Paris in the Dark
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Paris in the Dark: Going to the Movies in the City of Light, 1930–1950.

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During the 1930s, André de Fouquières wrote an occasional column as the resident bon vivant and man about town for *La Semaine à Paris*, the weekly listing and description of all of the cultural events going on in Paris from Friday to the following Thursday. He arranged possible activities—going to concerts, museums, lectures—day by day, and as much as possible he staggered events by time, indicating that those so inclined might go from one to the other. He rarely included anything about the movies playing at regular cinemas, but he paid careful attention to the ciné-clubs in the city. In the edition of April 12, 1935, de Fouquières wrote that on Friday, one might take in the opening of the Goya Exposition at the Bibliothèque nationale and then, at 3:00 p.m., move to the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro for a display of photographs of Indo-China and Siam. Following this afternoon of visual pleasures, one might then go to the Club George Sand to hear travel writer Marion Sénones explain “how she became a nomad,” and then move on to the Théâtre des Ambassadeurs for a 5:00 conference on “that distressing problem: ‘Will there be war?’” That evening, after the conference, there were a number of choices. The pianist Artur Schnabel would be playing at 9:00, but at about the same time there also would be a meeting of the Ciné-Club de la femme at the Marignan cinema on the Champs-Élysées. De Fouquières did not note the program at the club that night. For him, the gathering of the members of the club was significant enough.1

De Fouquières had been born in 1874, virtually the beginning of France’s decidedly precinematic Belle Epoque, and he had grown up wealthy enough to be the consummate dilettante, writing some plays as well as many essays. Perhaps because of his upbringing and his artistic inclinations, the cinema
itself—in its regular, daily, popular form—would not appear in his La Semaine column. So, we can get the sense of a difference, at least for de Fouquières and those like him, between the cinema and the ciné-club, with the latter fully on the level of Goya or Schnabel and just as important as a conference about the prospects for world peace. As much as it belonged to what we might call the broad film culture of Paris and the rest of France, the ciné-club was also marginal to it, given the dominance of the commercial cinema. Nevertheless the clubs had affiliations with a highbrow Parisian culture of the museum and the concert hall that the commercial cinema typically did not.

In both French- and English-language film histories, scholars have paid little attention to the ciné-clubs from around 1930 to 1945. Richard Abel has chronicled the club scene before then, and there has been some work on the postwar movement, particularly around André Bazin and those acolytes who would become so central to French filmmaking in the 1950s. But perhaps because the evidence of the clubs in the 1930s and during World War II is so ephemeral—mostly in newspapers and magazines—we have little sense of where they were, how they worked, or what they showed. As a result, the history of the ciné-club from the period tends to follow a simplified, heroic narrative. With the coming of sound the clubs devoted themselves to preserving the art of silent cinema, or, as in the cases of the Ciné-Club de France or the Amis de Spartacus, to showing those films censored by French authorities, with the formation of the Cinémathèque française in 1936 standing as the only logical evolutionary step in the clubs’ developmental history. After the catastrophe of World War II, according to this narrative, the clubs reestablished themselves as the place for the nurturing of the brilliant young men who would lead the French New Wave in the next decade.

Even in Paul Léglise’s encyclopedic Histoire de la politique du cinéma français, about all manner of industrial organization, the clubs get just a brief mention. Léglise brings up the children’s clubs, such as Cendrillon (Cinderella), and also the club most frequently referenced in all the histories, Henri Langlois and Georges Franju’s Cercle du cinéma, from which was formed the Cinémathèque française. Despite the prominence of the Cercle du cinéma, however, even that club often disappears from standard texts, and so the Cinémathèque often seems simply to appear in 1936, fully grown and without a more modest precursor.

The recent availability of so many online materials—newspapers, film tabloids, and magazines—housed in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris helps uncover more of this history, so much of it obscure for so many years. There remains a great deal we can probably never know, such as the prevalence of
smaller clubs that met perhaps in private homes or small commercial spaces that newspapers never noticed. Information about the clubs during the Occupation of Paris is still frustratingly difficult to find. We can, however, now begin to move away from the simplified narrative about the clubs and learn more about the regular activities of so many of these groups, which themselves, throughout the 1930s and the various economic disasters that the French film industry faced, throughout the German control of French cinema during World War II, and then as France rebuilt in the aftermath of war, remained a constant part of the Parisian filmgoing landscape.

