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INTRODUCTION



## Structures of feeling: contemporary research in women's film and broadcasting history

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### ABSTRACT

This special issue is the second volume originating from the 'Doing Women's Film and Television Histories III' international conference held at the Phoenix Cinema, Leicester, England, in May 2016. It connects with concerns and questions of women's production histories related to the constructed nature of history and how we write a 'history from below' to foreground the hidden, marginalised or forgotten histories of our women ancestors. This collection captures something of the dominant 'structures of feeling' of women's film and broadcasting history scholarship in the contemporary period ranging from considerations of women working in both above and below-the-line roles in film, television and radio, to those whose labour fell outside of mainstream cinema production, as in the instance of the amateur film in the UK between the 1930s and 1980. Together, these case studies span from 1926 to the contemporary period, providing particular flashpoints of women's history across the UK, North America, Italy and Australia.

### KEYWORDS

'Structures of feeling'; visibility; women's film history; women's broadcasting history; women's labour; 'above-the-line'; below-the-line; oral history

## Introduction

This special issue of *Women's History Review* is the second volume of papers to originate from the 'Doing Women's Film and Television Histories III' international conference held at the Phoenix Cinema, Leicester, England, in May 2016.<sup>1</sup> The third biennial conference of the Women's Film and Television History Network: UK/Ireland, it was organised by members of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project, 'A History of Women in the British Film and Television Industries 1933–1989,' in collaboration with members of the Cinema and Television History Centre (CATH) at De Montfort University.<sup>2</sup> While the scope of the Network and organising project has been to bring to the forefront of academic studies 'doing' histories of women working in the British film and television industries, 'Doing Women's Film and Television Histories III,' like its predecessors were firmly international in scope. The three-day conference brought together over one hundred delegates from 11 countries and three continents to engage and share research about women's film and television history.

Whereas the first two conferences centred on transnationalism and issues around activism, autism and agency respectively, the central theme of the third conference was

'Structure of Feeling.'<sup>3</sup> Derived from the work of Marxist cultural historian Raymond Williams, 'structure of feeling' refers to the culture of a particular period: the 'felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a particular way of thinking and living.'<sup>4</sup> Its particular relevance for a conference on women's film and television history, and for this special issue, is in the way it speaks to the difficulty of reconstituting the lived experience of social subjects once the 'living witnesses are silent' and the recorded fragments of a culture have fallen foul to the 'selective tradition' governed by contemporary interests and values.<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging the many kinds of special interests that govern the 'selective tradition,' Williams' account privileges an analysis of class. Yet his model of the workings of culture is just as relevant to feminist analyses. Indeed, his model enables us to articulate the way the 'selective tradition' is informed by a range of intersecting privileges including those of class, gender and race.

The concept of 'structure of feeling' provided a useful jumping off point for the conference and for this special issue. It connects with concerns and questions central to the Women's Film and Television History Network and to the broader field of women's production histories which have flourished in recent years.<sup>6</sup> Those concerns and questions related to the constructed nature of history and how we write a 'history from below' in order to bring into view the histories of our women ancestors who have been hidden, forgotten or marginalised in official accounts of history.

In acknowledging the impossibility of returning to the 'lived experiences' of women of particular historical periods, however, the concept of 'structure of feeling' constellates with Monica Dall'Asta and Jane Gaines' influential way of conceptualising the historian's engagement with women's surviving texts and documents. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, Dall'Asta and Gaines argue that while we can never go back to the times of those ancestors, 'nevertheless women's surviving films and documents exist as 'historical objects' in our present. Our engagement with them creates a 'wedge' in time, making the women we research 'momentarily coincident' with us and enabling us to 'constellate' with them ... Thus in reimagining their careers and recirculating their films, we enable their historical projects to continue in the present through our collaboration with their pasts.'<sup>7</sup> This symbiotic relationship of 'history' and historian is most explicitly taken up by Shelley Cobb and Linda Ruth Williams in their article 'Histories of Now: Listening to Women in British Film' in this collection. Following Christine Gledhill, they perceive the feminist historian as an activist, 'not just one who supplements the archives or textbooks, but as an active history-maker herself.'<sup>8</sup>

Like the papers presented at the conference, the articles in this collection capture something of the dominant 'structures of feeling' within particular aspects of women's film and broadcasting history in the period from 1929 onwards. The scholarship presented in the pages that follow ranges from considering women working in both above and below-the-line roles in film, television and radio to those whose labour fell outside of mainstream cinema production, as in the instance of amateur film in the UK between the 1930s and 1980. Together, the case studies span from 1926 to the contemporary period, providing particular flashpoints of women's history across the UK, North America and Australia.

