay, the scholarship by Hastie and others puts questions of gender centre-stage, reminding us that the attribution of value to some artefacts over others depends on questions of power, where some accounts are granted legitimacy whilst others are disqualified. Memoirs and personal reflections are particularly valuable for changing the frame of film history, highlighting the partial nature of official mechanisms such as screen credits, which occlude certain forms of labour. Personal reflections also have the power to bring the quotidian aspects of working life into view, and to show collaboration in action. The director and scriptwriter Muriel Box, who co-authored many scripts with her husband Sydney in the 1940s, described how 'I used to do the overall plot, then Sydney would start work on it and "diddy it up" wherever he could', with the script passing several times between the couple.[10] By paying attention to this kind of iterative dynamic, it becomes possible to recover the input of women into filmmaking, and the various dimensions – creative, intellectual, emotional – that it may take, and to develop new models of collaboration. And whilst the willingness of women such as Matthews and Box to speak out for others may be consistent with socially sanctioned gender norms, in which conventions dictate that women share credit rather than claim it for themselves, it also results in a more accurate reflection of studio practices. Women's accounts are thus a powerful mechanism to counter the intellectual problem of male-auteur orthodoxy and the limitations this imposes on film historiography.

Costuming for film, thanks to its highly collaborative nature, is a field well placed to advance this scholarship. Costume designers, art directors, and a wide range of craft personnel – from pattern-cutters to fitters, dyers to breakdown artists – are involved in costume production, as of course are the performers being costumed. Costume scholarship has been central

7 Liz Clarke, '"No accident of good fortune": autobiographies and personal memoirs as historical documents in screenwriting history', *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2016), p. 46.

8 Melanie Bell, *Movie Workers: The Women Who Made British Cinema* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

9 Amelie Hastie, 'The miscellany of film history', *Film History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2006), pp. 222–30. Debashree Mukherjee, 'Gossip, labor and female stardom in pre-Independence Indian cinema: the case of Shanta Apte', in Gledhill and Knight (eds), *Doing Women's Film History*, pp. 181–92.

10 Muriel Box interview, in Brian MacFarlane, *An Autobiography of British Cinema* (London: Methuen, 1997), p. 89.

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to debates in film studies since Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog laid the foundations for the study of costume and film narrative in 1990, with *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body*. Centring on costume's potential to support or disrupt narrative, Gaines argued that clothes work primarily to reinforce narrative ideas in classic realist cinema.[11] Stella Bruzzi later coined the term 'iconic clothes' to explore costume's potential to 'interfere with the scenes in which they appear' through forms of 'spectacular intervention'.[12] Bruzzi's research on costume and the body in *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) revealed a 'complex feminist displacement' of the conventional objectification of the woman's form in the film, and illustrated how clothes could function in multiple ways. This observation of costume's 'multiplicity' finds its parallel in Jackie Stacey's examination of the relationship between female spectators and cinematic pleasure, where screen clothes are central to the processes of escapism, identification and consumption.[13]

Costume's potential to disrupt and affirm gendered norms in complex and contradictory ways explains why feminist film scholarship continues to revisit the subject. Most recently, research by Kate Fortmuller and Melanie Williams has moved beyond costume semiotics and mise-en-scene to the processes of costume creation, through case studies of women such as Edith Head and Julie Harris, leading figures within costume design.[14] Informed both by scholarly debate and by costume designers themselves, notably Deborah Nadoolman Landis, this recent research has challenged the devaluing of costume design within critical and industry commentary – a marginalization attributed to the profession's majority female workforce and negative assumptions about women's labour. This marginalization is compounded by the fact that costume designers, alongside directors, producers and others, measure their work by how well it succeeds in being invisible to the viewer. Miranda Banks describes this as 'the central dilemma – and paradox – for costume designers [... in] that their job is to visualise a character through a costume that should go unnoticed by the audience because it looks organic to the personality of the character'.[15] For Williams it is this 'gendered invisibility affecting costume design labour' that she, Fortmuller and others have worked to challenge.[16] Scholarship that extends beyond design to other aspects, notably costume-making, is now beginning to emerge. Llewella Chapman's research on the James Bond franchise is notable here in attending to the labour of costume-makers, specifically the skilled tailors and shirtmakers who produced the iconic suits worn by successive Bonds.[17] Building on these important interventions, further studies of the interrelationship between design and making are urgently needed to move forward both costume analysis and wider debates about collaborative work in film studies.

The absence of making from studies of film costume may be explained by the socially constructed distinctions between art and craft that permeate western cultures. This hierarchical division is highlighted by textile artist Anthea Mallinson, who specializes in breaking-down or

11 Jane Gaines, 'Costume and narrative: how dress tells the woman's story', in Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog (eds), *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 180–211.

12 Stella Bruzzi, *Undressing Cinema, Clothing and Identity in the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. xv.

13 Stella Bruzzi, 'Tempestuous petticoats: costume and desire in *The Piano*', *Screen*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1995), pp. 257–66. Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994).

14 Kate Fortmuller, 'Gendered labour gendered politics: how Edith Head designed her career and styled women's lives', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2018), pp. 474–94. Melanie Williams, 'The girl you don't see: Julie Harris and the costume designer in British cinema', *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2016), pp. 71–106.

15 Miranda J. Banks, 'Gender below-the-line: defining feminist production studies', in Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks and John T. Caldwell (eds), *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 91.

16 Williams, 'The girl you don't see', p. 72.

17 Llewella Chapman, *Fashioning James Bond, Costume, Gender and Identity in the World of 007* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

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'ageing' costume for media productions. In western cultures the division of the mind from the hand has led to what Mallinson describes as 'the general absence of the craftsperson from theoretical consideration of filmic cultural production', which renders the work of the craftsperson in film 'almost invisible'. Whilst recognizing that this invisibility is 'part of the illusion of reality and verisimilitude that is so important to Western film production', Mallinson nevertheless argues for 'lifting the craftwork [...] out of the narrative context to which it belongs. In this way, the work becomes visible on its own for the first time.'[18] I want to adopt this approach for a case study of British film costume, lifting costume out of narrative context and re-situating it within networks of craft production in the 1930s. I use the tools of textual analysis alongside the methods of film history, drawing on primary sources such as personal diaries, studio plans, costume sketches, publicity photographs and business records. I also draw on the concept of material literacy. Developed by historians of design and material culture, material literacy is used to describe the tactile knowledge shared between traders, customers and supply shops in 18th-century Britain. Moving away from the binary distinction between 'those who made things and those who bought things', scholarship by Serena Dyer and Chloe Wigston Smith argues that material literacy permeated all levels of British society and was communicated through different modes, including the printed word, formal and informal instruction, and tactile and haptic knowledge.[19] The relevance of a material-literacy approach to a study of film costume is evident when we return to Matthews's description of the 'Three Wishes' dress, where she emphasizes the weight and texture of the material and the garment's effect on her as a performer. It is my contention that the designers, makers and performers of costumes for British films shared material literacy, it being the common currency that enabled collaboration to succeed; and that attending to costume's production through this lens takes our understanding of collaborative working in new directions. Indeed, the highly collaborative nature of costume work requires an approach that can weave together film studies and material culture studies into a new methodological framework. This has the potential to benefit the study of film costume specifically, and film history more broadly.

18 Anthea Mallinson and Clare Wilkinson, 'Making time: a conversation on aging film costumes', *Drain*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2014), <http://drainmag.com/making-time-a-conversation-on-aging-film-costumes/> accessed 13 February 2023.

19 Serena Dyer and Chloe Wigston Smith, 'Introduction', in Dyer and Smith (eds), *Material Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Britain: A Nation of Makers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 1–15.

In this essay, I pursue these lines of enquiry through a case study of the costume designer Gordon Conway and her relatively brief career in the British film industry. Conway's diaries, scrapbooks and other miscellany are archived at the Harry Ransom Research Center, in Austin, Texas. This rich repository (under-used in film scholarship) sheds light on the patterns of her working life and the ways in which she mediated between the film producers who commissioned her work, the makers who executed her designs, and the stars who wore them. Her career, within the production context of early sound cinema, offers a new dimension

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through which to probe the gendering of production hierarchies and film historiography.

