

Women at Work in the British Film & Television Industries

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Melanie Bell

This panel traces the contribution of women to film and television production in the post-1970 period. It explores women's experiences – as workers – in these two production cultures across different historical periods, and stages an intervention in research which seeks to bring together the past and present of women's film history. I'll open with a discussion of film production before Vicky speaks to television.

Underpinning many of the debates at *Women's Film History* network events has been a sense that we need an economic history to help us understand women's contribution to production. Bryony Dixon has called for us to 'do the math', to answer questions such as 'how many women were in the industry, what jobs did they do, and in what numbers', and to understand the impact of legislation and professionalization; the Marriage Bar, the Unions, the Equal Pay Act (2010: 306). Also, Vicky & I were both frustrated by the periodic laments in the mainstream press about the lack of women directors (**show slide**) and how these did little to further our understanding of women's work in film and television (both the labour they perform and the ghettoisation of women in particular roles).

What materials, methods and resources do we need to understand the role and position of women in the British film industry? To answer that we need to know which women we are interested in. Those women in above the line roles, for e.g. directors and producers, through whose careers we can trace creative agency. Or also those in below the line roles, continuity girls/script supervisors, those in wardrobe, make-up and other grades which have been traditionally dominated by women? What histories is it possible to actually research and write about? Much of the work done by production secretaries for example is lost to historians, having rarely been documented in any consistent and meaningful manner. And, any account of women's labour would need to recognise the broader changes in production culture (the

periodic contractions & expansions in film output) and be sensitive to how production roles are configured in different historical periods.¹

In terms of material and resources, one of the major barriers to research of this nature is the lack of reliable data. From the 1960s onwards, the break-up of the studio system, the shift to single-picture production companies and employment on a freelance basis make this a challenging history to research. However, there are trade journals and personal papers at the BFI, the BECTU interviews with film industry personnel are a useful resource (16% are with women), and more recently the government commissioned 'Skillset' Reports provide a rich dataset through their film and television production workforce surveys; these have been running since the 2000s and provide a census 'snapshot' of the workforce.

In the time available to me here I want to focus on the period after 1975, which was the year which saw the publication of the ACTT Report 'Patterns of Discrimination Against Women in the Film and Television Industries', and the Sex Discrimination Act (Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians). This gives us a combination of legislation and union activity at a particular historical moment, and we can trace the response of the union to both its own report and legislation to see if change was affected. Because the film industry was a closed shop at this time - technicians needed membership to be able to work - union data is a major resource for tracing histories of production labour. The union's own membership records unfortunately are not currently accessible to researchers, so I've used *Film and Television Technician*, the union's own monthly publication which is available at the BFI, and supplemented this with other trade journals such as *In Camera* and *Eyepiece* (published by the Guild of British Camera Technicians). Collectively these publications give a flavour of women's experiences on the shop floor and within production cultures.

The mid-1970s are also a time when women's participation in film production had reached a low point. The ACTT Report highlighted that only 12% of the Film

¹ In the 1970s for example the division between art director and costume designer was elided (Harper, and this is particularly important in the British film industry where, from the 1940s onwards, production roles have been clearly demarcated). How might that elision have impacted on women's production labour?

Production branch were women and primarily concentrated in lower paid, lower status grades such as continuity, production assistant/secretary, with some in editing and post-production roles like negative cutting. By comparison membership of the branch in 1955 was 17%, with women employed across a wider variety of grades.² There isn't time to talk about the Report in detail but I will just say that it was a major intervention in research about women's work in the industry, with proposals ranging from equal pension rights, maternity & paternity leave, training and quotas for all grades. Despite its aspirations, it was criticised by the feminist film scholar Claire Johnson in the pages of *Screen* (1975) for being primarily descriptive and failing 'to give clear indications as to the economic determinants and the matrix of social relations which underpin discrimination and are specific to the film industry' (126).

What was the response within the Union to this Report and the wider framework of legislative change?

One of the characteristics of the late 1970s and early 1980s is activity amongst women union members who sought to coordinate and drive through a number of initiatives around union representation, around training, and around working patterns and practices. (all of this taking place against a backdrop of wider industry changes including satellite TV, Channel 4).