First, some definitions are in order, because it certainly was not unusual in Paris during the period for a number of nontraditional locations to show movies at least occasionally. One might see documentaries at the Théâtre national populaire at the Palais de Chaillot, a site usually reserved for live performances. Or, at the Agence Économique de l’Indochine, audiences could watch films about France’s Far Eastern colonies. Other, more traditional cinemas often showed movies at special times for special audiences.
As just one example among many, the fashionable Lord Byron cinema in the eighth arrondissement sometimes showed matinees of cartoons and other films suited to children’s tastes. None of these spaces, properly speaking, was a ciné-club, but rather a venue where one might see movies now and then, or a conventional cinema that might every so often cater to very precise groups of viewers.  

There was also an extensive club culture in Paris during the 1930s where films might often be part of an evening’s discussion even for an organization usually unconcerned with cinema. In an event that I will return to in an upcoming chapter, on November 8, 1930, for instance, the socialist Club du Faubourg, which specialized in a wide range of political rather than cultural or aesthetic discussions, engaged in a “débat cinématographique,” taking sides “for and against” the two antiwar films about to open in Paris, the first from the United States and the second from Germany, À l’Ouest rien de nouveau and Quatre de l’infanterie.

Despite the romance of the movement—as its links to the French avant-garde of the 1920s and to the doomed-to-die-too-young Jean Vigo and André Bazin—the ciné-club came to be defined, and differentiated from other exhibition practices, by an extraordinarily specific level of bureaucracy and nationwide affiliation. In France during the early 1930s, the Annuaire général des lettres kept obsessive track of such things, and among its more than six hundred pages of lists of authors’ deaths, awards to artists, university officials, taxes on artistic activities, and legislation affecting newspapers, there was also a section devoted to “Clubs Cinématographique.” The 1933–34 edition listed three, and all apparently in Paris. The Fédération française des Ciné-Clubs was the parent organization for the national movement and also seems to have sponsored screenings at other clubs. This was by far the most important group and the one with the highest profile, with Germaine Dulac as president and Marcel L’Herbier, René Clair, and Abel Gance as members. There was also the Cinéregardo club, and a third called But. There were, after this, some sixteen “groupements adherents,” satellite groups, mostly in Paris but also in Reims and Strasbourg and Nice, where Vigo served as president.  

We tend to imagine the French film industry of the period as one marked mostly by instability. Think of the forced receiverships or bankruptcies of so many film studios during the Depression—Gaumont, Pathé, Haïk, Osso, Braunberger—which had such a devastating impact not only on production but also on exhibition. The ciné-club, however, appears to have been one of the most orderly and longstanding aspects of the industry. As early as 1929 the leaders of all of the clubs in France assembled at the Congrès des ciné-clubs,
with Dulac running the meeting. Club leaders discussed their mission of foregrounding those films that initially had failed to find a public or had been forgotten, or were now only seen in incomplete and compromised prints. They informed each other about efforts to develop clubs and audiences throughout the country, in Agen, Montpelier, Angers, Troyes, Avignon, and elsewhere, and of the need for rigid administrative practices. Club leaders understood that film distribution must be absolutely systematic, or else the club system would fall victim to the same random uncertainties that marked so much of the French film industry, and that the government would tax the clubs much more highly as individual entities than as members of a large federation. This system developed by the clubs, and the nationwide clubs cinématographiques, seems to have lasted, more or less successfully, at least until the German invasion of France in 1940.

Much more than mere bureaucratic affiliation marked and defined the ciné-club. In Paris at the time, one could find, quite easily, clubs that apparently had no direct connection to the larger movement. Cendrillon, for instance, had no link to the nationwide organization of clubs, but still identified itself as the “Club cinématographique d’enfants,” and showed cartoons and kids’ documentaries throughout the year. Cendrillon met at the upscale Gaumont-Marignan cinema on the Champs-Élysées, as did other clubs during the 1930s, and shared with practically all of the clubs in Paris and the rest of France their most distinguishing characteristic: public debate and discussion following screenings. Even the children who went to Cendrillon to be amused by Mickey Mouse or Flip the Frog participated in postfilm discussions and received guidance in the art of cinema, just as did those cinéphiles who belonged to more adult clubs.

