

AUDIOVISUAL APPROACHES AND THE ARCHIVE

Making Fiction Flow

Drawing on audio archive materials generated for the 'Women's Work in British Film and Television 1933–1989' project, the videographic essay *Making Fiction Flow* makes visible and audible the work of script supervisor Penny Eyles. An interviewee for the project, Penny is one of the many women in below-the-line roles whose creative contribution to film production has been under-appreciated. This video is the result of a sustained and ongoing feminist conversation between film historian Melanie Bell, principal investigator on the 'Women's Work' project, and the film scholar and audiovisual essayist Catherine Grant about women's self-definitions of their labour and its representation in film history and the archive.

Source Material

Our videographic essay draws together Eyles's spoken testimony with wide-ranging moving-image extracts from British films produced between 1943 and 2012 whose continuity work and script supervision were carried out by women, including by Eyles. It is bookended by scenes from existing 'making of' footage, documenting two of the films on which she worked, and in which she features.



Eyles was interviewed by oral historian Sue Bradley in 2015 as part of the 'Women's Work' project alongside twenty-four other women in a range of production roles. The project used life story interviewing, a method which gives space for its subjects to speak at length, and with great complexity, about their personal and professional lives. This approach is particularly valuable for understanding the lives of marginalised groups and individuals whose accounts and experiences are often under-represented in, or completely absent from, official archives.

In the context of film production, oral testimony is one of the principal sources of evidence of women's work in below-the-line roles such as script supervision. This kind of work is especially vulnerable to historical loss. In the case of script supervision this is partly due to the role's function to ensure continuity across shots and scenes which, when performed successfully, is invisible to the audience. But it is also due to the gender of the workforce. A female-majority role, it represents what director Sally Potter describes as the 'invisible labour involved in cinema ... [which] [w]omen historically have usually done' and which has been under-valued in official accounts (Mayer 2009: 4). This audiovisual essay was an occasion to meet the challenge of making visible the invisible through a female-authored account of filmmaking (Williams 2013).

Video methodology

Our original plan was to use audio excerpts from several of the 'Women's Work' oral histories in our videographic collaboration. But we focused in on Eyles's account largely because of its vividness as well as for the ways in which it encapsulated many of the historical aspects of women's post-war educational and professional experiences that we wanted to revisit – and 'reactivate'. We wanted to do justice to the detail of her insights about what exactly a script supervisor does and how that appeared to be historically conceived as akin to the 'feminine' occupations of secretary, assistant and carer. As soon as we started to discuss this, and began to select from Eyles's account, memorable images from films of the period came to mind. For example, Melanie was prompted by Eyles's lively observation – that her mother would have preferred to drive generals around during the war to what she actually did: looking after her child – to recall the scene in *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1943) in which Deborah Kerr is chauffeur to Roger Livesey's army officer.

Our associative selection-method, conjuring narratively or informationally 'relevant' images from our mutual memory-archive of British post-war audiovisual culture, proved a very canny procedure for locating moving image material that could be utilised for our non-commercial scholarly and critical purposes, according to our understanding of Fair Dealing. In this way we aimed to avoid some of the issues that might be raised by different choices, such as using proprietary still images of actual film sets, historical personnel, or pieces of equipment, to match to Eyles's account. Our play with literal correspondence in much of our montage selection, inspired by Eyles's own playfulness and creativity, as well as by what we could draw on from the fictional figuration by British cinema and television of its production processes, generated the form the whole video eventually took. Interestingly, it also led to what appear to be some of the new findings of our work as we retrospectively reflect on this form. For example, Eyles doesn't mention *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* as a prompt for, or source of, her deeply personal family memories, but her use of that coinciding anecdote might remind us that it is



often hard to tell, in scholarly memory-work, what is first-order remembering and what is second order remembering, that is, remembering informed by previous acts of relating the world and its histories, many of which are cinematic or televisual.¹ Eyles's and our memories might thereby be found to be as much a post-cinematic and post-memory construct as phenomena of episodic memory recollection.²

The graphic use of the row of looped and separated shots in multiscreen arrangements, set beneath the full sequences playing above, emerged from Catherine's material handling and thinking through of the film scenes while she was editing

them around selected excerpts from Eyles's vocalisations of her working methods. Eyles conveyed her unique ways of seeing as a script supervisor, and the vast range of the labour involved, so richly and with such attention to multiform detail that a single screen approach to the montage seemed quite inadequate. The multiscreen arrangement, offered up as a puzzle for the viewer to visually decode, or watch comparatively if they wish, presents cinematic narrative linearity as complex simultaneity. It became the videographic *dispositif*, or device, by means of which the continuity 'girl's' difficult and creative work on the fictional flow of the film – the meticulousness of

her careful attention and of her practices of memory, timing, and noting – is virtually performed, and thus brought out of its historical and practical invisibility.³

Conclusion

Through Eyles's richly detailed spoken narrative, different aspects of the script supervisor's workday come alive, the numerous micro-decisions needed to make fiction flow, and the many protagonists involved in the process. Indeed, life story interviewing is uniquely well-positioned to bring other

people into the conversation, both work colleagues and family and friends, reminding us not only of the collaborative nature of filmmaking but how life choices – and chances – are shaped by contingent social realities. This audiovisual essay, with its performative as well as illustrative videographic *mise en scène* of Eyles's highly valuable account, stands as another building block in the gendered politics of visibility, the form itself uniquely placed to both visualise the invisible and, through the spoken word, to bring the 'texture of experience' to film history (Karpf 2015).

Watch and listen to the audiovisual essay here:

<https://vimeo.com/1012108423>

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MELANIE BELL AND CATHERINE GRANT

MELANIE BELL

Melanie Bell is a film historian based at the University of Leeds. Her research draws together oral histories, archival records and screen "ephemera" to analyse the economic and creative contribution of women to film production through a feminist lens, opening up questions of collaboration, authorship and value. Her work has been published in *Screen*, the *Journal of British Cinema and Television* and *Feminist Media Studies*, and she is the author of *Movie Workers: The Women Who Made British Cinema* (2021).

CATHERINE GRANT

Catherine Grant is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Reading and Honorary Professor at Aarhus Universitet. She carries out her film studies research mostly in the form of remix-based video essays. For more than a decade she was founding co-editor of the award-winning publication [in]Transition: Journal of Videographic Film and Moving Image Studies. In 2020, Grant was elected a member of the Film, Media and Visual Studies section of Academia Europaea in recognition of her research contribution to the field.

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¹ Catherine had found this in making some of her earlier videographic adaptations of oral history material, for example, [Cinematic Organisms: Memories and Memorialisation](#) (2023a). This work was commissioned by the 'Cinema Memory and the Digital Archive' project, led by Annette Kuhn. See also Grant's reflection on this work and its findings [here](#).

² See Annette Kuhn (2011: 93) for discussion of oral history and memory work.

³ See Cristina Álvarez López and Adrian Martin (2015) on Grant's frequent recourse to designing dispositifs like this in her video essays.