Attending to the early sound period (1927–33) is a pressing concern for feminist scholarship. The film industry was transitioning to the new technology of sound, and studios in Britain were undergoing extensive modernization in terms of infrastructure and working practices. Widely acknowledged by scholars such as Sarah Street as a period of 'major rupture' in Britain's film studios,[20] it is marked by significant financial investment, the development of European co-productions, and considerable debate in trade papers about workforce training and instruction in filmcraft, with men such as Michael Balcon, Adrian Brunel and Alfred Junge leading the discussion. The period has unsurprisingly received sustained critical attention in works by scholars such as Street, Sue Harris, Tim Bergfelder and Christian Cargnelli.[21] This has focused principally on technological innovation, especially art direction, cinematography, and the pioneering work of Junge and later Edward Carrick. Most recently, scholarship has turned to film studios as material sites, making a much-needed contribution to our understanding of the spaces of production and the workforces within them. As Street reminds us, 'studios are, first and foremost, architectural spaces intended to *support a number of functions* depending on design, size, location and personnel'.[22] Whilst the work by Bergfelder et al. makes an important contribution to our understanding of film production in this period, the focus on the majority-male spheres of art direction and cinematography has sidelined other elements of filmmaking, with gender-specific repercussions. And as a great deal of costume production took place outside of the film studios, the recent turn to them as material sites risks duplicating this gendered historiography, as it cannot adequately account for the labour and processes through which British films were costumed. That much of this work was performed by women makes this a feminist issue.

What I propose here is a *feminist* history of costuming film: in looking beyond studio history and majority male roles; in drawing on women's accounts; and in approaching filmmaking as collaborative, with creative and emotional labour, craft skills and material literacy given equal value. First I sketch out the main elements of film costume – including design, making and maintenance – and the challenge of identifying archival sources. I then draw a provisional map of the historical context of film costume for 1930s British film, attending to studio maps and trade descriptions of established practices, and identifying individual designers to provide the wider context to Conway's professional interventions. This is followed by a case study of Conway and the collaborative context in which films were costumed. Here I examine Conway's public pronouncements on film costume, which highlight her acute awareness of costume's filmic utility, before turning to her diaries, analysing entries in some detail to reconstruct her working day and business relationships. From this I draw a more nuanced map of costume's complex chain of

20 Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997).

21 Tim Bergfelder, Sue Harris and Sarah Street, *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); Tim Bergfelder and Christian Cargnelli (eds), *Destination London: German-Speaking Emigres and British Cinema, 1925–1950* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2008).

22 Sarah Street, 'Designing the ideal film studio in Britain', *Screen*, vol. 62, no. 3 (2021), pp. 330–58 (my emphasis).

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labour and suppliers, reconstructing the world of Mayfair sewing and the 'making cultures' that costumed films in 1930s Britain. I then turn to a sample of two of the different types of businesses Conway visited – the costumiers and the couture workroom – opening up questions about craftwork, collaboration and shared material literacy. I examine the materials and skills needed to make a garment of suitable quality for high-end film productions, the working conditions in which makers operated, and how these makers were trained. Finally I return again to the 'Three Wishes' dress, lifting it out of its narrative context to offer a material analysis that makes craftwork visible, before closing with some reflections on the wider questions for film historiography which a feminist history of costume has surfaced.

Costumes for film are designed, made, bought and/or hired. They have to be shopped for, fitted, adapted, embellished and adjusted, washed, dry-cleaned, ironed, mended and stored. There are multiple stages in the costume journey, from script to screen, and whilst national cinemas may organize their labour differently, there are commonalities pertaining to workflow. First, and usually in consultation with producers, directors and art department heads, costume designers break down the script and draw up a dress chart, identifying the number and type of costumes needed, including duplicates and any special effects such as distressing or ageing. They then assess which characters require bespoke design and draw design sketches, attaching samples of preferred fabrics. Once the designer's sketches and script breakdown are approved (usually by the director or art director) these become central to the next stage in the process, which Mary Desjardins describes as 'manufacturing and finishing'.[23] Research by Elizabeth Nielson has shown how Hollywood costume worked at scale, with leading studios such as MGM famous for its in-house costume facilities where a large workforce comprising pattern-cutters, embroiderers, dyers and other sub-specialisms focused exclusively on the design, making and maintenance of costume for films. Studios employed their own sketch artists and period researchers, who had access to well-stocked in-house library facilities. Nielson provides more detail of the manufacturing, the 'making' aspect of costuming Hollywood films, which was undertaken by

> Expert artisans – people with job titles such as cutter, fitter, figure maker, table lady, draper, finisher, tailor, beader, milliner, and shoemaker – [who] transform raw sketches and bolts of every conceivable kind of material into finished garments. To do this, these artisans must understand the designer's ideas, use dyes expertly and have an almost instinctive command of color values. They must be able to cut, pattern and sew the raw materials with speed and dexterity and [...] develop an infinite amount of patience with live fittings. It takes years of refinement of their skills before costumers can transform

23 Mary Desjardins, 'Classical Hollywood, 1928–1946', in Adrienne L. McLean (ed.), *Costume, Makeup and Hair* (London: IB Tauris, 2017), p. 52.

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a sketch into a living garment of color, shape, personality, and authenticity on the screen.[24]

Nielson's description gives a clear sense of the range of skills, competencies and acumen needed by 'costumers' – the 'makers' – to achieve the desired aesthetic and material effects. Fittings take place with the actors, under the supervision of the designer, any final adjustments are made, and once the costumes are ready for shooting and production has begun, the wardrobe team take charge of the next stage. They have responsibility for servicing and maintaining the film's finished wardrobe during production, the continuity of the clothes – including keeping accurate records during shooting – and the return or storage of the costumes after shooting has finished. Wardrobe staff need stamina and physical strength (period dresses made of velvets and brocade are heavy), good organizational skills and the ability to think on their feet, a resourcefulness that Nielson describes as a form of creativity: 'the spontaneous ability to make do in a hurry with very few resources'.[25] Whilst other national cinemas did not have the in-house capability of Hollywood's studio system, many of the processes and personnel involved in costume were the same.

Archival sources record some aspects of these processes more fully than others, and this has shaped historiography. The paper records of leading costume designers are held at major libraries, including the British Film Institute and the Margaret Herrick, and contain sketches, fabric samples, mood boards, research photographs and correspondence.[26] These records provide an invaluable insight into the design aspect of costume, but as Williams has noted, manufacturing and maintenance are less well documented.[27] The effect of this absence of documentation has dogged film costume scholarship, inevitably privileging the work of the designer over that of the 'expert artisans' and the wardrobe team, many of whom were women.

Oral history and personal testimony have played a central role in recovering what we do know about the manufacturing and maintenance of film costume. Nielson conducted interviews with costume-makers in 1985, women whose work histories stretched back into the Hollywood studio system of the 1930s and 1940s. In the British context, the BECTU History Project has recorded valuable interviews with designers Julie Harris and Phyllis Dalton, whose testimony brings wardrobe personnel into the picture. Dalton worked on big productions such as David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago* (1965) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) – films with large casts and extensive costume requirements – and she marvelled at the skills of wardrobe supervisor Betty Adamson, who managed to rig up a washing machine whilst shooting on location in a desert, reflecting 'how she managed it, I still don't know'.[28] Dalton's anecdote provides an important insight into the resourcefulness of wardrobe personnel, albeit a second-hand account mediated through the designer's perspective.

24 Elizabeth Nielson, 'Handmaidens of the glamour culture: costumers in the Hollywood studio system', in Gaines and Herzog (eds), *Fabrications*, p. 61.

25 Ibid., pp. 170–71.

26 The British Film Institute holds the collections of Jenny Beavan and Julie Harris, whilst the papers of Edith Head are held at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

27 Williams, 'The girl you don't see', p. 73.

28 'Phyllis Dalton', *The British Entertainment History Project*, <https://historyproject.org.uk/interview/phyllis-dalton> accessed 14 February 2023.

