

## The Homefront

### Women of Steel

U.S.A. Production: War Manpower Commission, *Print*: 35mm, sd., English, b&w, 10 min., 1943.

Presented, ironically enough, by the War Manpower Commission, *Women of Steel* is a Rosie the Riveter classic documenting life in a wartime steel mill. With most of the men off at war, women have taken their places, easily debunking the myth that each sex has appropriate work. In this film, women pour molten steel into molds, perform chemical tests, weld materials, machine parts, and move large slabs of glowing steel around the factory floor. They are obviously happy and proud of the work they do, yet the film sets this satisfaction within a framework that reveals much about society's sexist attitudes toward women.

Though clearly proving they are fit for any work, the film tells us women are performing "a man's work and they can draw a man's pay." In a patronizing manner, they are complimented for their "adaptability to small tools." Women often compare tasks like pouring molten steel to housework, and one woman assures the audience that "this job belongs to some soldier, and when he comes back he can have it." The gains women made in the early forties were swiftly lost after the war, when the possibility of work outside the home was foreclosed. This is foreshadowed in several places in *Women of Steel*, especially the interviews:

(Male) INTERVIEWER: Edith Stoner's husband is in Alaska. She took this job for the duration. How do you like your job Mrs. Stoner?

EDITH: I love it.

INTERVIEWER: How about after the war? Are you going to keep on working?

EDITH: I should say not. When my husband comes back, I'm gonna be busy back home.

INTERVIEWER: Good for you!

At the much more subtle level of cinematic narration, we can find an apparent sexism that raises questions about power relationships in documentary cinema. A useful conceptual tool here is what Bill Nichols has called "documentary voice." To consider the "voice" of documentary is to ask from where the film speaks. Rather than looking to the director for the source of meaning, one looks inside the film itself. Where is the origin of the film's storytelling? In the case of most WWII documentary, it's centered near the voice-over narration. This narration works hard to control the disparate bits of information contained in images, sounds, and



Fig. 6. Rosie the Riveter propaganda poster.  
(Credit: National Archives)

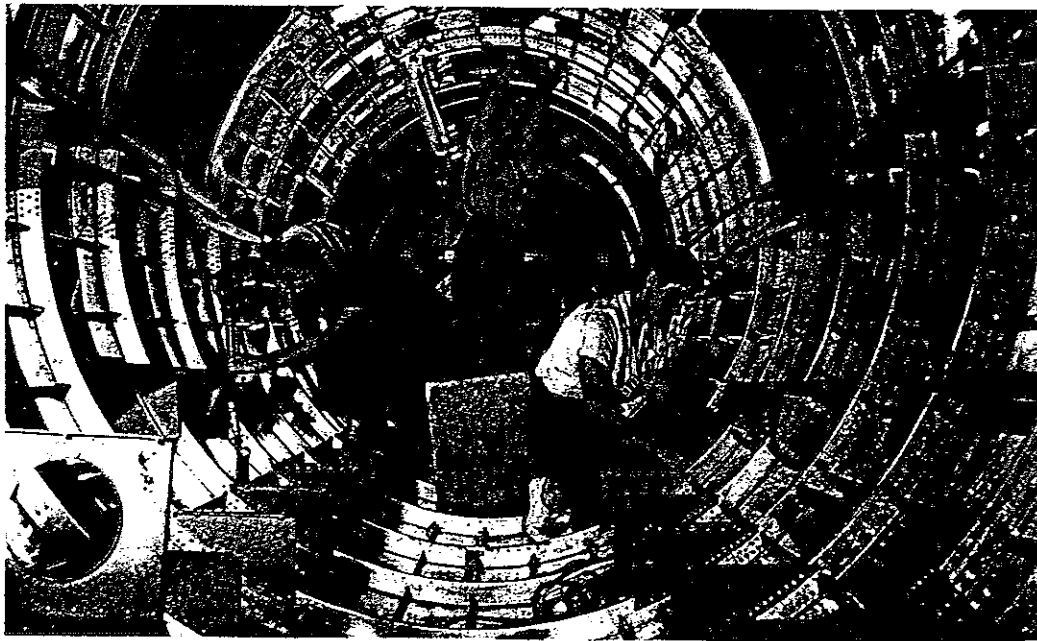


Fig. 7. Women of steel.  
(Credit: National Archive)

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interview, making the film coherent and meaningful. Positioned omnipotently off-screen, the narrator wields considerable power over the film, to the degree that he is often called the "voice of God." Perhaps it's not surprising that this voice is almost always male. Woman's voice is usually restricted from this potent point of origin and enunciation, especially in American films

Not only is the narrator male, but the intended audience seems to be as well. The narrator of *Women of Steel* addresses a male "we" about a female "them." In a condescending attempt at praise, the narrator says, "Of course, *we* had long since accepted *their* aptitude in fabrication, the swift, sure dexterity of their fingers [emphasis mine]." This kind of comment reveals that at the deepest level of documentary voice, the film is organized around a masculine point of view. Thus the women of steel are objects of speech and of looks; though we hear them talk, their interviews are within the domain of the documentary's main, masculine voice.

— Abé Mark Nornes

We Are Working So So Hard  
(*Watashitachi wa konna ni hataraitte iru*)

Japan Direction: Mizuki Sōya, Production: Asahi, Photography: Konishi Shōzō, Print: 16mm, sd., b&w, 18 min., 1945.

Produced in the final months of the war, the title of this film is a complaint about working conditions, and the film itself is the government's stern answer: work harder. The setting is a clothing factory, where women churn out piles of uniforms in furious fast motion. In retrospect, the film's urgent tone appears desperate, and within six weeks of its release, Hiroshima lay in ruins. Seen together with its American counterpart, *Women of Steel*, we can compare attitudes toward working women and their relative position in each society.

The first clear difference is the nature of the work and how it's represented cinematically. Instead of pouring molten steel, these women are performing the most domestic of chores: sewing. This "women's work" is, indeed, performed. The mundane task of sewing endless uniforms is transformed into dance-like spectacle through fast and slow motion. The fast motion creates a sense of urgency and the slow motion turns the work into a thing of beauty.

In the *Women of Steel* essay above, I discussed the power relations evident in the film's organization, particularly the narration. Narrators, particularly those that remain off-screen, are a site of power to the extent that they orient the film in a variety of ways. Off-screen female narrators in American films are extremely rare, but not in Japanese films. Many Japanese films, features and documentaries alike, use women's voices for narration. *We Are Working So So Hard* uses an off-screen, female narrator, but as a site of power this narration is weakened by the grammatical inflection of the text itself. As in the film's title, the narrator uses the first person plural "we" (*watashitachi*). While her voice is singled out above all others, the narrator places herself within the group that's working so hard on-screen. This position has little of the objectifying, controlling power of *Woman of Steel's* omnipotent male narrator.