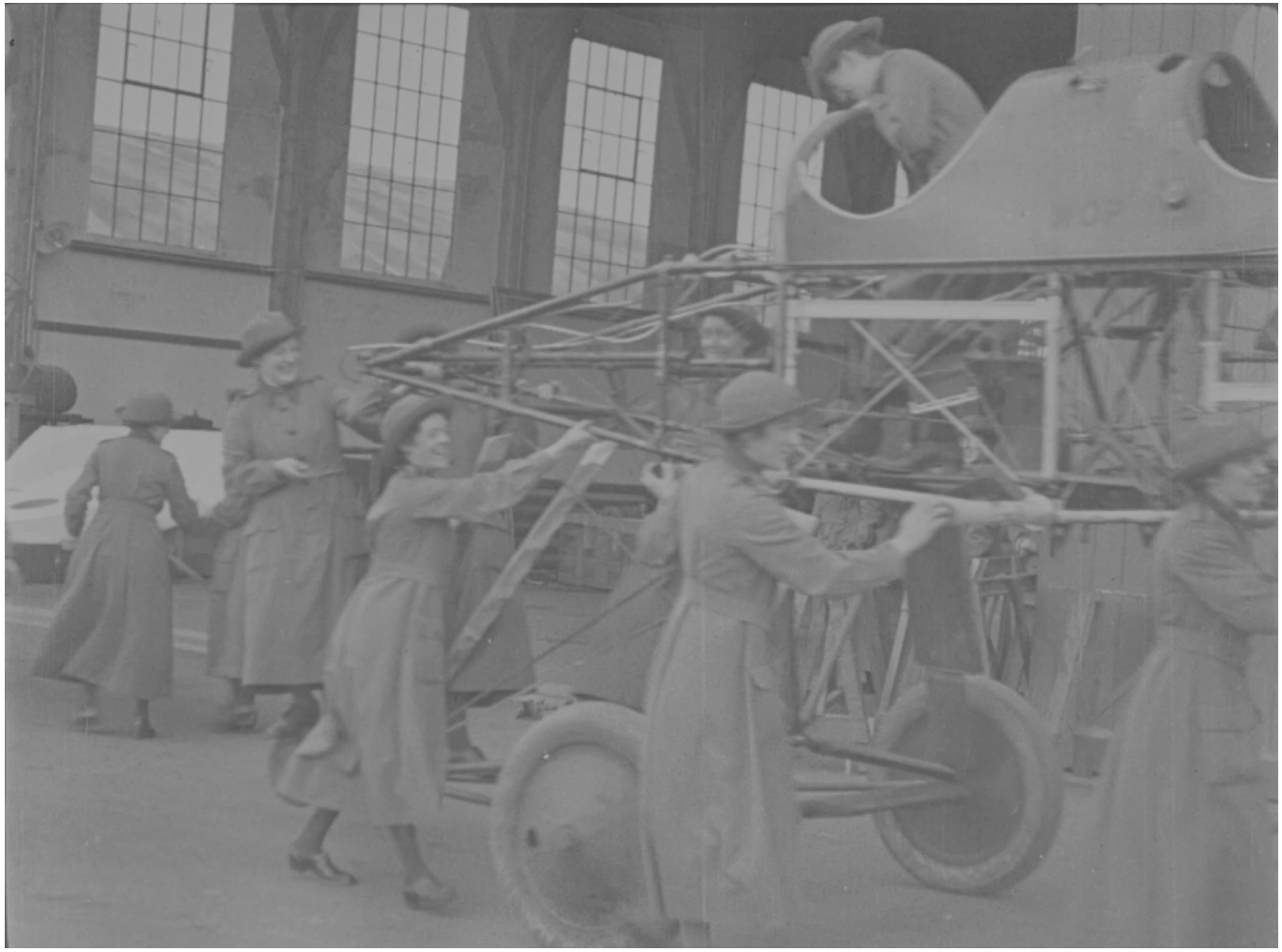
AUDIOVISUAL APPROACHES AND THE ARCHIVE

Light Hands



> *[w]omen have a particular consciousness of their collective irrelevance to traditional accounts of history, as well as their collective absence from its construction.*
> Laura Mulvey (2015:27)