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Similar limitations are found in fashion and theatre histories. Writing about the couture wardrobe of Edwardian socialite Heather Firbank, V&A Museum curator Jenny Lister comments that documents such as company bills and invoices tell us about the pricing of fashionable dress of the period but 'reveal little about the lives of the individuals concerned in its manufacture'.[29] Theatre scholar Aoife Monks was so frustrated by the absence of craft in theatre histories that her 2014 manifesto, 'In defence of craft', was a passionate cry for 'contact and conversation' between scholars and the theatre industry's 'hidden figures', the glove-makers, wig-designers, armour experts and many others.[30] Whilst these anthropological approaches can work well for studies of recent and present-day working practices, they cannot reach historical labour that is outside living memory.[31] For this we have to turn to archival fragments, second-hand accounts, fan magazines and other ephemera: the type of fragmentary and dispersed evidence that characterizes much of the scholarship in feminist film historiography. Whilst these are partial and provisional, they nevertheless build a picture of how costume-making may have happened, and stand as an important starting point for further conversation. It is this approach that characterizes my case study of British cinema, the design work of Conway, and the making of costume for film.

If British cinema of the 1930s was a time of 'rupture', what were the costume needs of the industry and how were they met? The scale and complexity of Britain's film industry grew exponentially between 1927 and 1932, with production levels of feature films over the period rising dramatically from 53 to 152.[32] This transformation was brought about by a combination of new sound technology and the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act (CFA), a protectionist measure to ensure a minimum quota of British films were shown on British cinema screens. New film companies were quickly established and a construction boom followed, with new studios being built and existing ones modernized. Higher production levels meant a great demand for labour, and as the workforce expanded, concerns were raised about shoddy production values and the need for technicians to receive appropriate 'instruction in filmcraft'.[33] Leading British studios boosted their public image by arranging visits from high-profile dignitaries such as the Japanese ambassador and the Prince of Wales, and producing glossy marketing brochures to display their material assets of buildings, technology and personnel. These strategies were used to convey a sense of the film industry's economic health.

Against this backdrop of expansion, costume needs increased in volume and complexity. The popular box-office genres of the day were historical dramas and empire films, comedies, musicals and melodramas.[34] Historical films such as Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), and Herbert Wilcox's *Victoria the Great* (1937) and *Nell Gwynne* (1934), typically had large casts, multiple

29 Cassie Davies-Strodder, Jenny Lister and Lou Taylor, *London Society Fashion, 1905–1925: The Wardrobe of Heather Firbank* (London: V&A Publishing, 2015), p. 145.

30 Aoife Monks, 'In defence of craft: a manifesto', *Scene*, vol. 2, no. 1/2 (2014), p. 177.

31 For research that combines film studies with anthropological field work of designers, supply shops, tailors and others in distinct work and residential spaces in Mumbai, see Claire Wilkinson-Weber, *Fashioning Bollywood: The Making and Meaning of Hindi Film Costume* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

32 Linda Wood, *British Films, 1927–1939* (London: BFI National Library, 2009), p. 137.

33 Adrian Brunel, *Filmcraft: The Art of Picture Production* (London: George Newnes, 1933), p. 59.

34 Street, *British National Cinema*, pp. 39–50.

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costume changes and required expensive fabrics and accessories. Empire films such as *Rhodes of Africa* (Berthold Viertel, 1936) and *Elephant Boy* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1937) needed military uniforms and 'native' costume, whilst popular Will Hay comedies such as *Boys will be Boys* (William Beaudine, 1935) and *Oh, Mr Porter!* (Marcel Vardel, 1937) required costumes – grammar school and railway uniforms, respectively – appropriate to their settings. Leading studios such as Gaumont-British had an eye to the international market, and films like Victor Saville's *Evergreen* (1934) and *First a Girl* (1935) used high production values, exotic locations and multiple costume changes to attract audiences, whilst the thriller *Rome Express* (Walter Forde, 1932) showcased stylish modern-day dress with magazine tie-ins.

Increasing the quantity and quality of productions placed stress on the system, resulting in criticism of some prevalent costume practices. Leading film magazine *Picturegoer* railed against British films that showed 'badly groomed stars in dowdy clothes', and against film producers who were content to put a girl in a frock and 'take up the slack with a couple of safety pins and pray it wouldn't show in the close-ups'.[35] The magazine grudgingly admitted that Britain's screen clothes 'have certainly shown improvement', but concluded that 'too little vision is yet displayed'.[36] This lack of vision may be explained by the particular ways in which films made in Britain were costumed. British studios did not have in-house costume departments, and certainly nothing on the scale of Hollywood. Instead they used a system outlined in Catherine Surowiec's description of costume assistant Marianne Horn, who was active in British filmmaking in the 1930s:

> Horn's talent lay not in designing dresses, but in organising the costume supply, securing costumes from couture houses or costumiers – the essential shortcuts to a supply of character clothing for any British studio lacking the manpower and space to manufacture and store its own costume reserve.[37]

Horn, known professionally as 'Marianne', was one of a number of costume assistants and wardrobe staff who were employed directly by the film studios; others were Ernest Farrar, Lily Payne, Joyce Auberon and Ann Morgan, all of suitable standing professionally to be profiled in fan magazines such as *Picturegoer*. Job titles such as 'dress controller' and 'dress supervisor' indicate that the design and manufacture of costumes was not part of their brief; their responsibility lay in managing costumes that came from external suppliers. This process is evident in the description by Auberon, dress controller at Elstree, of how 'we adjourn to a west end dressmaker to choose colours and materials, for although we have a dressmaking establishment on the premises for repairs and alternations, we make very few of the dresses ourselves'.[38] Industry descriptions of the wardrobe mistress as 'a sort of Female Property Maker'[39] further supports this understanding of how costuming was organized in Britain's film studios at the time.

35 E. G. Cousins, 'Eve and her fig leaves', *Picturegoer*, 27 June 1931, pp. 22, 24.

36 Ibid.

37 Catherine A. Surowiec, 'Anthony Mendleson: Ealing's wardrobe wizard', in Mark Duguid, Lee Freeman, Keith M. Johnston and Melanie Williams (eds), *Ealing Revisited* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 111. Horn has over 20 attributed wardrobe credits in the 1930s, including *First a Girl* (1935), Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Sabotage* (1936) and *Young and Innocent* (1937), *The Tunnel* (Maurice Elvey, 1935) and *Head Over Heels* (Sonnie Hale, 1937).

38 Gwen Willoughby, Dresses that have understudies', *News Chronicle*, 23 January 1931, p. 11.

39 Brunel, *Filmcraft*, p. 59.

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This system does not seem to have changed with the new investment in film studio infrastructure. When industry leader Gaumont-British launched its new studios at Lime Grove, Shepherd's Bush in 1932, its 30-page marketing brochure was replete with glossy photographs showcasing the latest technology in lighting, sound, film-cutting, developing, and so on. This seemingly comprehensive brochure incorporates photographs of workshops (carpentry, props, modelling room, plasterers' shop), a 'designing room' for art direction, dressing rooms for 'stars' and 'crowd', and a make-up room. But photographs depicting dedicated costume or wardrobe space are not included, and the accompanying studio plans replicate this absence. They plans are sufficiently detailed to include not only six sound stages, an orchestration theatre, camera rooms, scenario and publicity departments and a works canteen, but also stores for 'hessian', 'curtains' and 'carpets' (figure 3).[40] Yet despite the range, scale and detail of the plans, dedicated space for 'costume' or 'wardrobe' is notable by its absence. If we are to understand studios as 'architectural spaces intended to support a number of functions', then where were costumes being designed, made and stored at this time? Costume's absence from official documents is at odds with its depiction in a series of promotional cigarette cards released in 1934 by cigarette manufacturer B. Morris & Sons.

Produced with the assistance of Gaumont-British, the 25-card series, entitled 'How Films Are Made', focused on various different aspects of film production, from continuity to plasterers working on model replicas. Here a 'Wardrobe Dept' *is* featured, with the card showing a woman – described as a 'skilled needlewoman' – hard at work at a sewing machine, surrounded by period clothes and uniforms (figure 4).[41] The inclusion of 'Wardrobe' in the series seems to acknowledge it as a topic of interest to a general buying public, but the impression that costumes were produced in-house is at odds with the reality of studios relying on external suppliers for design and manufacture, located at some geographical distance from the studios' increasingly suburban locations.

