**French Impressionist Cinema**

French Impressionist Cinema describes an avant-garde film movement lasting approximately from 1918 to 1929. It was characterized by camera and editing techniques which both augmented the beauty of the image and evoked characters’ psychological states. Impressionist filmmakers regarded film as an art form in itself rather than simply a means for recording plays and novels. They believed art should not attempt to express truths directly, but rather create an experience giving rise to emotions that would lead audiences to underlying truths. Mood and suggestion took precedence over plot. The ideas underlying French Impressionist Cinema found articulation in the writings of film critic and ciné-club founder Louis Delluc, who went on to write screenplays and direct films in the movement. Other notable Impressionist directors include Abel Gance (1889-1981), Marcel L’Herbier (1890-1979), Germaine Dulac (1882-1942), Jean Epstein (1897-1953), Jacques Feyder (1885-1948), Jean Renoir (1894-1979), and Russian émigré Dimitri Kirsanoff (1899-1957).

Impressionists valued *photogenie*, a term originally used by critic Louis Delluc (1890-1924) to designate expressive differences between the object in front of the camera and the appearance of that object in the film. Camera tricks such as superimposing one image over another, shooting through filters or gauze or into distorting mirrors, masking off part of the image to change its shape from rectangular to round, or forcing part of the image out of focus – as well as slow motion, point-of-view shots and use of camera motion – all helped represent mental processes including dreams, reveries, and memories, as well as attitudes and emotional responses. Rapid editing – even down to single frames in one sequence in Abel Gance’s *La Roue* [*The Wheel,* 1922] – also presented viewers with impressions of character’s thoughts and mental associations. In distancing their films from theatre, Impressionist directors favored a more naturalistic acting style and preferred to shoot in real, albeit architecturally interesting, locations (typically in the Art Deco style).

The most prominent director in this group was Abel Gance, who not only made the first Impressionist film, *La Dixième symphonie* [*The Tenth Symphony*, 1918], but also the most ambitious – *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance* [*Napoleon as Seen by Abel Gance*, 1927] – which employed every Impressionist trope and even multiplied them with Polyvision, Gance’s own triple-screen process, climaxing in a triptych of rapid montages and superimpositions unequaled in cinema history. Germaine Dulac was one of the first feminist filmmakers: her *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (1923) used various camera tricks in depicting an unhappy wife’s perceptions of her overbearing husband and unfulfilling marriage. Feyder’s *Gribiche* (1926) employed progressively more luminous, romanticized flashbacks of the same incident to track two characters’ perceptions of their relationship.

Financial crises in the film industry following World War I actually helped foster Impressionist films because major production companies such as Pathé Freres and Gaumont viewed them as potential alternatives to the American films flooding European markets. Also, working on mainstream productions helped Impressionist directors finance their own more avant-garde projects. Some directors were even able to open their own studios. However, few Impressionist films did well in foreign markets, which reduced support in the big studios. The new sound technology of the late 1920s added considerably to filmmaking costs, which smaller studios could not afford. Consequently, Impressionist filmmakers wound up closing their studios and moving into other sorts of filmmaking: more mainstream fictional productions and newsreels (in the case of Dulac), but also more avant-garde, non-narrative forms as well.

**References and Further Readings**

Bordwell, D. (1980) *French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory, and Film Style.* New York: Arno.

Lanzoni, R. (2004) *French Cinema: From Its Beginnings to the Present.* New York: Continuum.

**Paratextual**

View *La SourianteMadame Beudet*:<https://archive.org/details/LaSourianteMadameBeudet>

View colour-restored version of Jean Epstein’s *La Chute de lamaison Usher*:

<https://archive.org/details/The_fall_of_the_House_of_Usher._full_RESTORED.live_electronics.avi>

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