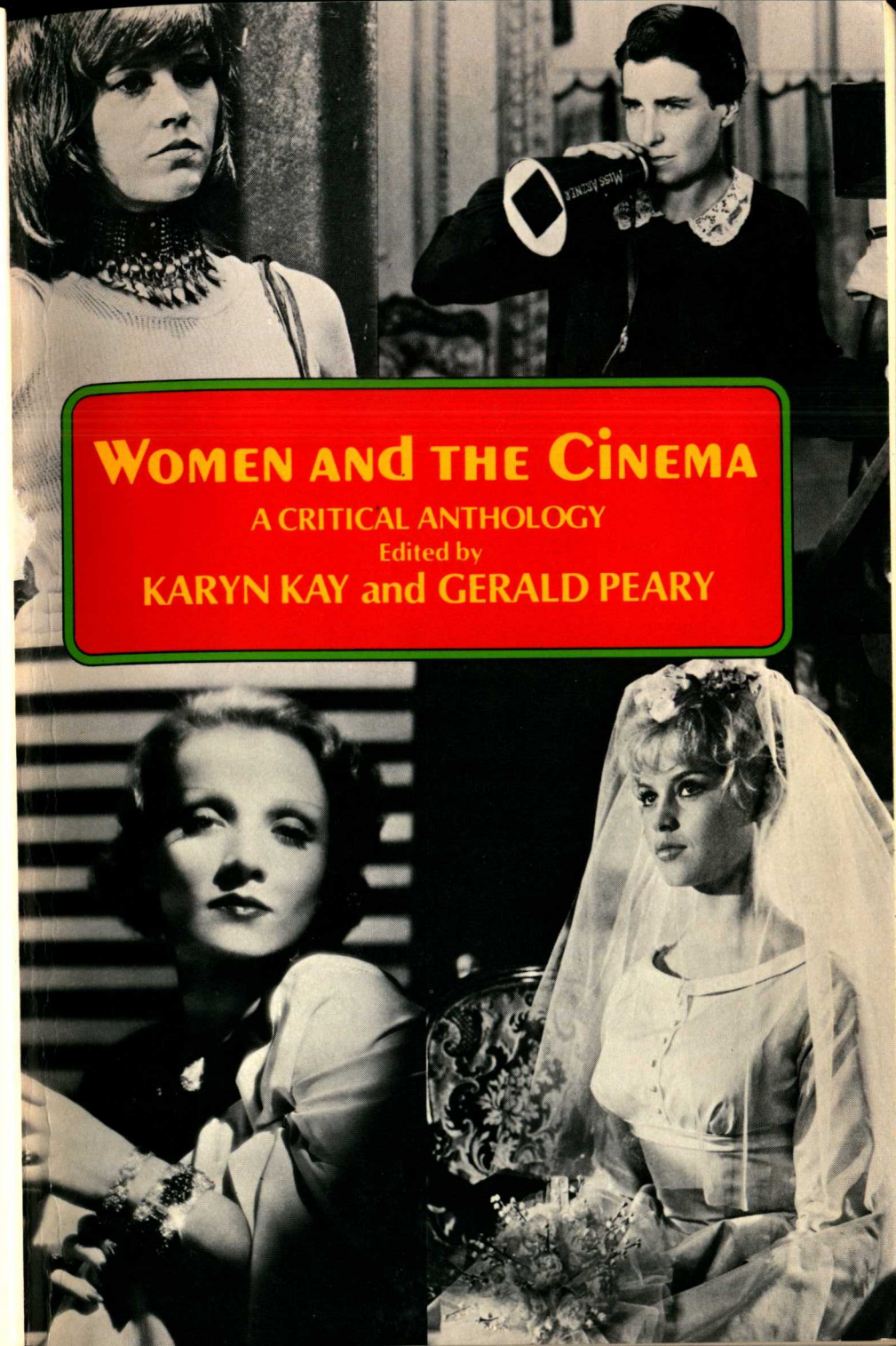

Women and the Cinema

A CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY

Edited by

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Germaine Dulac: First Feminist Filmmaker*

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> Puis l'essentiel n'est-il pas que nous soyons nos maîtres, et les maîtres des femmes, de l'amour, aussi?
>
> What is most important, is it not that we be our own masters and the masters of women and also of love?
>
> —André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme,* 1924.