British film studios at this time were commissioning freelance designers, typically from fashion and theatre backgrounds, on a film-by-film basis. They looked to the leading fashion designers Norman Hartnell, Elsa Schiaparelli, Coco Chanel and Berleo to design for principal players (usually the female stars) in films such as, respectively, *Sailing Along* (Sonnie Hale, 1938), *The King of the Damned* (Michael Balcon, 1935), *First a Girl* and *Evergreen*. This commissioning of 'fashionable couturiers' was observed by Rachel Low as a 'new trend' in British cinema and indicates that studios were prepared to invest in show-stopping gowns for the biggest productions of the day.[42] But most design at this time was undertaken by designers from theatrical backgrounds. Painters such as John Armstrong, who generated additional income through theatre set design and costume design for films including *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, and Doris Zinkeisen, a set and costume designer from theatre, who made a major contribution to British film

40 Conway Papers, Series 1, Subseries A, Production Materials, Container 27.18, Harry Ransom Research Center (hereafter HRRC).

41 Richard Farmer, 'Publicising the studio: cigarette cards – "How Films Are Made"', *Studiotec*, 3 July 2020, <https://studiotec.info/2020/07/03/publicising-the-studio-cigarette-cards-how-films-are-made/> accessed 14 February 2023. All six films featured in the series had costumes designed by Gordon Conway.

42 Rachel Low, *Film Making in 1930s Britain* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985).

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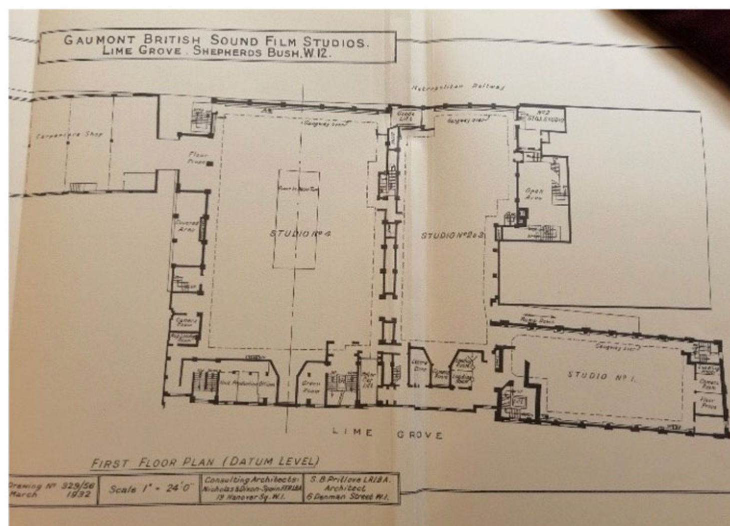

Fig. 3. Gaumont-British studio plans (1932).

Fig. 4. Cigarette card featuring the wardrobe department at Gaumont-British (1934).

through her designs for Anna Neagle. Alongside these was Conway, who came from a background in fashion illustration but went on, unlike the other designers listed here, to specialize in film costume.

Freelance designers were in fact the contact between studios and makers, part of a complex chain of labour that stretched from film studios to theatrical outfitters, department stores, couture houses and specialists in ladies tailoring – all businesses that were situated in London's West End. Here we find the 'expert artisans' of Nielson's description: 'the cutters, fitters, tailors and beaders [...] who transform raw sketches and bolts of every conceivable kind of material into finished garments'. Conway faithfully kept diaries during her years working in London, and made daily entries recording the appointments, meetings and costume fittings she attended, alongside shopping trips and visits to specialist suppliers. Drawing

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on Clarke's concept of creative labour as the work that goes on between films, these allow us to reconstruct in some detail Conway's working day, providing a unique glimpse into the costuming of British films. They also bring into view the expert artisans Conway worked with, enabling us to pursue Mallinson's call to 'lift the craft work out of the narrative context' and make it visible in its own right. Through Conway's diaries we can begin the process of restoring costume-makers to film history.

Conway was born in 1894, into a wealthy family in Texas. Educated privately at schools in Dallas, Washington and Switzerland, she toured Europe with her mother and received an education typical for a woman of her class, with instruction in art, dance, music and French.[43] A talented artist, her privileged background gave her entry to Manhattan's cafe society, where her sketches caught the eye of *Vogue*'s art director Heyworth Campbell and launched her on a career as a professional illustrator and designer. Between 1915 and 1921 she worked in New York, gaining success as an illustrator and poster artist before moving into costume and set design, initially for cabaret and then for musical comedy on Broadway. After marriage in 1920 she moved to Europe and lived between Paris and London, taking freelance commissions for illustration and design work for the leading European publishing and entertainment industries (figure 5). Conway specialized in depictions of the 'New Woman', whose slender young body was adorned in the latest fashions, and her designs appeared on posters for musical revues and in magazines such as *The Tatler* and *Eve*. After divorce in 1927 she settled in London, renting an apartment at Bryanstone Court, Mayfair, where her neighbours included Wallis Simpson. It was from here that she built her expertise in costume design, initially for stage and then increasingly for films. Between 1927 and 1929 she designed costumes for high-profile films including Graham Cutts's *Confetti* (1927), *God's Clay* (1928) and *The Return of the Rat* (1928), and Maurice Elvey's *High Treason* (1929). She also published a number of articles reflecting on costume design for film, including 'Dressing the talkies' and 'Frocks for films'. Here she demonstrated an advanced working knowledge of the interplay between fabric (its colour and finish), camera, lighting and film stock, alongside an acute understanding of the affective properties of costume on an 'artist's personality'.[44] Such was her commitment to understanding the specific properties of designing for film as opposed to theatre, that she reputedly took to analysing her own colour drawings 'using a small eye-glass implement of sapphire glass that transposed color into various shades of blacks, greys, and whites providing a contrast of hue, value, and texture'.[45] In Conway's designs for *The Return of the Rat*, her swatch sheet included a number of fabric and paint samples that suggest how she was experimenting with different colours – 'apricot and cream', 'mauves and blues' – for a film shot in black and white (figure 6). Like most women of her generation she was an avid filmgoer, and her diaries show

43 Allen, *Gordon Conway*, pp. 10–11.

44 Gordon Conway, 'Dressing the talkies', *Film Weekly*, 2 September 1929, p. 7. See also Bell, *Movie Workers*, pp. 74–78.

45 Allen, *Gordon Conway*, p. 121.

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Fig. 5. Publicity shots of Conway, undated but probably 1920s. Conway Papers, Series 1, Subseries A, Production Materials, Container 53.1, Harry Ransom Research Center.

Fig. 6. Gordon Conway's swatch sheet for *Return of the Rat* (Graham Cutts, 1929). Conway Papers, Series 1, Subseries A, Production Materials, Container 27.10, Harry Ransom Research Center.

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she frequently rounded off the working day with a trip to the cinema. The occasional recording of her impressions in her diary – '*Bad Girl* one of the greatest talkies I've ever seen'; 'saw a new color film' – suggests an active and engaged interest in the media in which she was working.

The period between 1929 and 1935 was remarkably prolific for Conway, who designed costumes for more than 30 films, including *Sunshine Susie* (Victor Saville, 1931), *Rome Express*, *The Constant Nymph* (Basil Dean, 1933) and several Jessie Matthews features. These were films that attracted Royal Gala Premieres and audience awards for best picture, and showcased an array of both glamourous and practical daywear for women, with the costumes featuring heavily in their publicity and press books. Conway was of sufficient standing to appear regularly in the press, photographed alongside leading stars and celebrities, where she was described variously as 'the well-known artist', 'the clever designer' and 'the famous dress designer'. In 1933, leading critic Nerina Shute crowned her 'A woman prophet of film fashions', whilst fan magazine *Picture Show* hailed her as an 'artist in cloth'.[46] In that same year she signed a contract with Gaumont-British that would have consolidated her ambitions to establish a specialist dress department for them, the first appointment of its kind in any British film studio. Conway's tenure, however, was short-lived, and she effectively retired from film production in 1934 due to a combination of ill health and the declining fortunes of Britain's film studios.

46 Qtd in ibid., p. 152.

The purpose of this biographical sketch is two-fold. First, it highlights the expertise Conway brought to British films from her background as a fashion illustrator and theatre designer in New York and Paris, the twin capitals of the modern world. She had also accumulated a wealth of cultural capital from living in Europe, was well-versed in Parisian night-life and the jazz scene, and had a string of connections across theatre, fashion and magazine publishing. At a time when the British film industry was expanding, and companies such as Gaumont-British had an eye towards the international markets, Conway's talents would have been in high demand. Second, her screen credits show that she designed costumes for films with budgets of varying size, made by different production companies and at different studios, including Gainsborough in Islington, British Lion in Beaconsfield, and Gaumont-British in Shepherd's Bush. This suggests we can read the descriptions of workflow, process and suppliers – documented in her diaries – as broadly representative of how costume design and making for British films was functioning in this period.

