

# BEYOND IMPRESSIONS: GERMAINE DULAC (1882-1942), HER LIFE AND FILMS, FROM AESTHETIC TO POLITIC

Tami M. Williams / PhD Thesis Project  
University of California - Los Angeles

Feminist, socialist, and pioneer filmmaker of the 1920s French avant-garde, Germaine Dulac played a founding role in the evolution of the cinema both as art and social practice. Over the course of her film career (1915-42), she directed more than 30 fiction films, many marking new cinematic tendencies (from “Impressionist” to “abstract”), and an equivalent number of newsreels and documentaries. Moreover, Dulac played a leading role in the innovation, legitimization, and diffusion of French film and film culture through her prolific writings and lectures, as well as through her presiding roles in corporate, cine-club and social organizations, such as the *Société des Auteurs*, the *Fédération Française des Ciné-clubs*, the *International Council of Women*, and the *International Institute of Educational Cinema*, to name a few. Despite her vast impact on the cinema, our knowledge of Dulac and her role in film history has been primarily limited to short biographical overviews and analyses of two or three of her fiction films, namely her ‘Impressionist’ *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (1923) and her “Surrealist” *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (1927). Their isolated consideration obscures her broader contributions to cinema and feminism.

Using newly available, original archival resources from Europe and the U.S. (including scripts, correspondence and legal files), I retrace, recontextualize and reevaluate the social and aesthetic trajectory of Dulac’s “commercial” and “avant-garde,” “narrative” and “non-narrative,” “fiction” and “non-fiction” films and projects, within the context of early 20<sup>th</sup> century France and of her life and work as a whole. The scope of my analysis spans the length of Dulac’s life (1882-1942) and is divided into four chapters and periods.

In my first chapter, I outline Dulac’s family background and her encounters with certain people, events and tendencies during France’s *Belle Epoque*, as they impact her political and aesthetic views, or the paradigmatic alternatives that shape her film career. I also examine her “women’s portraits” and theater reviews for the feminist weekly *La Française* (1906-13), her first theater production *L’Emprise* (1907), and her political writings and activism (1906-15). Then, I consider her early filmmaking career – from her first experiences as a producer for Pathé in 1915 to her first directorial efforts (*Sœurs Ennemies* to *Le Bonheur des Autres*, 1915-18) – in order to measure the historical significance of her incursion into and “negotiated” course within the French film industry as a female artist and entrepreneur.

My second chapter considers Dulac’s corporate, artistic and pedagogical initiatives of the 1920s, and comprises a historical overview and several inter-textual analyses of Dulac’s “commercial” and “avant-garde” narrative fiction or “Impressionist” films (*La Cigarette* to *Princesse Mandane*, 1919-28). Taking into account Dulac’s personal goals, as well as industry constraints, I examine the gender and class politics of these “psy-

chological” films. Further, in light of confirmed “naturalist” and “symbolist” influences (from music, theater, photography and dance), and in consideration of Dulac’s conception of movement, rhythm and “life itself” as *specific* qualities of the new “cinematographic art,” I examine the aesthetic, and epistemological shift in her fiction work. I argue that the crux of this shift, from the use of the “technical effect” to that of “rhythm within and between the images,” takes place in Dulac’s theories, as well as in her films in 1924. To this end, I conduct an in-depth analysis of her independently financed feminist short *La Folie des Vaillants* (1925) which, amongst her narrative films, comes the closest to fulfilling her ideal of a “visual symphony” and a “pure cinema” free from the narrative and decorative conventions of literature and theatre.

My third chapter is devoted to Dulac’s “non-narrative” fiction films (1927-30), which I examine in light of this shifting aesthetic ideal, as expressed through her writings and lectures (1924-29), as well as in view of the emerging “specialized cinema” outlets (1926-30). In particular, I examine the polemic that ensued from Dulac and Artaud’s collaboration on *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (1927), and which was made famous by the “Surrealist protest” following the film’s February 1928 screening at the *Studio des Ursulines*. Taking into account Artaud’s “Surrealist” vision, I reformulate this polemic with regard to Dulac’s description of the film as “visual music,” her activism for a “pure” cinema, and her conception of authorship. The second part of the chapter is devoted to Dulac’s “abstract” films *Disque 957* (1929), *Etude cinégraphique sur une Arabesque* (1929), and *Thème et Variations* (1929), which I examine within the context of her filmography and writings, as well as in relationship to the work of other filmmakers of the movement.<sup>1</sup>

My fourth and final chapter addresses a crucial, but little known period of Dulac’s career as a non-fiction filmmaker (1931-1942). In the first part, I consider the aesthetic and social dimensions of her conception of the newsreel, in her work as founding director of one of the most important newsreel companies of the period (*France-Actualités-Gaumont*, 1931-1935). In the second part, I examine Dulac’s socially and politically engaged non-fiction films and projects from the Popular Front to Vichy, including both her unique newsreel-based documentary feature *Le Cinéma au Service de l’Histoire* (1935), which explores cinema’s role as a “carrier of history,” and her Socialist propaganda film *Retour à la Vie* (1936). I also consider her contribution, within the context of the vast cultural movement *Mai 36* and *Ciné-Liberté*, to the genesis of Jean Renoir’s *La Marseillaise* (1938). Finally, I examine and contextualize a number of her fiction and non-fiction film projects (1938-41) written during the period leading up to Vichy. Through the broad scope of my analysis and in consideration of the radically evolving social, political and cultural climate of the period, I aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the work of this prolific and ground-breaking woman activist and filmmaker, and to reestablish its importance in film history.

<sup>1</sup> Please see my overview of Dulac’s 1920s work published in *1895* (June and October 2001), and my analysis of her “abstract” films in *Jeune, Dure et Pure! Une histoire du cinéma expérimental en France* (Paris: Cinémathèque Française, 2001).