In the ten years between 1920 and 1930 French film established itself as the equal of the American, Russian, and German cinemas; more importantly, it showed a skeptical world that film was indeed a serious and formidable art form. Freed from its false reputation as a subgenre of theatre or photography, French film in this decade began to command respect and appreciation from artists and audiences alike for its potential both as product (document) and as performance (fiction). It attracted painters (Duchamp, Picabia, Léger, Dali) and poets (Breton, Desnos). They foresaw very clearly that film would become an immensely popular art, a means of reaching audiences beyond the bookstores and museums, beyond national boundaries of territory and language. They believed that the cinema had almost messianic powers, that through film the post-war audience could be restored to a lost innocence, away from

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rationalism, determinism, and naturalism, toward the ancient art of pure sensation and environment.

By far the most important and the most prolific filmmaker of the decade was Germaine Dulac, whose film style proceeded from psychological realism and symbolism through Surrealism to documentaries and formal attempts at transposing musical structures to film; her ultimate goal was that film at its highest level of achievement should become a visual symphony. Yet Germaine Dulac has been largely overlooked or else slandered by most film historians. One reason might be that Dulac cannot be put into categories: for example, she was making films before the abovementioned Surrealists, and she was still making films in the 1930s when most of the Surrealists had stopped. Another reason might be that Dulac's films have never received wide distribution, either in France or elsewhere.

This second reason is linked with a third, perhaps the most important reason of all: Germaine Dulac was intensely interested in the image of women in film. An analysis of both an early film and a later film of Dulac demonstrates that she was the first feminist filmmaker.

Her 1922 film *The Smiling Madame Beudet* could really be retitled "The Original Diary of a Mad Housewife." It is one of the few experimental films of the decade in which women are not fragmented, shown as sexual freaks, stripped in close-ups or through editing to reveal a bleeding mouth, bared breasts, or buttocks. It is one of the few films of the decade in which a woman is main character.

The film is heavily influenced by French Symbolism (especially Baudelaire) in content, by the theatre in its use of type-casting for everyone but Madame Beudet, and by D. W. Griffith in its form: the use of sentence fragments in the titles to convey pieces of dialogue, the use of shadows to separate the mundane from the mysterious, and the use of highlighting on the heroine. In later Dulac films, narration and theatrical acting and sets will disappear. . . . But here we must remember that her main character is a housewife. Dulac was more concerned here with psychic sex and violence

Germaine Dermoz as Madame Beudet in Germaine Dulac's *Smiling Madame Beudet* (1922). (Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive)

than with the fragmented physical sex and violence of the later Surrealists.

Action begins in the film when the maid brings in the mail. Mr. Beudet (played by Arquillière) accepts his mail gruffly, because he thinks it contains more bills to pay. His gruff treatment of the maid extends to all women, including his wife. By contrast, Madame Beudet (played by Germaine Dermoz) accepts her mail gratefully, even greedily, because the mail offers her a temporary escape from her boredom. In one of Mr. Beudet's letters is an invitation from his friend Mr. Labas (played by Jean D'Yd) to a presentation of *Faust* at the opera that evening. Beudet excitedly shows the letter and the opera tickets to Madame Beudet. Confronted with her indifference, he asks her angrily: "How is it that you don't want to understand *Faust*?" Dulac inserts two subjective point-of-view shots to show that Madame Beudet clearly understands the Faust story (male fantasy, female victim) all too well. Mr. Beudet's reactions, when he cannot comprehend his wife's indifference or lethargy, are always violent reactions, like pounding his fists on his desk. Dulac can

deftly show in one such shot of pounding fists that Mr. Beudet demands attention both through pouting and brute force.

Madame Beudet's reactions to such situations are always symbolic, that is, to be understood on at least two levels. Outwardly, she maintains the docile posture of a subdued housewife, but inwardly, through Dulac's use of point-of-view shots, she shows herself to be capable of many imaginative fantasies. Such point-of-view shots are clearly recognizable in Dulac's films, since they involve the use of slow motion, or wide-angle lens distortion, or some means of trick photography. For example, Madame Beudet looks at a picture of a male tennis player in a book. The tennis player becomes her symbolic lover, her agent of revenge upon her stupid husband. Against a completely black background, the tennis player swings his racket in slow motion. In Madame Beudet's fantasy the tennis player enters the room; we know that he is part of her fantasy since we can see through his body to the walls behind. While the real Mr. Beudet continues to sit at his desk, an imaginary Beudet is picked up and choked by the tennis player. The usually unsmiling Madame Beudet smiles and even laughs heartily. The real Beudet, meanwhile, thinking that his wife is making fun of him, pulls a gun out of his desk drawer and puts it to his head. A title: 'Parody of suicide. A joke often perpetrated on dear Mrs. Beudet." But since Madame Beudet does not look, he puts the gun down.