A typical day shows Conway moving between the film studios and the various costumiers, couture houses, department stores and other suppliers to the clothing trade, all of which were located in central London. Her diaries, kept between 1922 and 1935, cover the entirety of her London film career, with an entry for most days recorded on one page (figure 7). Conway had meetings at film studios, usually with producers or directors, in the pre-production stage of the film. A typical entry from 1931 reads,

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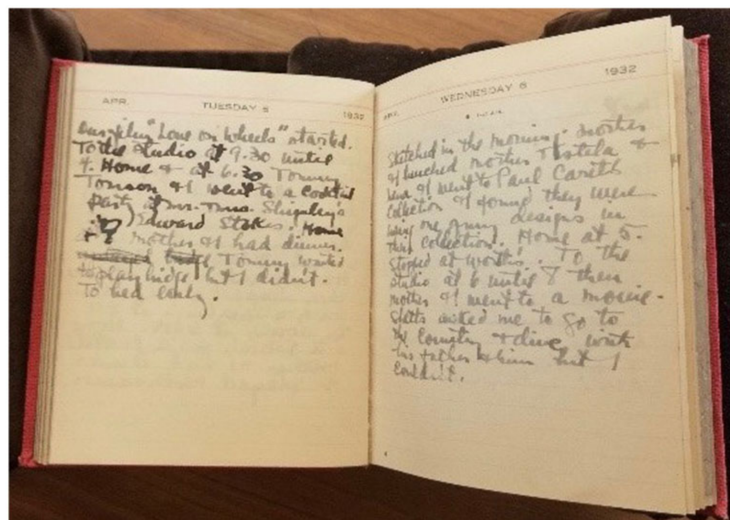

Fig. 7. Gordon Conway's diary (1931).

'After lunch I went to Gainsborough to talk to Victor Saville about costumes for *Michael and Mary*. Then to Simmons and home.' In another entry she writes, 'To Gainsborough at 11 to see Chan [Balcon, producer]. Then to Simpson's about costumes. Home to lunch and did a design for Edna Best and met her at 3 at Worth's.'[47] Others record her meeting with a principal actress at Simmons 'for a fitting', 'shopping at Selfridge's for clothes for the film', visiting the studio for a fitting ('Worth's came to fit Edna [Best]'), 'to Maison Arthurs at 3', going to the studio 'for a press tea', and a visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum 'to look up Ancient Greece'. Long days and working at the weekends was not uncommon. An entry for 1928 reads 'up at 7, in studio at 9 and didn't leave until 7pm. Went to see a film in the evening, couldn't stay awake.' On Sunday 20 December 1931, Conway records that she 'stayed in all day and designed clothes for *The Faithful Heart*'. Small wonder perhaps that her entry for Christmas Day 1931 reads simply, 'stayed in bed until 4'.

Diary entries suggest that the four main elements of the costume designer's role were meetings, sketching, commissioning and shopping. If we look at this work at a more granular level, we can see Conway's design sketches as detailed, mixed-media compositions that include fabric samples, textual annotations, colour schemes, body postures and different views of the outfit to build a three-dimensional picture of a garment and performer. The sketches sometimes include particular paints to indicate the fabrics and materials to be used in the finished design: for example the metallic paint used to indicate 'silver flowers with diamante' and the instruction for 'grey satin' in Conway's design for the Grand Duchess in *Confetti* (figure 8). Conway's diary entries record her visits to costume-makers, her supervision of fittings with stars, shopping for clothes (sometimes accompanied by the leading actress) and purchasing accessories such as costume jewellery, parasols, handbags and shoes.

47 Gordon Conway Papers, Performing Arts Collection PA-00019, Series 1, Subseries C, Diaries, Container, 10.1-11.6, HRRC.

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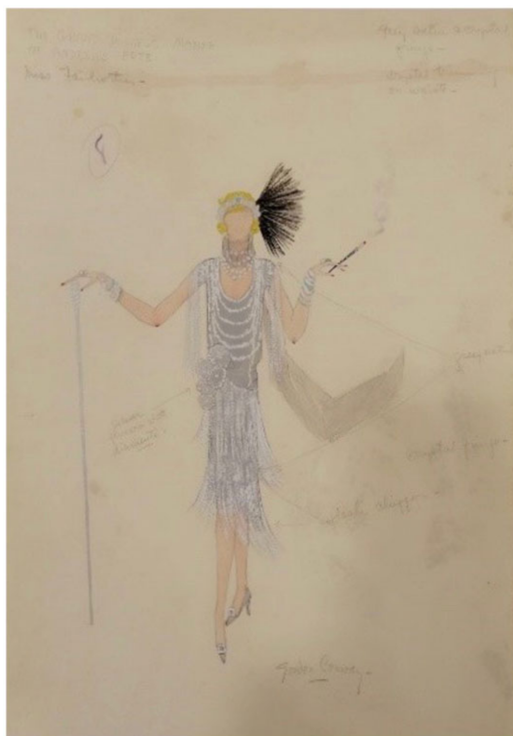

Fig. 8. Gordon Conway design for *Confetti* (Graham Cutts, 1928). Conway Papers, Series 1, Subseries A, Production Materials, Container 25.31, Harry Ransom Research Center.

Shopping in this context is a multi-faceted activity requiring high levels of material literacy. It involves identifying potential garments, assessing their suitability for character construction, their potential to be adapted (by whom and at what cost), how their material might photograph, and how they might fit a performing body.

These different aspects of the costuming process were geographically specific, and ranged from specialist costumiers and department stores to couture houses, each with their own work cultures and rhythms. The specialist costumiers supplied outfits for the theatre and for fancy-dress hire. The main firms at this time were B. J. Simmons, Bermans, Samuels, Morris Angels and Nathans, all of whom not only held extensive costume stock but had well-equipped workrooms where their staff could produce bespoke garments from designers' drawings. Leading department stores such as Selfridge's and Marshall and Snelgrove were key suppliers of women's ready-made clothing, and they too had in-house workrooms employing seamstresses who could adapt an item to order. Couture dressmaking in the capital was extensive, and highly concentrated in specific areas of the West End. The designer Stella Mary Newton, who opened her first couture house in London's New Bond Street in 1935, remembers dressmaking as organized into two distinct tiers:

> Ordinary couture included professional tailors and dressmakers [...] the 'little woman around the corner', who made up her customer's

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material, created patterns to her ideas, or copied a garment illustrated in *Vogue*, and stage designers who sometimes also designed and made clothes for private clients. Custom-made *haute couture* garments created by a designer used the very best quality materials and were made by a team of skilled professionals. [...] The clients never provided fabric, for there was a close collaboration between the house designers and the manufacturers of high quality textiles and trimmings.[48]

A couture house like Worth's – frequently mentioned in Conway's diary – was at the elite end of the fashion market and specialized in creative vision and fine hand-sewing to produce a perfectly finished product, whilst a skilled professional dressmaker and her assistant, working from paper patterns, could produce a garment to a quality finish.[49]

A costume designer like Conway, or indeed anyone doing the same job, needed the skills and the upper-class background to be able to navigate effectively across this retail and manufacturing landscape. This demanded a knowledge of who supplied what at the best price, and which businesses could be relied upon to deliver on time, to the required quality and finish. As the linchpin in what was a complex chain of labour, the designer needed to be able to talk effectively with dressmakers, saleswomen and actresses. This required specialist vocabulary to explain cut and finish (rolled hems, bias-cutting, and so on), a working knowledge of French, and the ability to talk to actresses with tact and diplomacy, offering reassurances whilst staying within the design brief. Such types of emotional labour are commonly found in work undertaken by women. It is reasonable to assume that department-store shopping trips with actresses might also involve coffee or lunch, which necessitated appropriate manners and deportment; one had to be trustworthy and not betray a confidence, whilst also being entertaining and good company. The significance of the socializing element to Conway's role is further evidenced by considering the function of her apartment at Bryanstone Court. Here she hosted dinners and entertainment for what she described as 'film men', who had to be persuaded to 'take it [costume design] seriously' and not scrimp on costs, and received guests such as film star Rene Muller before accompanying her to the dressmakers. For this to work effectively, an apartment in close proximity to the luxury shopping, dining and theatre venues of central London was an vital asset, as was the necessary economic and social capital to furnish it to the standard expected by such visitors. Here are 'the negotiations, the meetings with producers [...] the parts of the job that require navigation in a business environment' that characterize Clarke's description of creative labour. Conway's diaries make this work visible, highlighting the necessity of looking beyond the film studio to uncover a fuller picture of filmmaking; costume design, craftwork and decision-making is happening elsewhere, and it is these different

48 Stella Mary Newton, 'London *haute couture* in the 1930s', *Costume*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2005), p. 4. Newton opened her house under her 'maiden' name of Stella Mary Pearce.