As this brief summary suggests, this publication has afforded us the opportunity to present in print the work of women across the burgeoning field of film and broadcasting (both television and radio). Despite forming the two arms of broadcasting, television and

radio have largely been treated as separate entities within academia, as has the work of women within those areas. As Kristin Skoog and Alexander Badenoch argue in their recent special issue of *Women's History Review*, 'Women and Radio: Sounding Out New Pathways in Women's History,' compared to print media, film, and television: 'radio has remained fairly invisible and marginalised within media studies and media history.'<sup>9</sup> This is despite the deep affiliations among the three major media forms. As we know, many women worked across television and radio as well as film and this collection is an opportunity to explore such interrelated histories.

Although our call for papers for this volume was broad in an attempt to make as diverse an anthology as possible, geographically as well as culturally, as is so often the case, conference papers that related to areas other than Western Europe and North America and addressed how gender issues intersect with 'race' were not forthcoming. Indeed, at the conference itself, only five papers (representing 5% of the total conference papers presented) focused explicitly on 'race.' There is a striking parallel here between the under-representation of BAME women in accounts of history, and their positioning within, film and broadcasting production. Drawing on research carried out as part of their 'Calling the Shots' research project, in this collection Cobb and Williams demonstrate, just how breathtaking is the under-representation of BAME women as filmmakers in the UK, despite working in a context in which equality and diversity polices have been introduced to supposedly protect those characteristics. The contemporary focus of their study enables Cobb and Williams to capture the 'structure of feeling' of BAME women and their experiences of particular production cultures in the UK through undertaking oral histories, but this is not always an option for scholars researching earlier periods of women's film and television history where if historical records survive, they are all too often patchy.

The many references in the articles in this special issue to the lack of archival evidence available to many of the authors pursuing topics related to women, gender, amateur and/or below the line work, flags the importance of what Lisa Stead, drawing on Antoinette Burton, refers to in her article in this collection, 'Archiving Star Labour: Framing Vivien Leigh,' as the 'backstage of archives' narrative. She argues that we need to bring to the foreground how archives 'are constructed, experienced and manipulated,' otherwise the history of women in film and broadcasting is in danger of perpetuating a selective tradition which continues to privilege white and middle class women's production histories. Just as it is a political act to draw attention to racism and sexism that keeps certain groups of people out of particular areas of work, or radically restricts their access to it and affects their experiences in work, it is also a political act to lay bare the extent to which women's history in the creative industries has been erased and lost. This can act as a cautionary tale and inform future research and archiving policies and initiatives.<sup>10</sup>

## Collection overview

The articles in this collection follow a loosely chronological order but here we want to draw attention to the ways in which they can be read to constellate with each other thematically with regards to 'visibility.' One of the joys of empirical research is that there is always more to discover about areas that appear to be well trodden in terms of published scholarship, and those discoveries often cut new swathes through well-established ways of thinking about particular genres, roles, and stars. Stead, for example, draws upon materials

such as annotated script, correspondence, photographs, and scrapbooks, in order to examine how Leigh's process of archiving such materials produced distinct framings of her multifaceted labour in the inter- and post-war transatlantic film industries. She argues that Leigh's archival self-fashioning constitutes a complex material network, one which offers alternative readings of gendered star labour and pushes back against more standardised narratives of her career that have overwhelmingly focused on her glamorous star image, her mental health, and her relationship with her equally famous husband and co-star Laurence Olivier.

If we ever needed proof that that no topic is ever fully worked over, Shelley Stamp's 'Film Noir's 'Gal Producers' and Its Female Market' provides it. Drawing on close readings of publicity materials around the three 'gal producers,' Joan Harrison, Harriet Parsons and Virginia Van Upp, Stamp challenges gendered understandings of *film noir* as a masculine genre. As she demonstrates, these three key female Hollywood filmmakers of the mid 1940s were given great amounts of critical attention with the explicit purpose of attracting female moviegoers to a cycle of films that many previous scholars have presumed catered to almost exclusively male audiences. Equally invested in selling *noir's* 'red meat' to the female market, publicity about *noir's* 'gal producers' relied less on clichéd views of women's interests in consumption, fashion and romance, turning instead to their interest in work and professionalisation – and their taste for crime and violence. Thus, as she states, if publicity about *noir's* 'gal producers' helped broaden conceptions about female taste to include criminality and violence, these materials also contributed to growing conversations about women's work and female professionalisation – in the movie industry and beyond. Secretaries, waitresses, industrial workers, and retail clerks who read pulp crime fiction, listened to suspense stories on the radio, and went to films *noir* also likely followed this 'dispersed' publicity about the women who worked behind the scenes on some of their favourite films.