When Mr. Beudet leaves for the opera, Madame Beudet is left alone in the unlighted room. At times like this, when she is left alone, we are given glimpses of the depth of her personality, of all the suppressed life forces within her. She picks up Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil,* and turns to "The Death of the Lovers." For each line that she reads, a corresponding shot of objects in the room both reinforces the verbal line and undermines it by the inherent banality of the objects. She reads: "Our beds are filled with soft smells," and we see a shot of the Beudets' unused bed. She reads: "And pillows deep as graves," and we see two stacked but again unused pillows. She reads: "And strange flowers on the shelves," and we see the flowers that Mr. Beudet always arranges in the center of the table, but that Madame Beudet always rearranges off to one side. Her reading epitomizes the whole film, epitomizes the agonizing differences between imagination/potential (poetry) and her own frustrated existence. She walks to the window. A title tells us: "Always the same horizons." The next shot we see is that of the jail, both in her mind and also physically across the street.

At this point, blocked by the walls that surround her, she returns to her fantasy of the "lover" coming to save her. As the blurred image steps through the closed door, the face slowly comes into focus: it is the smiling, mocking, demonic face of Mr. Beudet. Her enslavement is so total that her husband dominates even her fantasies. His face is especially grotesque, because Dulac uses a wide-angle lens both to flatten and to enlarge the facial features. Madame Beudet takes the real gun out of the drawer and loads it. Then she goes to bed.

The final sequence of the film is a return to the opening tableaux shots. Mr. Beudet is again at his books, this time looking at all the household expenses. He has the maid call his wife in to account for all the expenses. He cannot, however, begin to approach a rational conversation. He begins pounding his fists again, then pulls the gun out and puts it to his head. Madame Beudet, who knows that the gun is loaded, jumps back in fright. He says: "It's you who deserves it more than me." He shoots the gun into the room, and there is a quick cut to the cat running downstairs, an incredible insert to convey the shock and sound of the gun going off. Immediately we see a flower vase broken. Mr. Beudet runs over to his wife and hugs her, his back to us, her drained, expressionless face to us. "So you wanted to kill yourself?," he says. "But how could I possibly live without you?," he says, squeezing her stiff body. Behind them in a picture frame, a drama finishes with a storybook ending. There are puppets in the mirror. A man and woman hug, then a curtain comes down. Then the word *"Theatre."* This excellent *mise-en-abîme* metaphor, like that of the poetry, is typical of Germaine Dulac's amazing ability to capsulize whole worlds of feeling in brief, static shots, and to use the symbolic possibilities of the camera, animating the inanimate (the tennis player, the imaginary "lover," the mirror) or conferring special importance on objects, while making into statues people whose existence contains little hope of true feeling.

Dulac gives us one last title: "United by habit." In the last visual

of the film, Mr. and Mrs. Beudet are walking down the street. Mr. Beudet tips his hat to a passing priest. His hat tipped, he turns his face briefly to the camera. All we see of the "smiling" Madame Beudet is her back, and we realize with a chill that she is nothing more than a showpiece for her husband on the street, that she is no better off outside of the house or in the provinces than she was inside the house or in the shadows of the city. She is a victim, without future, without escape.

In the years following the release of *The Smiling Madame Beudet* several Dada painters turned to film, trying to write automatic films, films without plots, films that produced visual shocks through innovative close-ups, fragmentation of objects and rapid editing. Francis Picabia collaborated with René Clair to make *Entr'acte* (1924). Fernand Léger made *Le Ballet Mécanique* (1924), and Marcel Duchamp made *Anaemic Cinema* (1926). But the first truly Surrealistic film was Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928, script by Antonin Artaud). In this film she exploits the Freudian symbolism of her male colleagues. She makes a film in their style in order, at the end, to expose male fantasies. For this reason, the clear distinction between objective reality and subjective point-of-view shots that exists in *The Smiling Madame Beudet* no longer exists in *The Seashell and the Clergyman.* Before looking at the film, it would perhaps be interesting to note what the Surrealists appreciated in later non-Surrealist films.