49 Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 50–53.

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business environments that support the function of costuming British films.

Mapping this spatially helps us to visualize this business context, with its complex network of labour and suppliers, and to show how a costume designer may have moved through it in the day-to-day execution of her role. Writing in 1960, geographer P. G. Hall described London's clothing trade as historically 'localized to a high degree', with high-end women's outerwear (dresses and gowns) concentrated in London's West End. Here was the 'army of high-class Court and private dressmakers' ready to meet the demands of the 'wealthier classes' and the 'special and exceptional needs of the middle classes'.[50] Alongside those who specialized in bespoke dressmaking were department stores with their in-house workrooms, and these and other purveyors of luxury goods had businesses that stretched along the 'principal shopping arteries' of Oxford Street to the quieter streets around Grosvenor Square. Promoted at the time as 'London's most fashionable shopping district', the cultural geographer Bronwen Edwards describes this as 'a collection of smaller, differently functioning routes and areas, home to a variety of businesses, creating a complex patchwork that was at once a source of disorientation, and the West End's chief attraction'.[51] In 1938, a description of this district in *The Architects Journal* as 'one of the finest drapery sites in the world' highlights the primary role played by textiles.[52] To navigate the area required an effective knowledge of suppliers and a good degree of planning, especially for shoppers like Conway, who seems to have moved about it principally on foot.

The particular location of Conway's apartment also forms an important part of the picture. Bryanstone Court was a short walk to the department stores of Oxford Street, and the streets around Grosvenor Square were home to 'chic dress shops [...] as well as the more upmarket dressmakers'.[53] The House of Worth – visited by Conway with actress Edna Best – had its premises here, whilst the court dressmaker Maison Arthurs was half a mile away on Dover Street. The costumiers visited by Conway – B. J. Simmons, Nathans and others – had their premises in and around Covent Garden, close to London's theatre district, and within walking distance of the Grosvenor Square shops. Figure 9 gives a detailed picture of the density of businesses supplying women's clothing in Mayfair. In addition to the major court dressmakers and couture houses, here are the purveyors of ordinary couture, 'the "little woman" who runs you up a frock in no time' – usually found in the 'less-salubrious back streets' – and the ancillary trades and suppliers.[54] Although not necessarily visited in person by designers such as Conway, ancillary trades were intimately connected to the business of costume through their supply of buttons, hooks, decorations and belts, and their servicing of sewing machines.[55] This is what the design historian Bethan Bide has termed 'the world of Mayfair sewing'.[56] Mapping this complex network highlights the geographical concentration of specialist skills that Conway and other designers called on to costume British films. For the

50 P. G. Hall, 'The location of the clothing trades in London, 1861–1951', in The Institute of British Geographers, *Transactions and Papers*, no. 28 (1960), p. 168. The opening of tube stations between 1900 and 1907, first at Oxford Street then at Regent Street, was a major factor in consolidating the high concentrations of workshops in dressmaking and ladies tailoring in this area (ibid., p. 169).

51 Bronwen Edwards, 'West End shopping with *Vogue*: 1930s geographies of metropolitan consumption', in John Benson and Laura Ugolini (eds), *Cultures of Selling: Perspectives on Consumption and Society Since 1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), p. 37.

52 Ibid., p. 35.

53 Ibid., p. 45.

54 Ibid., pp. 46–47.

55 Hall, 'The location of the clothing trades in London', p. 174.

56 Bethan Bide, in conversation with the author, 2 November 2021.

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Dressing the Talkies: 3 Streets

1. Scott & Co.: *7 Albemarle Street (Tailors)*
2. Viola Ltd: *18 Albemarle Street (Court Dressmaker)*
3. Martial & Armand: *18 Albemarle Street (Courture)*
4. Cobb Walt: *25 Albemarle Street (Ladies Tailor)*
5. Ernest & Redfern Ltd: *26 Albemarle Street (Courture)*
6. Savage & Co.: *28 Albemarle Street (Tailors)*
7. Madame Luander: *35 Albemarle Street (Court Dressmaker)*
8. Desboroughs: *36 Albemarle (Tailors)*
9. Goodstien & Lunch: *37 Albemarle (Tailors)*
10. Guthrie & Valentine: *46 Albemarle (Tailors)*
11. Walker Herbert: *47 Albemarle (Tailors)*
12. Harry Maison: *10 Dover Street (Court Milliner)*
13. Marthe Dion Ltd: *11-12 Dover Street (Court Dressmaker)*
14. Susette: *15 Dover Street (Dressmaker)*
15. Maison Arthur: *17-18 Dover Street (Court Dressmaker)*
16. Madame Elisa Poutz: *27 Dover Street (Court Dressmaker and Milliner)*
17. Schlacter Leon Ltd: *31 Dover Street (Court Dressmaker)*
18. Machinka: *36 Dover Street (Court Dressmaker)*
19. Verlaine Ltd: *48 Dover Street (Court Dressmaker)*

Fig. 9. Concentration of dressmakers in Mayfair circa 1930. This image was prepared by David Gould, Post-Doctoral Research Assistant, School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds.

film historian, the maps presented here should be viewed alongside the studio maps of Gaumont-British (shown in figure 3), where costume is conspicuous by its absence. Indeed they go some way to explaining this absence; costume is not shown in film studios because it is already accounted for in London's infrastructure.

I want to look in more detail at a representative sample of the different types of costume businesses Conway visited as a designer, and from this to build a picture of the artisans making costumes for British films. I am as precise as is practicable about workflow, the different elements of costume-making and the skills of the maker, and where possible use examples from British films of the time. But the patchy nature of archival collections means I cannot illustrate all stages in the process through the same film, and I therefore draw material from a range of films made around the same time.

References to 'Simmons' appear frequently in Conway's diaries. Located on King Street, Covent Garden, B. J. Simmons was a leading supplier of theatrical and historical costumes. Founded in 1875, they had a reputation for creating historically accurate costumes and were well-known for dressing Herbert Beerbohm Tree's popular productions of Shakespeare. They held extensive stock for hire, had a substantial in-house research library on costume history, and made costumes to order in their well-equipped workrooms, which had access to the finest fabrics and materials. By the 1920s, Simmons were increasingly picking up costume work for the film industry, and the company's records show them involved in the costuming of over 100 British films between the 1930s and 1950s. Comparable businesses such as Nathans noted the increase in 'demands' made by the burgeoning film industry at this time. John Gudenian, Nathan's deputy managing director, recalled that 'During the thirties, business in this line expanded with the advent of many productions for Gaumont British at Lime Grove and Gainsborough

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Films at Islington'.[57] Nathans had a staff of approximately two hundred, which included skilled cutters, dressmakers, tailors, milliners, jewellery-makers and painters, and supplying British film productions became an important part of the company's turnover. Gudenian joined the company in 1950, and his descriptions, as an industry insider, of how the costume business worked with the film industry give an invaluable insight into workflow, and are worth quoting here at length:

57 John Gudenian, 'Bermans and Nathans, costume and the entertainment world', *Costume*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1981), p. 60.