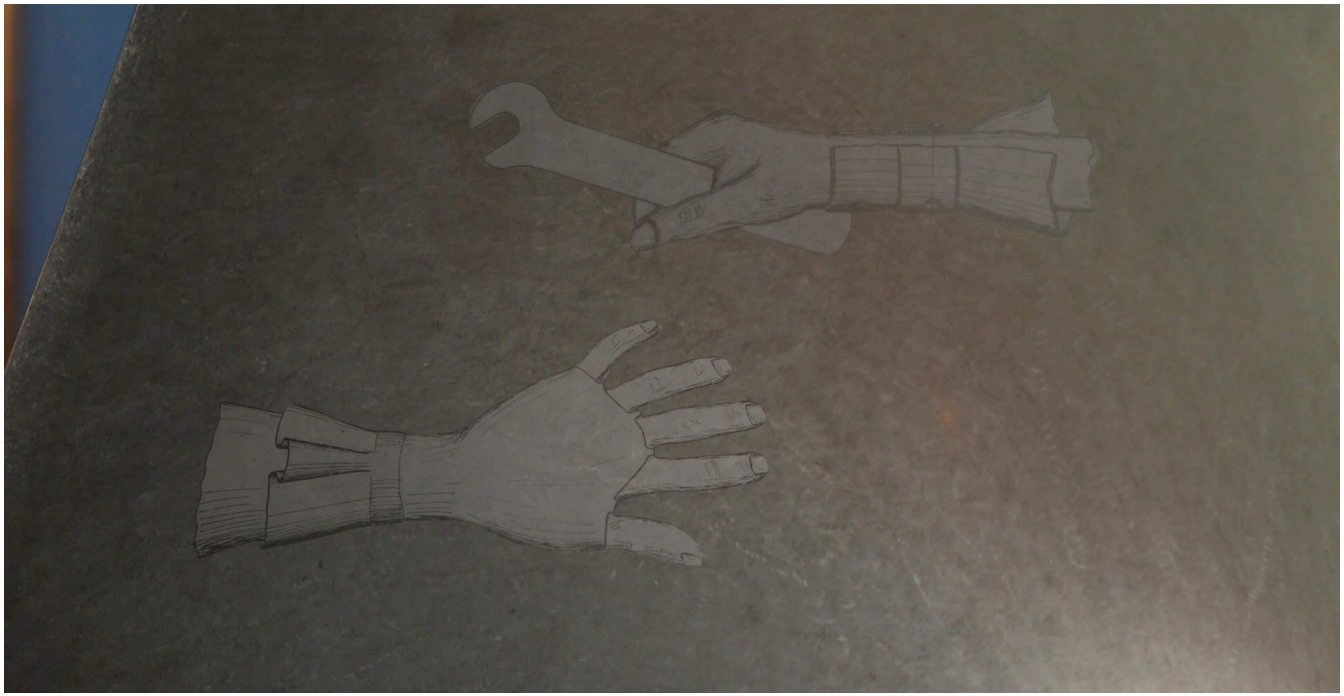
Light Hands presents an encounter, an audiovisual moment from my research into the early history of aviation. It is also an exercise in appropriation, taking material produced in a patriarchal setting and curating it anew with a feminist agenda. Thirdly, it is an effort to think with film, using video, sounds, and time alongside text, to initiate an investigation.

Source material

The filmed material examined here is newsreel and actuality footage held and digitised by the Imperial War Museum. It shows women working in aircraft manufacture in England during the First World War, and constitutes one of the principal sources of evidence of these activities. Aside from films and photographs, there is very scant documentation of women making aeroplanes. Hundreds of companies employed women, but there is little proof of this apart from some government figures, a couple of diaries, and some references in factory magazines.

Women abound in this imagery, in frames composed to set off their collectivity, rows of heads bent over workstations or a wing, or their slightness as individuals dwarfed by impressive machinery. The film segments were made for several purposes: to persuade employers to hire more women and increase wartime production, and to lighten up the newsreel programme. They would have been screened soon after filming, and play into a fascination with women doing men's jobs – both as novelty and as an expression of patriotic effort.[1] A journalist employed to hymn wartime production in print found purchase in analogies between the 'slight' and 'dainty' bodies and hands of the female workers and the light frames and delicate processes of the aircraft (Yates 1918: 29).[2]

The compositions both echo and reinforce the tendency at the time to denote these workers 'girls'. The word has connotations of maidenhood, innocence, malleability and silliness. It



distils a patronising and limited view of female agency, making it recognisable, manageable, to male supervisors, employers and policy makers. While there were evidently young girls working, there were also many older women with skills and experience. Female wartime work pushed to the fore social anxieties about changing femininity and the status of women, with efforts to discipline and protect workers pulling against a desire to maximise their utility in production.