One of those, the Amis de Spartacus, aligned itself with the French Communist Party rather than, apparently, the national ciné-club organization, and typically showed films that had been banned in France, such as Sergei Eisenstein’s *Le Cuirassé Potemkine* (*Battleship Potemkin*; 1925). There were clubs, as well, with connections to other media, and particularly journalism. Many of the leaders of the clubs were themselves film journalists, and the clubs were often the offspring of newspapers. One of the longest-lasting and best known of the clubs was *La Tribune Libre* du Cinéma, established as an offshoot of the newspaper *La Tribune Libre*, and by 1939 the club had its own radio program, with debates and discussions led by the well-known French polymath Maurice Bessy. Possibly because of the multimedia success of *La Tribune Libre* du Cinéma, the film tabloid *Pour Vous* established its own club, Des Amis de *Pour Vous*, around 1940 and lasting until the beginning of the Occupation, showing
Friday-night premieres of major French films as well as reprises of popular movies at a fashionable spot on the Champs-Élysées, but one that seems not to have been a conventional space for movies.  

The Screenings and the Viewers

Holding meetings in that kind of location was not unusual. The Ciné-Club de Phare Tournant showed movies in the ninth arrondissement at the building that housed the agricultural society of France, while La Tribune Libre du Cinéma screened films in the seventh arrondissement at the Salle Adyar, a theatre rather than a cinema. Wherever the films showed, most of the clubs—or at least those that we can find even sketchy records of today—met in some of the very best parts of Paris. Many of them—Cendrillon, the Ciné-Club de la Femme, the Cercle du cinéma, and others—had their weekly screenings at 33 avenue des Champs-Élysées at the Marignan, one of the most important cinemas in Paris.

The frequently posh setting, the people who attended, and the discussions that took place made the ciné-club, far more than the ordinary cinema, a special location in the cultural geography of Paris. So what, precisely, happened at the clubs that made going to one the equal of attending a concert or a museum? Of course the films were important, and the tabloids and newspapers from the period can give us an idea of the screening strategies of the clubs, and of the differences and similarities between them and also between the clubs and the commercial cinemas located throughout Paris. There were, as well, other elements of the experience of going to a club, elements that developed from the clubs themselves, but that also derived from the never less than baroque legislation that governed the cinema in France.

Naturally enough, cinéphiles went to the clubs to see movies. Looked at most broadly, throughout the 1930s the screenings tended toward several major and often overlapping categories: the director retrospective, the silent film, the thematic series, the avant-garde, and the sensational or censored film. None of these categories, however, was specific to the clubs, and in fact one might find the same films playing in the regular cinemas in Paris. At least in terms of these film choices, the clubs stand out not in binary opposition to the more available film culture of Paris (and, indeed, the rest of France), but as overlapping with it, differing in terms of presentation context, or in the frequency that they might highlight a specific performer or director or kind of film.

We can see the preferences of the clubs through a random look at the period from around 1930 to 1940. Just a few days before the surrender to Germany
Figure 2.2 The Marignan cinema, the site of so many ciné-club screenings in the 1930s, as it looks today. Photograph by author.
in June 1940, the Cercle du cinéma, meeting at the Musée de l’homme at the Palais de Chaillot in the sixteenth arrondissement, ran an evening’s retrospective of the work of Bette Davis, showing fragments of La Forêt pétrifiée (The Petrified Forest; 1936), Ville frontière (Bordertown; 1935), and Femmes marquées (Marked Woman; 1937), as well as screening Une certaine femme (That Certain Woman; 1937). Ten years earlier, in December 1930, La Tribune Libre du cinéma ran an evening’s retrospective of the work of director Jean Grémillon, showing entire feature films as well as some clips. Grémillon, of course, had a distinguished career, making films practically until his death in 1959. At the time of the Tribune retrospective, however, he had been a director for only a few years, and so we can see the interest of the clubs in fostering the work of young, promising filmmakers. More typically, however, the clubs showcased the major directors: a screening of Marcel L’Herbier’s films at Ciné-Club de la Femme in 1936, or a Jean Vigo festival at the Cercle du cinéma in 1938, or a Jacques Feyder retrospective presented by the same club in 1940. No director during this period, though, seemed more important to the clubs’ sense of film history and French film culture than René Clair.