> If the script is complete and a copy available, this is perused for details such as period, action, number of crowds etc. Depending on the budget and the stars involved, a list of requirements is prepared by the Costume Designer or Wardrobe Supervisor and presented to us for an approximate budget. Again from the breakdown and artistes involved, it will be decided which costumes will have to be made for these star parts. [...] [the] Costume Designer will then bring in his or her drawings for detailed discussion with our Production Department, where materials are selected and cut and style decided. [...] fittings are supervised by the Costume Designer whose word is final, although our technical staff on many occasions offer valuable advice. Smaller parts are very often fitted up from stock and the overall number of crowd costumes are mustered for inspection by the Designer and/or Wardrobe Supervisor. [...] Film companies in normal circumstances organize their own transport to collect from us and likewise return the goods after shooting has terminated. [...] the top part of principals' clothes have special attention which in period costume can involve hand work rather than machine work, because one has to consider the much magnified picture that is presented to the public and the greatly enlarged detail on show.[58]

58 Ibid., pp. 63–64.

Putting this description alongside extant archival materials held in the Conway and Simmons collections helps build a more nuanced picture of workflow. Original costume designs would be copied by 'house artists'. Referred to as 'costumiers copies', these were sometimes traced but just as often house artists would transfer, free-hand, the original designs, 'adding notes about costume construction, even incorporating features of an actor's face for a realistic touch'.[59] These costumiers copies (none of which are signed) would be passed to the dressmakers in the workrooms where the garments were made (designers retained their originals). These were working documents, added to and amended with detailed instructions about material type and colour. A large company the size of Nathans or Simmons would have sufficient specialization within its workforce to assign specific elements of the costume – lace collars, or embroidery on waistcoats – to different members of the workroom. Sketches for *The Iron Duke* (Victor Saville, 1934) show how greater detail is added as the costume moves through the manufacturing process, with close-ups of hands, cuffs and collars, especially for period clothes, alongside instructions concerning fabric colour and measurements (figures 10 and 11). Hand-written comments on the sketches to 'use

59 Notes for the web exhibition, 'A tonic to the imagination: costume designs for stage and screen by B. J. Simmons & Co.', The Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, May 2010; site no longer available. For exhibition information see <https://sites.utexas.edu/ransomcentermagazine/2010/05/26/web-exhibition-explores-costume-designs-for-stage-and-screen-by-b-j-simmons-co/> accessed 11 April 2023.

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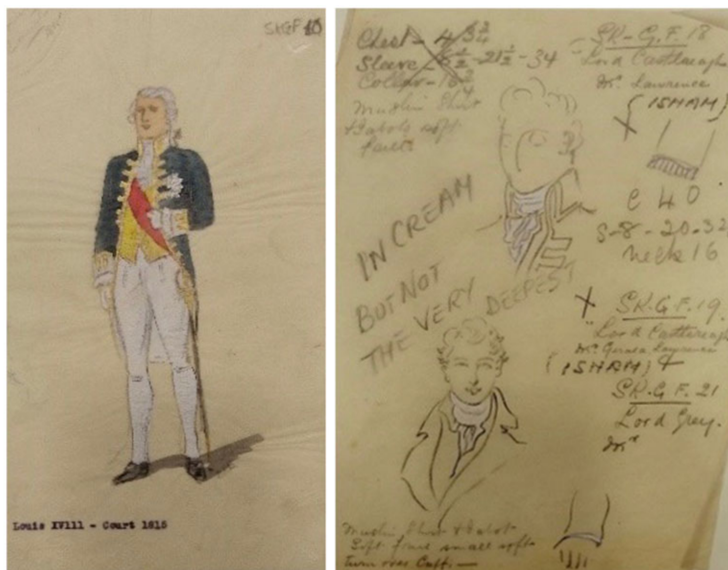

Figs 10 and 11. ***The Iron Duke*** **(Victor Saville, 1934) original costume design by Cathleen Mann. House artist sketches (l) and (r) with instructions and measurements. B. J. Simmons & Co. Subseries B. Film Productions, 1923–62. Box 190.13. B. J. Simmons Collection. Harry Ransom Research Center.**

cream, but not the very deepest' show both a shared material literacy in the workroom and an awareness of how fabrics photographed for the screen. There is an intimacy in the attention to detail, especially where roles had been cast and the house artists and makers knew which actors would be wearing the costumes they were creating.

Paper records and other forms of written documentation are invaluable for bringing into view the work of the house artists and for showing how the design is amended and supplemented as it moves through the making process. These are some of the stages by which a sketch is transformed, in Nielson's words, 'into a living garment of color, shape, personality, and authenticity on the screen'. But many elements of making go unrecorded in this form, and thus remain elusive. In an attempt to make visible the individuals involved in manufacture I have looked to other sources, namely the testimony of fashion designers and the curricula for training dressmakers in the 1920s and 1930s. These provide a new perspective on workflow and specialization, and from this we can extrapolate how material literacy enabled successful collaborative working.

References to the couture house Worth's appear frequently in Conway's diaries: 'did a design for Edna Best and met her at 3 at Worths' [sic]; 'Worth's came to fit Edna' at the film studio.[60] She also visited the court dressmaker Maison Arthurs on Dover Street, and Chez Beth, 'a chic new shop in London' that had previously executed Conway's designs for theatre productions.[61] Given Conway's reach as a designer, we can extrapolate from her diary entries that a significant proportion of costumes for British films were being made in couture workrooms in the 1930s. Couture designer Stella Mary Newton, in her first-hand account of London's couture, provides a detailed description of

60 Conway Papers, Diaries, Container, 10.1-11.6, HRRC. Conway designed for two films starring Edna Best – Victor Saville's *Michael and Mary* (1931) and *The Faithful Heart* (1932). It is likely that Worth's made the luxury evening-wear that Best wore in *Michael and Mary*, as this featured heavily in the film's publicity campaign.

61 Allen, *Gordon Conway*, p. 102.

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the workflow in couture houses, albeit from the perspective of a designer. The larger houses had several workrooms which supported a degree of specialization (embroidery, tailoring, and so on), with each workroom supervised by a head fitter, with a 'second hand', an assistant, a junior and apprentice also employed. The workrooms had a strict hierarchy, whereby

> designer and saleswomen communicated with the fitter, but never the hand. The fitter conversed with the hand, but never with her assistant. [...] Each 'hand' was experienced enough to 'take her own work' direct from the fitter and to distribute parts of it to her assistant or assistants.[62]

62 Newton, 'London *haute couture* in the 1930s', pp. 14–15.

That hands might have a reputation for certain types of work – 'able to handle a chiffon with a particular skill, or work well with stiff taffeta' – attests to the fact that certain fabrics and techniques required a particularly high level of skill and dexterity. The hand also undertook 'small and intricate pieces of machine stitching', whilst less-skilled stitching such as straightforward long lines of machining was handed over to a machinist.[63] Workflow also extended to the stockroom, where the stock-keeper supplied 'day-to-day necessities to the workroom' including 'swatches of textiles [...] ornament and trimming', and to the 'matching girls', who were dispatched to the haberdashery departments of shops on Oxford Street to collect items the stockroom could not supply. Clutching paper pinned with scraps of fabric, their job was to match the material with the correct shade of sewing silk, ribbon and lining. Matching was difficult as fitters were 'very exacting', and matching girls were trained to discern how a sewing silk of a slightly darker shade 'would best "work in"' to the garment and be less visible to the naked eye.[64] Such high levels of technical knowledge and attention to detail would have been especially valuable for any company making film costumes, where 'greatly enlarged detail' would be on show in the finished item.

63 Ibid., pp. 15–16.

64 Ibid., p. 10.

Newton's description of how work flows through a couture house shows how an original design passed through multiple stages, each step in the process communicated and interpreted by different people using written, verbal and material forms. Conway's business interactions will have been with the saleswoman and fitter – she almost certainly never interacted with a workhand or matching girl – but for her designs to succeed, all those involved in the process must have been able to collaborate through a shared vocabulary and possess similarly high levels of material literacy. We can see here how something as seemingly mundane as matching silk threads for sewing is an essential part of a wider collaborative process, and how a discussion between a matching girl and a haberdashery assistant about 'this thread, or that thread?' is as much a part of filmmaking as deciding where to cut a scene. Examining workflow and processes at this granular level – albeit still mediated through the voice of the designer – is vital. It addresses the 'gendered

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invisibility' of costume labour and adds further evidence to the feminist project of recalibrating what counts as work.