There was certainly recognition during and after the war of women's participation in the workplace, with munitions being a sector of note. As well as news films and articles, we find songs, poems and novels about 'munitions girls'. But after the 'Restoration of Pre-War Practices' Act of 1919 required women to cede their positions to men, their contribution to the aviation sector seems to have been forgotten. The discourse around flight developed in two directions after the war – one looking back to the intense experience of military flying and dwelling on male heroism and camaraderie, subjects of dozens of 1920s and 1930s feature films; and one looking forward to the peacetime possibilities of aviation for nation and empire, with a minor part to be played by female passengers and the occasional lady pilot. Neither of these areas accommodated the fact that a third of the workforce making wartime aeroplanes had been female, and that there were over 120,000 women with experience in aircraft manufacture now unemployed (Jones 1937: 85).

Video methodology

Creating a video essay with this material enabled me to explore the affective qualities of the material while reflecting on my practice with a theoretical framework of recent scholarship on archive film and video research methodologies. On one level I was keen to recuperate the realities that the IWM's holdings evinced. On another, I was aware of being seduced by the 'knowledge effect' of archive film identified by

Mary Ann Doane, of the risk of treating the footage too concretely as proof, as a transparent conduit back to a historical moment (2002: 21). My research into the production context of this kind of footage and photography made me very aware of the probable composition and editing decisions behind it that make it an imperfect source of knowledge about women's experiences.[3]

How then to force some openings in this material, to mine it for clues, to use it to create new stories? I have taken a stance of 'ethical possession', treating the source material as my own within this seven-minute duration (Cocker 2009). In curating and presenting fragments of the material, I wanted to separate moments from their production context and test them for connection. What other potential narratives could ensue? I used the digital editing space as a 'place to play', as Jyoti Mistry has recommended (2020). I explored pairings, both along and across the timeline. I sourced sounds for sentiment, and my own footage for interactions with historical artefacts.

For Catherine Russell, the essay form is one that 'requires the viewer to pass judgement' (2018: 24). The addition of British music tracks from different periods is intended to provoke the viewer to reconsider the visual information and adjudicate whether the sound worlds suggested are appropriate. They articulate my own responses of indignation and melancholy, cycling through shades of sexist glam rock and noughties feminist irritation before settling on a sentimental Edwardian song of the kind that may well have been played in the homes of some of these workers before and during the

war. While I have employed voiceover in previous research films, I chose here to use music alongside narrative intertitles as my authorial intervention so as not to privilege one woman's voice in a context where many women are seen and not heard.

Conclusion

This video essay serves as an entry point to my deeper archival research, examining women's interactions with aviation technology during the First World War. I hope to follow it up with a videographic case study on particular firms and processes, setting filmed material alongside archival documentation in order to better illuminate both. Here, in presenting fragments of moving image, I seek to engage viewers with the subject. I also use the essay as a space to examine my own encounter with the material, and disclose my interest. It allows for time to activate the archive film in a way impossible in a written piece, to make it do some of its original work under a layer of critical refraction. It is a promising space to make up for collective absences.

Acknowledgements

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Watch the audiovisual essay here:
https://vimeo.com/921996906

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1 In fact, aeroplane construction was one of the few areas of wartime industry where women were not directly replacing men, as the sector had been so small before the war. See MacKay 2018: 313

2 Similar rhetoric about women at work on other munitions can be found in the writing of Boyd Cable and Hall Caine.

3 On the (entirely male) newsreel production teams see Ballantyne 1983 and Luke McKernan's articles for Screen Online 'Topical Budget: Women' http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/583946/index.html and 'Topical Budget: War and Propaganda' http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/583331/index.html (accessed 06/12/23); thanks to Luke McKernan for advice on researching this area. On the visual representation of women workers see Thom 2000: 37, 55 and Bowen 2008.