In accord with research findings across many academic fields, Stamp's article also demonstrates the ways in which women who enjoyed relatively high profiles in their own day have been ignored since then or, at best, neglected and marginalised. This is also true of Doris Arnold, a highly popular British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio personality whose rise to fame is charted in Kate Murphy's article, 'Doris Arnold: the Making of a Radio Star, 1926–1939.' Arnold was especially feted for her gramophone record programme *These you have Loved* which she produced and later presented in the late 1930s, making her the UK's first female 'Disc Jockey.' Despite her fame at the time, however, as Murphy's account traces, Arnold is oddly absent from broadcasting histories and little is known about her today. Hers was one of the best known 'rags to riches' narratives of the early BBC: a young woman who started as a typist but whose musical talent propelled her to stardom. This article explores Arnold's rise to fame in the 1920s and 1930s through a detailed evaluation of her personal staff files, using them as a vehicle to demonstrate the ways in which such documents can add to our understanding of women who worked at the BBC in its early days. A close reading of the files exposes the complexity of gender-related issues including status, pay and clothing.

The emphasis in the remaining five articles is on questions of gender discrimination and how to bring into view lesser known figures and groups of women from film and broadcasting history. Helen Hanson's article explores the career of Lela Simone, a

music co-ordinator who worked in Hollywood at MGM's Arthur Freed Unit from 1944 to 1957. As Hanson's account charts, despite Simone's exacting technical supervision of the sound and music recording and post-production on renowned musicals of the 1940s and 1950s, such as *The Pirate* (1948), *On the Town* (1949), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *Gigi* (1958), she had been relegated to the margins of history—or beyond—as one of Hollywood's 'anonymous movie workers.' Drawing on various archival sources, Hanson engages with the methodological and conceptual challenges of making visible the labour of women who, like Simone, worked below-the-line in technical roles. Taking Simone's work on sound and music in the iconic 'Singin' in the Rain' musical number as a case study, the article illustrates how a micro-historical focus can bring a previously invisible realm of women's labour, and agency, into view.

While Hanson explores the overlooked women working in male aligned technical roles, the focus of Jeannine Baker and Jane Connors' article, "Glorified typists" in no-man's land: the ABC Script Assistants' strike of 1973' is on the production histories of women in the Australian Broadcasting Commission who worked in the most feminised of all below-the-line grades: the script assistant. Like other articles in this collection, Baker and Connor draw on oral histories, in this instance with former script assistants, who were involved with the 1973 strike. Supported by relevant material from the ABC and ABC Staff Association archives, the authors use oral histories to comprehend better how the strike, the run-up to it and its aftermath were experienced by individual women, as well as the motivations and emotions of script assistants and their various understandings of their professional identity, none of which can be gleaned from the public record. It also demonstrates that there is a longer tradition of women's labour organising within Australian broadcasting than indicated in previous histories of the subject.

The theme of visibility is explored from a different vantage point in Hill and Johnson's contribution 'Making Women Amateur Filmmakers Visible: Reclaiming Women's Work through the Film Archive.' They investigate levels of visibility in their study of the 142 examples of films by women in the Institute of Amateur Cinematographers collection (1500 films in all) housed at the East Anglian Film Archive. Reflecting the growing interest in home and amateur filmmaking during the last two decades, they argue that the stigma of inferiority associated with amateur film doubles when the filmmakers are women, and that archival bias makes matters even worse. They argue that prevailing associations of archive film with space, place and location could prevent feminist-led projects from gaining traction in the contested world of exhibition where locality often overshadows other thematic or stylistic approaches. The research and cataloguing project with which they are involved aims to raise the profile and visibility of women amateur filmmakers and help overcome archival oversights while improving access to amateur films by women.

The interplay between the micro- and the macro-historical characterise the contributions of Laraine Porter and Cobb and Williams to this collection. Both of their articles combine new quantitative data with archival research in order to highlight the positions of women in both early and contemporary British film production. Taking her cue from Dorothy Richardson's essay, 'The Film Gone Male' written for the British film publication *Close Up* in 1932, Porter's article interrogates whether synchronised sound masculinised British film production between 1929 and 1932. Drawing on qualitative data drawn from the recently launched BFI's Filmography together with archival research, she

demonstrates how pre-existing patterns of gender discrimination in both above and below-the-line roles were consolidated during this transitional period.

