

## The "Pure Cinema" of Germaine Dulac

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In 1907, the French filmmaker, playwright, journalist, feminist, and political activist Germaine Dulac (1882-1942) gave a lecture on the "international task of French Women." She urged her audience to "create things anew and according to your own spirit" and to organize into cooperatives and unions. Tami Williams's in-depth historical study and critical biography *Germaine Dulac: A Cinema of Sensations* reveals the breathtaking extent to which Dulac followed her own advice. Among the most prolific and influential figures in early French cinema, Dulac is today virtually forgotten. Williams's book, a volume in the "Women and Film History International" series aiming to reconstruct the lost histories of early women filmmakers, magnificently resurrects Dulac.

Dulac is especially remembered for her extraordinary experimental film *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), which evoked a priest's erotic fantasies. The first surrealist film, it was made a year before Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* and evidently inspired them. This short film alone was an astonishing achievement; but in a career expanding over four decades from the Belle Époque to the French Occupation, Dulac produced nearly thirty fiction films and numerous documentaries and newsreels. Williams's book shows how, through both her films and her rigorous promotion of cinema as a new art form and potent tool for social transformation, Dulac had a tremendous impact on twentieth-century filmmaking.

Dulac was brought up in Paris by her paternal grandmother, the daughter of a Polish countess and a woman of "great culture and aristocratic privilege," after her mother was diagnosed with chronic depression and frequently institutionalized. Her father, a brigadier general, was stationed in rural France. Dulac's conservative family would, as Williams notes, "serve as a counter-model for her politics" and give her "access to considerable financial means and to a powerful support network for her social and cultural reform efforts."

When Dulac was ten, she bought herself a still camera. "I spent my time photographing everything I saw," she wrote. "I thought I possessed all the happiness in the world, in carrying over my heart a little black box, which I knew could capture the mystery of light, the blaze of the sun, the shadows and the gestures." In 1895, at twelve, she went to see the first public film projection organized by Auguste and Louis Lumière. "More than any other attraction," she recalled, "that one left its mark." A few years later, she would frequent the Théâtre Robert Houdin where Georges Méliès showed his films. Dulac's coming-of-age in Paris was full of exposure to innovative culture -- the exhilarating avant-garde dance forms of Loïe Fuller and

Isadora Duncan, musical compositions by Éric Satie and Claude Debussy, symbolist theater by Maurice Maeterlink, Picasso's blue period -- all of which would characterize her own approach to filmmaking and social representation.

In her twenties, she worked as a writer for the feminist journal *La Française* and as a freelance theater critic reviewing everything from plays at the classical Comédie-Française to the avant-garde Théâtre de l'Œuvre, paying special attention to gender representation and expression. All the while, she was developing her ideal of a "Pure Cinema" based on movement and rhythm found in "life itself," highlighting, writes Williams, "the abstract and spiritual aspects central to her vision: that is, a cinema that did not simply reflect life, but one that like music opened out onto a world of imagination, reverie, and transcendence."

In 1904, she met her future husband Albert Dulac, a novelist, playwright, agronomist, and politician who profoundly encouraged both her feminist politics and her artistic vision. He remained devoted to her even after she left him several years later for the actress and dancer Stasia de Napierkowska, the first of Dulac's female lovers. In 1915, Dulac fell in love with Irène Hillel-Erlanger, a novelist, journalist, and critic, and a year later they co-founded a film production company.

Hillel-Erlanger moved in Paris's most illustrious literary, artistic, and political circles and hosted many literary salons together with Jean Cocteau, Anna de Noailles, and Dada movement founder Tristan Tzara. The Noailles family later financed *The Seashell and the Clergyman*. From 1916-1918, Dulac produced and directed six feature-length films, a six-episode serial film, a ballet-pantomime set at a cross-dressing masked ball, and a series of journalistic shorts, all of which are lost, though Williams thoroughly describes and analyzes the existing related documentation. After the war, though continuing to produce films on her own, Dulac mostly worked with independent producers, including Ciné-Studios, Film d'Art, Société des Cinéromans, and Delac, Vandal et Cie.

Dulac wrote that "the avant-garde and commercial cinema, or the art and industry of film, form an inseparable whole." Indeed, her own approach to filmmaking included impressionism, surrealism, abstract cinema, and documentary, all of her films intended for the widest possible audience. Dulac used natural settings, authentic props, minimal plot and décor, live animals as a realist device, and nonprofessional actors in secondary roles. She relied heavily on atmospheric effects, such as colored projections and visualized scents -- lighted fountains, incense, exotic flowers -- as symbolist representations of the psychic life of her heroines. Through juxtapositions, fades, and dissolves, she illustrated characters' thoughts. Her use of what she described as a "shock" of images prefigured the Soviet montage. She innovated technical means -- lighting, lenses, prisms, in-camera effects -- to get the desired cinematic results.

Dulac's films often explore self-definition and self-realization of her female characters, many of them experiencing rebirth and transformation. Her feature films commonly include scenes of women playing sports, driving, or hunting. Her filmic approach to sport in her documentary of

the *Tour de France* anticipated Leni Riefenstahl. In 1919, Dulac set up her own distribution office in New York, becoming one of the first foreign filmmakers to do so. She also distributed several of her films through London studios.

Dulac's 1922 series of fictionalized newsreels entitled "Women at Work" showed women in various occupations, including taxi driver and agricultural engineer. In a feature that same year called *The Death of the Sun*, Dulac depicts the struggles of a woman caught between her duties as mother and wife and her career as a scientist. Feminist storytelling and subversion of gender conventions notwithstanding, Dulac was adamant about her vision of film as essentially life, movement, and rhythm. She wrote, "I evoke a dancer! A woman? No A line bounding to harmonious rhythms. I evoke, on the veils, a luminous projection! Precise matter? No. Fluid rhythms... Harmony of light. Lines and surfaces evolving at length according to the logic of their forms and stripped of all meanings that are too human to better elevate itself toward the abstraction of sentiments leaving more space for sensations and dreams: integral cinema." As Isadora Duncan revolutionized dance, Dulac would do the same for cinema "opening up new possibilities for the spectator to create his or her self."

From 1930-1935, Dulac was the artistic director and nonfiction filmmaker at Gaumont, one of France's largest and oldest production houses. She also assisted Louis Lumière in creating France's first major film school, L'École Louis Lumière, where she taught until her death in 1942. Dulac was fundamental to the 1935 nationalization of the French film industry and in 1936 helped establish the Cinémathèque française.

In that same lecture on the "international task of women," Dulac lamented the lack of opportunities for professional women as well as their systematic erasure from public life, declaring, "It is unacceptable that half of humanity continues to be written off." Despite her exemplary career, during which she was compared to such cinema luminaries and innovators as Sergei Eisenstein and Jean Renoir, Dulac experienced erasure both during her life and after her death. Over a century later, women directors are still grossly underrepresented in the film industry, women's stories dismissed as unbankable by producers, and it is still unacceptable.

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