Since most of the Surrealists were men (Léonor Fini is an admirable and astonishing exception), they tended to admire certain films for reasons that would be offensive to most women. For instance, they loved *King Kong* (1933), especially the scene in which Kong rips off Fay Wray's clothes. Apropos of this scene, Ado Kyrou, a leading Surrealist critic, said: "Sadism-protest which leads to revolt after passing through love is the only one that has value for man."[1] They loved Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930) for the many shots of Marlene Dietrich's thighs, as seen by a roving, caressing, fondling camera. They loved Groucho Marx's sadistic handling

[1] All of these examples come from J. H. Matthew, *Surrealism and Film* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1971).

of wealthy matrons and Harpo Marx's complete surrender to his own libido. The portrayal of women in all of these examples is never as women actually are, but always as men fancy them to be in dream and fantasy.

In the Surrealists' own films the same male fantasies and stereotypes of women prevail. They exalt free sex and violence, yet they do not discard the double standard. They consistently portray women as fetishists and transvestites, phenomena that sexologist John Money says occur mainly in men. Or they portray women as castrating mothers or mindless nymphomaniacs. They portray women as statues, as machines, as half-animals. What films like Man Ray's *L'Etoile de Mer* (1928), Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), and Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1933) propose is that men see women with their eyes openly as they had always seen them with their minds: as sexual objects to be fragmented and possessed. The one exception is Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman.*

In the opening shots we see the back of a woman, seated at a table. She is pouring liquid into bottles, then throwing them on the floor. The glass breaks and the liquid becomes smoke. A fat man dressed in military uniform walks in in slow motion, his feet high-stepping in a kind of goose step. As he passes through the frame, the camera gets a beautiful close-up of the sword (phallic symbol) trailing behind him. And as the woman continues to break bottles, he levitates behind her, his head sticking to the ceiling. The scene fades.

Enter the clergyman (Alex Allin), a thin, nervous, "effeminate" priest. Like the woman, he is seated and pouring liquids. He is pouring them, however, into a seashell. The colonel comes in and stops him. By the repetition of the opening scene, by substituting the priest for the woman and the seashell for the bottle, it is suggested that the colonel represents a kind of sexual stereotype of aggression for both the priest and the woman, that the priest and the woman are to be compared and contrasted, and that the priest and the colonel are rivals for the woman.

Images and sequences objectifying the sexual overtones of religious confession reveal the prurient and violent nature of religion.

After a long series of shots in which the priest locks doors and twirls keys, first as phallic symbols and then as masturbatory symbols, we see the priest chasing the colonel and the woman. In a beautiful shot Dulac shows the woman, who holds her dress up with one hand, while the colonel holds his sword up with his opposite hand: thus, the dress of the woman becomes visually linked with the sword of the colonel and the metaphor is concretized.

In a later shot, eight maids come into a room and begin dusting. They are dressed in black and white, which links them with the religious life. They begin to dust a huge ball on a pedestal in the center of the room. As they dust, the face of the priest begins to emerge in the ball. From the priest's point of view, the effect is that of a harem masturbating him. The women leave, and the priest comes in with the woman for a mock wedding. The "priest" officiating at the wedding is, of course, the colonel. Then the ball, which has been covered up (representing the priest's sexuality covered up), is unveiled (the priest is "coming out"). The priest picks up the ball, but since he is impotent, he drops it, and it smashes into little pieces on the floor, corresponding to the visual of the woman breaking bottles on the floor in the beginning of the film. The priest's face is seen among the pieces of glass. He picks it up, and it becomes a seashell. The priest sees his face upside down in the seashell. The seashell, thus, is both a religious and a sexual symbol: it is a symbol of suppressed sexuality, of sacrifice. In another scene the priest begins to move toward the woman, and we see that his black cassock is cut in two and that there is a long flowing train to his cassock, a replica in black of the woman's white evening gown. The camera focuses on the train after the priest walks out of the frame, just as it had focused on the sword of the colonel after he had walked out of the frame. In one brilliant shot Dulac shows us that the priest identifies both with the colonel and with the woman. He does not want to possess the woman, the real woman, sexually; rather, he wants to become her, he wants to become his idealized embodiment of her. He wants her to become, like the seashell, a symbol that he can possess without risking himself sexually. Later the priest runs backward into the church, his refuge, his womb,

where he backs up to the pedestal with the ball restored. He motions with his finger for someone unseen (presumably the woman) to come in. A close-up of the curling finger, shot in slow motion, is here a tremendously powerful shot.