Such skills were acquired through extensive training – it took six years for a 14-year-old school-leaver to progress from apprentice to assistant – and long hours in the workroom, where late finishes without overtime pay was not uncommon. Many of the women – and they were all women – would have been trained through trade schools such as the Barrett Street Trade School for girls, a precursor to the London College of Fashion. It is worth reflecting here on the training the girls received, and research by costume historian Helen Reynolds provides a valuable account of the provision.[65] Situated in close proximity to Selfridge's on Oxford Street, the Barrett Street school took in girls aged 14 to 16 for a two-year full-time course in either dressmaking (which included hand and machine embroidery), ladies' tailoring or hairdressing. Students at the school were mainly girls from working-class backgrounds, those whose parents could afford not only the fees (£1 per term in 1920–21) but also to allow their child to be economically inactive beyond the school-leaving age of 14. Curricula show students were taught to the level required for employment in the high-class couture trade. For dressmaking students this meant proficiency in 'hand-rolled hems, hand button holes, fine pin tucks, pleats and a number of seams and seam finishes'.[66] Stitches and techniques were worked on samples of different fabrics (from fine silk to wool) before students progressed through pattern-making and cutting, design and then garment-making. Embroidery students went through a similar training, practising a variety of stitches on fabrics of different weight before progressing to 'braiding, fringing, metal thread and beading work'.[67] The philosophy of needle-trade schools such as Barrett's was to train girls to be 'creative artisans as well as skilled technicians', and students were expected to have a deep understanding of the properties of different fabrics and how they moved with the body through cutting and draping.[68] The school also offered special day courses for girls and women aged 16 to 25, evening classes and group courses for dressmaking, intended 'to supplement knowledge and experience already acquired in the workroom'.[69] These ranged across flat pattern-making, power machining, advanced art courses in drawing and design, and a course in French to learn the technical terms used in the skilled trades and 'how to conduct business correspondence with French firms'.[70]

The school was successful – in 1928 it had almost 1500 students in its classrooms – and it earned a reputation for quality teaching and placing its students in skilled jobs, providing 'the West End of London's clothing trade with much of its skilled workforce'.[71] It achieved this by actively building links with prospective employers. It hosted an annual exhibition, which in 1921 attracted delegates from over two hundred firms to a private viewing, whilst representatives from leading department stores (Marshall and Snelgrove, Harrods, Liberty) and trade unions (the Amalgamated Union of Tailors and Tailoresses) sat on the school's

65 Helen Reynolds, *Couture or Trade: An Early Pictorial Record of the London College of Fashion* (Chichester: Phillimore, 1997).

66 Ibid., p. xxii.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., fig. 18, np.

69 Joan Edwards, 'The Barrett Street Trade School', *Costume*, vol. 18, no. 1 (1984), p. 84.

70 Ibid.

71 Reynolds, *Couture or Trade*, p. xi.

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Consultative Committee, advising on curricula content to ensure students were trained in a way that met the needs of local industry. By the late 1920s, as mentioned above, this included West End-based business supplying film studios with costumes.[72]

72 Edwards, 'The Barrett Street Trade School', p. 84.

This gives a clear indication of the range and depth of the training received by students, whether as dressmakers, tailors or embroiderers, the high level of technical proficiency they developed, along with the acumen necessary to apply it to creative design. Firms such as Simmons and Nathans, the house of Worth, the professional tailors and dressmakers who collectively made up the world of Mayfair sewing, were well stocked with these highly trained and talented individuals. It was through their skills that British films were costumed. These were the costume-makers who, to return to Nielson's description, could 'transform a sketch into a living garment of color, shape, personality, and authenticity for the screen'. And that 'little woman' who could run you up a frock in no time could do so not because it was easy, but because she was highly skilled – able, in Nielson's words, to 'understand the designer's ideas [... and] to cut, pattern and sew the raw materials with speed and dexterity'.[73]

73 Nielson, 'Handmaidens of the glamour culture', p. 61.

I want to close by returning to *The Good Companions* and to look again at the 'Three Wishes' dress in the light of this scholarship. How did the makers of that dress transform Conway's sketch into a living garment to be worn by a performer and recorded for the cinema screen? What materials were used, how easy or difficult were they to work with, and what skills were required? *The Good Companions* is a typical example of costuming for British films in the 1930s. It includes a mix of hires from costume houses, original design for leading women, and male actors providing their own modern-day attire. The two principal female characters in the film – Susie Dean (Jessie Mathews) and Miss Trant (Mary Glynne) – wore costumes designed by Conway, a total of 14 outfits including a number of evening dresses and smart daywear. Designs for these are held in the Conway collection, but there are no annotations or instructions on Conway's design indicating preferred fabrics or materials, nor are there corresponding entries in her diaries connecting the actress or dress with a particular maker. I have not yet been able to attribute its making to any one individual dressmaker or couture house. What follows, then, must of necessity be speculative, but is perhaps all the more compelling because it suggests that *any* of the dressmakers in Mayfair could have made the dress.

The 'Three Wishes' dress is worn by Matthews in a key scene in which her character, Susie Dean, performs a solo romantic number. The sequence consists of static and dynamic poses, with Matthews initially seated atop the piano before moving across the stage, performing the high-kicks and back-bends for which she was famous. Conway's design and its execution therefore needed both to attract attention to a static

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figure and to accommodate the full range of movements Matthews would perform. Conway's design is for a full-length backless dress, made of a sheer fabric with an embellished neckline, and long sleeves and hem decorated with feathers. Whilst the bodice is fitted to showcase a slender torso, the skirt is full, the design suggesting that several metres of fabric will be required. Stills from the film show the dress was made to Conway's design with the exception of the cleavage-revealing neckline, which in the finished garment is covered by a modesty panel (perhaps, in 1933, to accommodate the requirements of US censors).

Matthews's reflections on the dress she wore are detailed and accurate: a 'dazzling sequinned neckline and cloud upon cloud of floating transparent chiffon, covered in ostrich feathers'. The chiffon will have been silk chiffon, as a nylon version did not enter the marketplace until 1938. A fabric typically used for women's evening-wear, chiffon is light and slippery in texture, and only experienced hands in the workrooms could manage it successfully. It was often sewn using French seams, a technique that involved folding seams twice to encase the raw edge of the fabric, preventing it from fraying, and creating an exceptionally neat edge on what is a delicate fabric. As Matthews was to dance in the dress, inevitably putting the garment under some stress, it is likely to have been made using this method. The fullness of the skirt, with metres of fabric needing to be seamed, would have made the process labour-intensive and therefore expensive. The sequins on the neckline would have been attached by hand and were probably made from gelatine. The heating and pressing of gelatine into small, transparent discs was a new process in the 1920s, and whilst this meant the sequins could be mass produced and readily adopted by ateliers in Europe, they were also unstable and sensitive to heat and moisture.[74] The sewing 'hands' attaching the sequins would have to be adept, as painstaking care was required to avoid the discs melting and spoiling the fabric. Whilst gelatine sequins were a new material for dressmakers to work with, ostrich feathers were well established in the fashion market, frequently used to trim evening gowns and capes. Preferred for their exceptionally soft and loose texture, only the finest feathers could be attached to silk chiffon as anything too heavy would cause the fabric to tear or wrinkle. The detailed layering on the gown's skirt suggests that hundreds of individual feathers were attached by hand to give the 'floating' appearance of Matthews's description, feathers which would have been sorted, cleaned, bleached and dyed in plumage sweatshops in London's East End before they reached the West End dressmakers.[75] As chiffon was too delicate a fabric to put through a sewing machine in the 1930s, all of the cutting, fitting and sewing would have been done by hand, the fabric laid out on a large workroom table, with perhaps several women involved in attaching the decorative embellishments.

This 'dream of a dress', designed by Conway, worn by Matthews and made by unknown workhands, helped the film to its critical and commercial success. It garnered a Royal Command performance, and

74 Meghan Nesmith, 'A history of sequins, from King Tut's Tomb to your New Year's Eve outfit', *Racked*, 28 April 2017, <https://www.racked.com/2017/4/28/15345696/sequin-history> accessed 16 February 2023.

75 For research on the gendered and colonial supply chain for ostrich feathers, see Merle Patchett, 'Feather-work', *GeoHumanities*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2021), pp. 257–82.

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earned Conway a Production Personnel credit for ‘Gowns’ in the official Programme released by Gaumont-British for the film. It also helped the nervous young star Jessie Matthews to occupy the centre-stage with greater confidence. Just as importantly, the study of this dress has highlighted the collaborative nature of filmmaking, pinpointing its many creative, intellectual and emotional dimensions, and revealing precisely how women’s craft skills and material literacy were – and are – central to the costuming of film. Ultimately it shows how far removed the idea of individual authorship is from the reality of humans working together in pursuit of a common, creative goal.

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