3 initiatives:

- The first major development was the convening of the Union's first Women's Conference (Jan. 1981) which provided focus for a wide range of women's activity which had hitherto struggled for collective coordination. The Conference highlighted the difficulties women faced getting entry into technical grades and how those who'd gained training in independent cinema were denied an union ticket, it called for quota systems for women & black workers, child-care facilities/job-sharing and an Equal Opportunities Officer to be added to Head Office staff, an appointment which was agreed and made later that year.

² Film Production was the smallest branch of the ACTT having been the largest branch until 1971. In 1969 an embargo was placed on new entrants as there were so few jobs to go round, so this history has to set women's participation against the contraction of British film production at this time.

- What also started in 1981 after the first Women's Conference was the 'Equal Opportunities' section of the FTT. This drew together news about women's activity in the industry & further afield – it highlighted the training courses specifically for women being run by the National Film School, the screening of women's films at the NFT, reviews of key feminist texts (A. Kuhn's *Women's Pictures*), and in-depth profiles of women working in the industry where they reflected on their career trajectories and patterns of discrimination. There's a sense of 'shared space' between academics and practitioners at this time, both are interested in 'representation' in front & behind the screen, and share a common language for discussion.
- Other initiatives included a working party set up by the ACTT in conjunction with other stakeholders (the British Film and Television Producers Association and the Independent Programme Producers Association) to promote equal jobs and training opportunities in the film industry.
- Women in the Union met with not inconsiderable resistance from General Council (the Union's main governing body). Reports which included requests for an equality handbook to cover such issues as 'negative images of women' and 'discrimination at interview stage' were variously derided at Council meetings as evidence of a 'self-perpetuating matriarchy', nothing more than 'reports on women's superiority', which put men in the position where they needed to 'react to bias against them'. The most vocal detractors came from the Television Branch, the Sound Section and the Film Production Branch – the 3 areas where women were woefully under-represented.

Nevertheless there was a sense of consciousness and profile-raising amongst women union members in the 1980s. In the same manner that feminist scholars were at the vanguard of film studies, the women's conference was identified with 'new developments' within the labour force. Women's union representation across all branches (not like-for-like) increased (from 11% in 1968 to 22% in 1984, but still some way off the 25% of 1946) and women held strategic positions: the animator Gillian Lacey for example was appointed Vice President of the Film Production Branch in 1983.

If we look beyond the Union's own publication to other specialist trade journals of the period – *In Camera*, *Eyepiece*, *AIP & Co* – we find profiles of, and debates about, women working in the industry. These provide an illuminating window on production cultures of this historical period. The producer Jenni Howarth (*Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*) reflects on how commissioning editors won't give a script in a 'male' genre like the gangster film to a woman, and how women get corralled into 'women's subjects' (introspective domestic dramas) whilst at the same time they have to avoid repeating themes, patterns and motifs that another woman has previously dramatised: the director Conny Templeman recalled how she couldn't get her script which had a tramp in it commissioned because of Agnes Varda's *Vagabonde* – the logic being 'we've had one of those' from a woman. Many of these concerns find an echo in accounts from BOTH earlier historical periods (Muriel Box, Kay Mander), AND more contemporary accounts: the 2006 SkillSet report on Women Screenwriters found commissioning editors had quite fixed ideas on the types of stories that women could write.

I've presented an overview of women's activity and experiences within film production culture in the 1980s but it's difficult to answer conclusively what impact this activity had – because we don't have like-for-like data. The 1990 Employment Act and the introduction of free labour market policies brought an end to the Union's closed shop, so union data becomes a less promising resource for research. The BFI Television Industry Tracking Study of 1994 is one potential source, although it covers television, so that complicates the picture and our attempt to 'do the math.' However as the boundaries between the two mediums become more porous in the 1990s it's possible to draw some speculative conclusions. Women's participation in film production did increase, and more anecdotally we can point to some success stories in the 1990s. *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), directed, written and produced by women (& often picked up by trade papers as illustrative of progress); Carine Adler's *Under the Skin* (1997) shows what can happen when funders like BFI & C4 actively seek out women writers and directors.