In October 1935, the Ciné-Club de la Femme presented an evening of Clair’s Un chapeau de paille d’Italie and Entr’acte (1924), as well as clips from La Proie du vent (1927) and Les Deux timides (1928). In January 1937, the Ciné-Club Mercredi dedicated a session to Clair, showing a silent film and one with sound, Les Deux timides and Fantôme à vendre (The Ghost Goes West, Clair’s first film in English, from 1935). Just two months later, the same club showed two more Clair movies, Le Million (1931) and 14 Juillet (1933). The list of Clair screenings at clubs might go on and on. Clair’s films also showed constantly at French commercial cinemas throughout the period, not fully as retrospectives but often in reissue, while the opening of a new Clair film would be cause for celebration in all of the French film tabloids that catered to average fans rather than those frequenting clubs. Thus the auteurist approach of the clubs served to reinforce the central position of individual filmmakers in French film culture generally, and, as the case of Clair indicates, also supported the period’s standard notions of the patrimony of French cinema.

Clair’s work shows the eclecticism of the clubs, ranging as it does from an avant-gardist tradition (Entr’acte) to a more precise narrative classicism (Fantôme à vendre). These wide interests were a constant of the clubs in the 1930s, with experimental cinema always holding a significant place. In May 1936, for example, the Cercle du cinéma mounted what surely must have been one of the most comprehensive screenings of French avant-garde cinema, with an evening of films by a who’s who of experimental filmmakers: Clair,
Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, and Jean Epstein, for instance. The Cercle also included clips from Abel Gance’s *La Roue* (1923), demonstrating the links between the avant-garde and commercial cinema, and the club did all of this at that standard and very fashionable location, the Marignan cinema.\(^{18}\)

The chic address indicates that the clubs were very much in the center of Parisian culture rather than the margins, and also shows the fully respectable status of avant-garde cinema. Nevertheless, the clubs always stressed the significance of commercial cinema generally, and Hollywood cinema in particular. The same week as the avant-garde retrospective, and at the same address, the Ciné-Club de la Femme screened James Whale’s *L’Homme invisible* (*The Invisible Man*; 1935), while just a short metro ride away at the Salle Poissonnière on the border of the ninth and tenth arrondissements, the Ciné-Club de Paris showed the Gregory La Cava screwball comedy *Mon mari, le patron* (*She Married Her Boss*; 1935).\(^{19}\)

The Paris ciné-clubs all emphasized the importance of silent cinema, and all of them concentrated on the necessity of preserving those motion pictures from before the transition to recorded sound. The popular press, at least, understood the mission of the clubs in just such archival terms, and viewed the clubs as the most formidable defenders of silent cinema. A 1940 article about ciné-clubs in the newspaper *Le Temps* argued that the clubs themselves formed the last outpost for a kind of cinema “ignored by the audiences in our grand movie palaces,” a cinema that counted for much more than the current vogue for mere “recorded theatre.” The article then went on to praise in particular the Cercle du cinéma, which posed as its statement of principles research and conservation of “the classics of the screen,” and to show new prints of the films of Griffith, Stroheim, Wiene, Dreyer, and Chaplin, among others. The newspaper did not mince words about this project, praising the Cercle for “courageously attacking” this problem of a silent cinema overwhelmed by the technology of sound.\(^{20}\)

The Cercle took its mission seriously, and showed a range of silent films, often French but also those from other countries. In less than a month, between the end of December 1938 and the middle of January 1939, the club screened an evening of early silent films by Georges Méliès and Ferdinand Zecca, Wegener’s *Le Golem* (*Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*; 1920), Lang’s *Metropolis*, and Sjöström’s *La Charrette fantôme* (*Körkarlen*; 1921).\(^{21}\) But silent films played throughout the period at most of the clubs, with movies by Chaplin, Murnau, and Feyder in addition to Clair always well represented. Here again, the clubs’ screenings of silent films differed not so much absolutely from the more typical cinemas in Paris, but more in terms of volume
and frequency. Reissues of silent films played in the city at least through the mid-1930s, and one cinema in Paris, as I mentioned earlier—the Boulevardia in the tenth arrondissement—showed silent films exclusively during that same period, while the idiosyncratic Corso-Opéra in the second arrondissement showed them more frequently than sound films.22

