France

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Overview

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This overview will explore the role of the female screenwriter or scénariste in France, from the silent period to today, when the proportion of female to male screenwriters is one of the highest in the world.¹

In early silent French cinema, five female scenario writers, Alice Guy (see entry p. 322), Germaine Dulac, Irène Hillel-Erlanger, Colette and Musidora played an instrumental part in its development. Guy, Dulac and Musidora were pioneers and differed from their male contemporaries, with the exception of Méliès, in that they were actors, directors and producers. Colette was an accomplished author and before that a pantomime artist, Guy wrote novels and plays after becoming disillusioned with the film industry, Germaine Dulac was a theatre and film critic, and published seminal texts in film theory, Musidora wrote songs, plays and film scripts and Irène Hillel-Erlanger was a poet, revered by the surrealists, whose cubist approach to writing influenced Dulac’s kaleidoscopic innovations.

Colette (1873–1954) is famous for her ground-breaking feminist and libertine novels, yet was one of the first bona fide woman screenwriters in France. She even wrote a manual in 1918 on how to write a film script titled ‘Petit manuel de l’aspirant scénariste’ (Virmaux 2004: 243). Colette’s film career spanned more than 30 years, during which she adapted several of her novels as well as writing for the renowned directors Max Ophuls (Divine [1935]) and Marc Allegret (Ladies Lake [1934]). She also wrote for the female directors Musidora, Solange Terac and Jacqueline Audry, these collaborations enabling a strong tradition of feminist filmmaking to become established in France.

Colette, Alain Virmaux argues, felt that cinema was first and foremost a matter of writing (Virmaux 2004: 24). In his book Le Scénario, Jean-Paul Török cites Colette as one of the author screenwriters who is often forgotten, pointing out that French cinema, especially during the first half of the century, had a literary tradition (Török 1986: 53). A comparative study and analysis of Colette’s screenwriting based on Alain and Odette Virmaux’s work on Colette would be valuable and has yet to be realized.²
A screenwriting tradition, from a female perspective, is at the roots of French cinema. Indeed Alice Guy was one of the earliest screenwriters and directors, whose first film was shown in 1896. Her importance was not recognized in France until 1954 when she was awarded the Légion d’honneur. Guy began her film career as a typist for Leon Gaumont and convinced him to let her act a few scenes in front of the camera that she had written for friends (Cazals 1978: 53). Even though some historians regard the result as a ‘flat mise-en-scène and silly scénario’ (Pinel 1994: 40), *La Fée aux choux* (1896) was a great success (Pinel 1994: 40).

Musidora (née Jeanne Roques, 1889–1957) came from a Bohemian background and her father, Jean Rocques, wrote songs while her mother was a feminist. In April 1913 Musidora was performing at the Folies-Bergères in a burlesque act when she was discovered by two young directors from Gaumont, Henri Frescourt and Louis Feuillade. They were impressed with this daringly dressed woman, wearing just a few feathers, who had a remarkable stage presence. Musidora went on to become the first vamp, as Irma Vep in Louis Feuillade’s ten-episode film *Les Vampires* (1915) (Pinel 1994: 38). But Musidora wanted to be a writer and was passionate about writing, explaining that, ‘A film should be written like a good book ... and when you see it in ten or fifteen years it should be as beautiful as it is today’ (Musidora 1943). She went on to found her own production company, La société des films Musidora, and made her directing debut with *Minne ou l’enigme libertine* (1916)3 and then *Vagabonde* (1917), both adaptations of Colette novels. Unfortunately there is no trace of *Minne ou l’enigme libertine*, and historians’ views differ as to whether it was lost or never completed. In 1918 Musidora wrote and directed *Vincenta*, followed soon afterwards by *La Femme cache*, based on Colette’s original scenario. Musidora began a trend for Colette adaptations, explaining, ‘I was the first to make Colette write a film script before she went on to become the great scénariste’ (Musidora 1943).

Germaine Dulac (1882–1942) established herself as a key figure in early avant-garde cinema. The second woman to direct a film after Alice Guy, she made her directing debut with the historical melodrama *Les Soeurs enemie* (1915). Dulac began her career as a theatre critic and wrote for the feminist periodical *La Femme française*. She is described by her contemporary Henri Frescourt as a propagandist for the cause of the avant-garde cinema. Dulac visualized each film when writing the scenario (Ford 1972: 36)4 and would follow the storyboard, making few changes when filming.

Dulac adapted Denys Amiel’s play *La Souriante Madame Beudet* in 1923, described as ‘a psychological comedy which was not really meant to be adapted on the screen’ (Ford 1972: 34). Dulac invented new ways of showing the intimate thoughts of the characters on screen. She did not revert to using title cards to explain what was happening, but explained the characters’ feelings through visual effects. Although the film enjoyed critical success, it did not convince the producers, and Germaine Dulac went to the United States, returning to France full of praise for the ‘team work’ in the Hollywood studios. She joined the Société des Ciné-Romans (Ford 1972: 37)5, and went on to write and direct *Gossette*, a ciné-roman in six episodes.