Tracking film practitioners is illuminating. If we look at the women who were profiled in trade journals in the 1980s we see that their subsequent careers were

patchy. Of the women trained at the NFS in 1970s, the producer Jenni Howarth's career petered out in 1993, the writer & director Noella Smith carried on only until 1999. The cinematographer Belinda Parsons was still working in 2005, as was Sue Gibson, who's become one of the most established cinematographers in the industry. And of those who came up through the ranks - Chyna Thomson is still in the camera department having worked as a clapper loader, focus puller and now first assistant camera.³

If we fast-forward to 2008 and the census data collected by the SkillSet Reports (the next available and comprehensive data set) - 40% of respondents were women (a considerable improvement on the 12% of women members in 1975). However, many are still clustered in the traditional areas of costume and make-up (show slide). There have been in-roads in Production, and a small increase in the Camera dept. from 9% in 2005 to 15% in 2007 (SkillSet 2008). Of that 15% however there are no women as DoP and Camera Operators, rather they cluster in the lower grades of trainee and first & second assistant. These figures suggest that not an awful lot has changed in the technical categories over the last 40 years – despite the demise of the closed shop, and the availability of training for women.

These figures suggest there are ingrained habits in the production culture that are impervious to legislation. One of the characteristics of film production is its informal hiring practices and nepotism (v. topical) – it's the DoP for example who puts the camera team together. Perhaps we need to return to Claire Johnston's comment about the 'matrix of social relations' to understand women's position in the film industry. We need to be attuned to the informal rules of customs and practice, the networks through which social capital is acquired and deployed. It's this, as well as formal structures and legislation, which will help us understand women's place in production cultures and help us write women's film history.

³ Daughter of cinematographer Alex Thomson who'd worked with Nic Roeg.

Key Questions

- When did ACT become ACTT, and when did that become BECTU?
- Were all grades members of the Union?
- The relationship between ACTT membership and others unions such as TUC, NALGO. (Bridlington agreement was to prevent other unions poaching members)

Vicky Ball

My research of women's production histories focuses upon tracing histories of British feminine-gendered fiction that have been produced with shifts to women's economic positioning in the public sphere (as both producers and consumers) in the wake of the sexual politics and legislation etc. from the late 1960s.

My research has been informed by a central concern of feminist media studies: namely, the relationship between media production and media representation, that is, male dominated patriarchal institutions of broadcasting lead to narrow range of representations of women.

[Slide 2: early reps of women]

Maureen Gallagher (1979) *The Portrayal and Participation of Women in the Media* for instance documents the way in which women have been historically cast in narrow and stereotypical roles:

- Women and mother: the home-orientation of women
- Sex object and glamour girl
- The virgin-whore dichotomy
- Lack of reps of working women (i.e. as lawyers, doctors, judges, scientists etc.)
- Characteristics of passivity, dependence, indecisiveness
(Gallagher 1979:9-11)

What we can say is that texts informed by sexual politics of the period – late 1960s – early 1990s have impacted upon and opened up repertoires of representation:

Clip of *Take Three Girls* (BBC 1969)

Written by Charlotte Bingham, Terence Brady & others; Produced by Verity Lambert among others

[slide – examples of dramas]

Various feminist academics have suggested that from the late 1960s these shifts have culminated around the construction of a financially and sexually liberated ‘new woman’

To be clear – these texts are hegemonic and ambivalent – which do on occasion recuperate discourses of liberal and radical feminism for commercial ends
BUT at least they engaged with shifting ideologies of gender and opened up ways of representing women

Also - wider range of reps than has been discussed in these marginalised texts

Issues central to feminism - equality and discrimination (role reversal narratives)
Prime Suspect - Making explicit the misogyny of the met.

Not just the middle class professional woman – but issues of female agency and independence refracted through regional dramas about working class subjectivities across issues of gender, ‘race’, class and age,

Quiet complex subjectivities – factory workers in traditional w.class communities in (i.e. Making Out – we follow) and prostitutes which refute that these are all about narratives of women’s emancipation but rather their ongoing daily struggles.

Postfeminist

What I have been exploring in my research has been what has happened to feminine-forms of drama (texts about and by women) since the late 1990s-2000s amidst discourses of cultural feminization

Cultural feminization refers to not only an increase in female participation rates in the post-industrial society (as suggested by the increase in women in media industries and in occupation of high profile jobs). But also in relation to a more general cultural feminization discussed by Rita Felski and Lisa Adkins in which the values aligned with the feminine have come to dominate contemporary consumer culture

As Lisa Adkins argues, the ‘feminization’ of consumer culture refers not only to the “ongoing interpellation of women as consumers” in the late modern period but to the way in which the characteristics associated with the feminine, including: the predominance of surface, simulation, and masquerade; the authority of the consumer; and a dedifferentiation of the social, involving a domestication of the public sphere, are understood to be the dominant aesthetics and practices of consumer culture (ibid: 674-675).