Up to this point, the film has been typically and faithfully Surrealistic, the dreams and fantasies, the slow motion and dissolves, the split screens and editing upon association rather than upon linear narrative or cause and effect, all representing the inner states of the priest, making his interior world the only world, the outer world, equating religion and violence and sex. But here, for the final shots of the film, Germaine Dulac chillingly breaks away from Surrealism toward realism, in order to expose the priest's fantasies for what they pathetically are. For a moment, we are no longer inside the priest's disoriented mind, but rather outside, watching the real priest. Contrary to the usual Surrealist method in film, Dulac moves from the subjective point-of-view shot here to the objective, authorial camera shot, for these final shots cannot possibly belong to the priest's fantasy world. In other words, up to this point, the priest that we've seen is the priest within the unseen thinking priest's mind. Now we see the real priest; now we clinically observe his last fantasy from outside.

That we are in the realm of realism is poignantly brought out in this shot of the real priest holding, hugging, squeezing, fondling—empty air. If we were still in his fantasy world, we could of course see the priest fondling the woman. But we are not. The woman, who has only been there in the mind of the priest, is now absent, as in reality she has always been absent. After squeezing empty air, the priest begins to choke the air. His hands close up, as if he were squeezing the woman into a little ball and trapping her within his fists. His hands still closed, he walks over to the ball, which seems more like a vault or prison or tabernacle now, given his actions. We see her face, a captive inside the ball. This shot identifies even further his sexuality with hers, since his face had been a captive in the ball earlier. The film ends with this shot of her face in the ball, and we are left wondering whether this final shot is Surrealism or realism, a twist of the unreal (or the more than real), or whether it

is rather a turn of the everyday world, women as sex objects trapped inside the crystal-ball prisons that are the minds of such men.

The film created a great deal of controversy when it first came out, since Artaud, who had written the script, publicly claimed that Dulac had betrayed his scripts, had destroyed his original idea of what the film should be. Indeed, at the first showing of the film, Artaud and Desnos disrupted the whole audience by screaming from the first row. Desnos: "What is Madame Dulac?" Artaud: "She is a cow." Artaud enlisted the help of the other Surrealists in denouncing Germaine Dulac for having, as critic Alain Virmaux says, "feminized" the script! The priest was supposed to have been played by Artaud himself, according to Artaud. As such, the priest was to have been much more masculine, and his fantasies were to have been filled with masculine rage and fury, not revealed as the pathetic fantasies of a hung-up priest. Regarding the film, Ado Kyrou, filled with self-righteous indignance, reported: "The script is very beautiful; filled with eroticism and fury, it could have been a film in the same class as Buñuel's *L'Age d'Or* [1930], but Germaine Dulac betrayed the spirit of Artaud and made a FEMININE film. Artaud, who wished to play the role of the clergyman and participate in the shooting and editing, could do nothing about it, since Germaine Dulac had delayed the original shooting date, knowing that Artaud would then be taken up with other obligations."[2] Bettina Knapp also recognizes this cry of indignance as a masked cry against feminism, but even she refuses to see the extent of Dulac's feminism in the film; her interpretation of the film remains couched in Jungian terms of *animus* and *anima*.[3] Only Alain Virmaux, of all the French critics, recognizes that *The Seashell and the Clergyman* was not only the first Surrealist film, but that it was also the greatest film of the decade.[4]

[2] Ado Kyrou, Le Surréalisme au Cinéma (Paris: Editions Arcanes, 1953), p. 186.

[3] Bettina L. Knapp, *Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision* (New York: Avon Books, 1969), pp. 91–96.

[4] Alain Virmaux, "Une promesse mal tenue: le film surréaliste," *Etudes Cinematographiques*, nos. 38–41 (1965), pp. 103–105.

After *The Seashell and the Clergyman* Germaine Dulac evolved beyond Surrealism and returned in earnest to her ideas of transposing musical structures to film. She tried to replace theatrical drama and narration in film with recurrent themes and leitmotifs, using them as they are used in music. She extended her psychological or symbolic use of the camera to include treating movement within the frame and editing as one would treat rhythm or tempo in music. The result of her research was *Theme and Variations* (1930), which was perhaps the closest the French have ever gotten to making film a visual symphony. After this film she became head of production at Gaumont studios and began to supervise the films of others.

Approximately forty-five years later, we can only stand in wonder and awe of Germaine Dulac; we are just beginning to appreciate her flexibility and her wide repertoire of film styles; we are just beginning to understand the full extent of her originality and her courage in the face of so many entrenched critics.