The contribution by Cobb and Williams reflects upon the use of oral histories as part of their current major research project ‘Calling the Shots: Women and Contemporary Film Culture in the UK, 2000–2015.’ As in the broader field of women’s history, oral history has become a prominent means through which scholars in women’s film and broadcasting history recover women’s experiences of and participation in those cultures. Cobb and Williams’s article engages with the theoretical, methodological and political issues at stake in undertaking oral histories with contemporary women film makers *in medias res*. Listening to women tell their own stories and making them available for others is then a particular mode of history-making, one that is inevitably, and like all histories, both political and incomplete, among other things. Given the ongoing nature of doing women’s film and broadcasting history in which accounts are open to revision and differing interpretation, Cobb and Williams’ formulation aptly captures how we are all researching *in media res*. The articles in this collection form part of this process and speak of the ‘structures of feeling’ present in the contemporary scholarship of women’s film and broadcasting history.

## Notes

1. The first collection of papers is: Vicky Ball and Laraine Porter, eds., ‘Gendered Discrimination in the Creative Industries’, Special Issue of *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 4 (2018): 462–7.
2. More information about the Women’s Film and Television History Network: UK/Ireland can be found on its website: <https://womensfilmandtelevisionhistory.wordpress.com/>. More information about the ‘A History of Women in the British Film and Television Industries’ project can be found at <http://bufvc.ac.uk/womenswork>
3. The inaugural Doing Women’s Film History Conference was held at the University of Sunderland on 13–15 April 2011. Doing Women’s Film and Television History II was held on 10–12 April 2014 at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. More information about these conferences can be found on the Women’s Film and Television History Network: UK/Ireland’s website: <https://womensfilmandtelevisionhistory.wordpress.com/events/dwftth-conferences/>
4. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Wishart, 1961), 68.
5. *Ibid.*, 70.
6. See for instance, Kay Armatage. ‘The Women’s Film History Project and Women and the Silent Screen’, *Screen* 49, no. 4 (2008); Sofia Bull and Astrid Soderbergh, eds., *Not So Silent: Women in Cinema Before Sound* (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 2010); Vicki Callahan, ed., *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* (Detroit MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010); Christine Gledhill, ed., ‘Transnationalising Women’s Film History’, *Frameworks* Dossier 51, no. 2 (2010); Vicky Ball and Melanie Bell, ed., ‘Working Women, Women’s Work: Production, History, Gender’, Special Issue of *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 10, no. 3 (2013); Despoina Mantziari, Yvonne Tasker and Melanie Williams, eds., ‘Activism, Agency, and Authorship: Exploring Women’s Film History’, Special issue of *Feminist Media Histories* 2, no. 2 (2016); Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight, eds., *Doing Women’s Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), Vicky Ball and Laraine Porter, eds., ‘Gendered Discrimination in the Creative Industries’, Special Issue of *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 4 (2018). See also Women Film Pioneers Project: <https://wfpp.columbia.edu>.

edu/ and Women's Film and Television History Network: UK/Ireland <https://womensfilmandtelevisionhistory.wordpress.com/>

7. Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight 'Introduction', in *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 6.
8. Christine Gledhill 'Transnationalizing Women's Film History', *Framework* 51, no. 2: (2010): 275.
9. Kristin Skoog and Alexander Badenoch, 'Women and Radio: Sounding Out New Paths in Women's History', *Women's History Review*, Published online April 9, 2019, 2.
10. See Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley, 'Is Archiving a Feminist Issue? Historical Research and the Past, Present, and Future of Television Studies', *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 3 (2008): 152–8.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

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**Pat Kirkham** is Professor of Design History, Kingston University (with a brief to bring together film and design), Professor Emerita, Bard Graduate Center, New York, and Associate Research Fellow, Cinema and Television History, De Montfort University. Her many publications include *You Tarzan: Masculinity, Movies and Men* and *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women* (both with Janet Thumim), *A View from the Interior: Women, Feminism and Design* (1989, with Judy Attfield), and *Saul Bass: A Life in Film & Design* (2011). She is currently completing *Charles and Ray Eames and Hollywood: Design, Film, and Friendships* (Yale University Press).

**Laraine Porter** is Reader in Cinema History at the Institute of Cinema and TV History at De Montfort University, Leicester. She was the Principle Investigator on a recent Arts and Humanities Research Council project, 'British Silent Cinema and the Transition to Sound 1927–1933' in collaboration with the University of Stirling. She has published journal articles and book chapters on British silent and early sound cinema including on women cinema musicians and the women's voice in cinema. Her current research is on women working across the transition to sound and the reception of the talkies in Britain and is currently writing a book on the British film industry 1927–1933. She is the director of the British Silent Film Festival which has been running since 1998.