It is these in relation to these shifts that we can contextualise the subsequent feminization of British evening television: that is, where feminine values have been felt to dominate both factual and fictional television (i.e. the rise of lifestyling texts and soapification of drama – that focus more upon the life politics of identities).

These discourses have culminated in discourses of Feminization of British television.

[Slide: feminization of British TV]

- More women in production
- 'Feminine' forms of programming displacing male aligned texts in evening and prime time texts
- More consumer driven programming solutions

At the more reactionary end of the spectrum – the respected Christopher Dunkley has suggested ...**[slide]**

Within the world of broadcasting, it has also been an open secret that television is predominantly a female medium. Now, however, something new is happening. From being a mere tendency, the feminization of television is turning into a rout. Wherever you look - terrestrial broadcasting or the new cable and satellite channels, analogue or digital, news programmes or commercials - women and women's interests are favoured. [...] Female presenters are replacing males, and material traditionally regarded as being of particular interest to men is downgraded or side-lined. [...] At the same time, many of the top male attractions - sports such as soccer and boxing and virtually all first-run movies - are being spirited away to specialist subscription channels or pay-per-view networks. Thus, while the quantity of women's favourite viewing goes up on the free terrestrial channels, men have to pay through the nose for the programmes they used to get for nothing. [...] The acceleration of this process may have something to do with efforts made in the past few years to promote women to the top jobs in TV. Of course, British broadcasters should give women equal opportunity - but they should also give men equal programming. (Dunkley 2003: 30)

However, while these narratives are suggestive of postfeminist narrative of progress for women and values aligned with the feminine, they are pernicious because, as with other post-feminist discourses circulating in culture more generally across this period, they firstly:

1). evade gendered and sexual inequalities that continue to structure the economic, social and cultural landscape. In this instance broadcasting production (which render feminism as no longer necessary).

- Tallying with Lisa Adkins research of other feminized service industries, the shifts which make up the 'feminization of television' re-inforce women in relation to the feminine at the level of production and programming rather than suggesting process of de-traditionalization.

We can see this by exploring some of the recent findings of research of women in the broadcasting industry:

- **[slide feminization of TV production]**

- However, although women now represent 48% of the terrestrial television workforce (Skillset 2010:7) and women such as Eileen Gallagher and Dawn Airey, the fact that the ‘top jobs’ in broadcasting both now and, retrospectively, in the 1990s are held by men [4] is representative of steadfast gendered hierarchies that continue to structure broadcasting industries.
- Although figures by occupational groupings collected by Skillset’s 2009 Census covers the entire audio-visual industries (rather than just television), they nevertheless demonstrate how men are far more likely to be company owners (78%) and to fill managerial and executive producer roles (61%) despite a greater proportion of women being graduates and receiving more training than their male counterparts (Skillset 2010: 6).
- Gendered roles also continue to structure the industry with women having the highest representation in traditional ‘feminine’ areas such as costume and wardrobe (68%), makeup and hairdressing (52%) and lowest representation in more ‘masculine’ areas such as camera (12%) and lighting (10%) (Skillset 2009:17).

Depressingly, the gendered pay gap shows no sign of diminishing in broadcasting as in the wider culture, with women in television earning on average 17% less than men (Skillset 2010:21).

[slide – feminization of employment]

- Moreover, women’s experiences in broadcasting tally with other common characteristics of the ‘feminization of employment’ in the 1990s with the growth of jobs involving the terms and conditions often associated with ‘women’s work’, including low pay and job insecurity (Thynne 2000).
- This is particularly the case for women who have taken the opportunity to work freelance in the wake of the deregulation of British television because it allows them to care for their dependents and deal with other domestic/personal obligations (Skillset 2010: 14).
- Significantly, a large proportion of respondents in Skillset’s *Balancing Children and Work in the Audio Visual Industries* report complained that maternity and paternity pay had not been adequate when on short-term contracts (2008: 7). It is the salience of these gendered working conditions – what Thynne refers to as indirect forms of discrimination (2000:71) – that are identified by Skillset’s later report: *Women in the Creative Media Industries*, as contributing to the extremely low number of women over the age of 35 (52%) compared to men (75%) working in television, who presumably leave to have, or care for existing, children (2010: 18-20)[5].
- As these examples illustrate, far from social subjects being de-traditionalized by the ‘feminized’ employment cultures of the broadcasting industries of late modernity, these ‘new’ working conditions re-traditionalize both women and men in relation to the traditional division of labour.
- Indeed the Skillset report from 2010 is alarming because it suggests that at the precise cultural moment that women have begun to make substantial inroads in to media industries they have also starting to leave the industry: 5000 women have left the industry in the last three years compared with just 750men.

- Broadcast's survey of Women and TV 2010 reports that 53% of respondents (1000 respondents) reported bullying; 73% acknowledged ageism and 44% reported to have suffered sexual discrimination ('Women and TV: A Tough Balancing Act' 6th May 2010).

[Slide – broadcast survey]

- What women from Broadcast survey suggested they want in 2010—does not differ significantly from what women have been requesting since in pre-2nd wave feminist period]

2). The second major issue is the lack of research regarding what has happened to British forms of fiction produced by women in this period of feminization -

For example, in relation to the feminine forms of heroine TV, particularly the FED, there has been a waning of such specific forms

Waning of types of feminine-gendered fictions - FED and prof. woman drama – move to mixed ensembles akin to soap opera (maximize audiences)

Where they do appear – seem to be reduced back in to narrow range of feminine discourses and spaces, albeit with an ironic postfeminist edge (but nevertheless declaring goals of feminism achieved/depoliticising TV drama):

[Slide - Feminization of TV schedules]

Compare to

- The Marriage plot (postfeminist choices in which women naturally choose marriage as the life style choice)
- Sexualisation
- Girlification
- Consumerism (level of rep and aesthetics realism to flexi-ad)

[slide – Questions]

What has been much less researched and discussed is women's experiences of production –

- What negotiations/compromises are taking place behind the televisual screen?
- What impact has the competitive and uncertain climate of broadcasting had on the opportunities/ types of work women produce?
- In what ways does it enable as well as prohibit women's creativity in media production?
- What control do women have over their work?

Lucy Prebble known for her political theatrical work - satire Enron (about the real life Enron scandal and financial corruption of 2001) responsible for the adaptation from book to screenplay of Secret Diary if a Call Girl –reported in The Guardian in 2009 as saying that the production turned out lighter and frothier than she wrote it

- What has changed for them?

Clearly these questions could be cast to male as well as female producers but how do the current broadcasting climate/broadcasting culture impact on women in particular and specific ways

Conclusion.

What can we make of this picture?

The current postfeminist position of women in the industry bears an uncanny resemblance to the pre-feminist position of women in the industry (gendered pay gap, job segregation and gendered hierarchies). What has changed in the 40 years of feminism?

Both in front of and behind the camera

Clearly issues of representation are still important – however as discourses of feminization suggest, we have to be careful of not over essentialising or over simplifying relations between production and textual representations.

In order to provide more sophisticated and fleshed-out understandings of women's film and TV production histories we need far greater detail regarding women's economic, social and cultural histories of film and TV (how these intersect – consumer/global-led approach to audio-visual industries),

Two final points:

I would suggest that reports and public discussions regarding women's position (i.e. RTS event in Newcastle a few weeks ago as well as Broadcast's roundtable discussion which included prominent figures such as Lorraine Heggessey, Oona King and Kate Kinninmont) suggests we need to put the focus back on patriarchy – currently the emphasis is on what women need to do on an individual basis (“women need to be more assertive”) and not enough on how bodies such as DCMS, BECTU, Skillset, WiFT, RTS, BFI etc., can help support changes to the industries' patriarchal cultures.

Finally, we need to encourage discussion and debate between academics and practitioners in order to make sense of the landscape and initiate change. The RTS event made stark the gulf between academics and practitioners' approaches and perceptions of the positioning of women in production.

[slide] Hasn't always been the case – flash up *Boxed in* women cover.