The clubs interpreted film history in other ways, and not just as the lineage of great directors or as the necessity for preserving a lost and now mostly ignored art form. Whether that history might be understood as ranging from the beginning of cinema to the present, or as a specific set of current concerns, the clubs often organized screenings around themes or genres or technologies, or alternatives to mainstream cinema as we have seen with the frequent avant-garde festivals. In stressing an educational imperative, in bringing to light linkages between films or eras, the clubs did indeed separate themselves from the other cinemas in Paris.

After the war had begun but before the Occupation, in February 1940, the Cercle du cinéma ran a retrospective of current movies that specifically addressed the crisis, showing a series of English propaganda films by Humphrey Jennings and others, mostly produced by the General Post Office. Just a few weeks later, the club staged an evening of two anti-Nazi films, *Kuhle Wampe* (1932), from Germany, and *Karl Brunner* (1936), a Russian film. Indeed, between 1938 and 1940, the Cercle du cinéma routinely scheduled such thematic events, but usually with more relaxed rather than pressing concerns, and taking a longer view of history: a festival of animation “from Émile Cohl to Walt Disney,” two festivals of “films fantastiques,” a retrospective on the “evolution of French cinema from 1888 to 1940” from Marey to Renoir, and, as well, a session on “Eroticism and the Cinema,” with screenings and analyses of films by Pabst, Murnau, Stiller, Eisenstein, Lang, Chaplin, Renoir, Sternberg, DeMille, and others.23

As one might imagine, this last festival seems to have been a major event in Paris at the time, and fully showed the connection between the clubs and other cultural and educational organizations. French philosopher Jean Carteret presided at the screenings, as did members of the “groupe psychologique de la Sorbonne.” The exact schedule of events remains unclear, but the screenings either were interspersed with, or followed by, broad discussions on the aesthetics, philosophy, and psychology of the erotic in cinema.

An event like this one constituted the fulfillment of de Fouquière’s belief in a Parisian cultural landscape where ciné-clubs might engage with, and even be the equal of, a range of intellectual and artistic activities. This sort of engagement came to mark so many of the clubs, and to differentiate
them from neighborhood cinemas and those on the grand boulevards. At that 1936 screening of _L’Homme invisible_ at the Ciné-Club de la Femme, Germaine Dulac addressed the audience on the topic of “The Cinema in the Service of History.” The link between the film and the presentation is uncertain, but this has the sound of an important speech given by a prominent member of France’s artistic scene, and highlights the pedagogical instinct and the outreach to the Parisian intellectual community of so many of the ciné-clubs’ activities.

The clubs took part in broad aesthetic debates, and then might provoke an even wider discussion of them. In 1927, for example, _La Tribune Libre_ du Cinéma staged an evening of films made from the various color processes available at the time. The event seemed significant enough that France’s leading Communist newspaper, _L’Humanité_, gave it prominent coverage. According to the newspaper, debates followed the screenings, with partisans for and against color film each arguing for their cause. _L’Humanité_ understood the scene at the screening as part of a simmering argument, one that the newspaper had examined before (“The question of the color film, on which we have already given our opinion, is more and more the order of the day”). The newspaper then weighed in on _La Tribune’s_ screening (“In general, horrible pictures”), and then linked the entire event to a recent issue of the film journal _Photo-Ciné_, in which Jean Epstein had explored, at length, the issue of the color film.

_L’Humanité_ typically covered the movies, and with an understandable interest in the politics of cinema. The article about _La Tribune Libre_ and color film was surrounded by an extended appreciation of Russian director Youri Taritch’s proletarian drama _Les Ailes du serf_ (1926) and by an ongoing call for protests against the Hollywood war film _La Grande Parade_ (The Big Parade; 1925), that exemplar of the “odious mercantilism of an international bourgeois cinema.” Clearly the newspaper understood the fluidity between aesthetic issues, such as color cinema, and political ones, and saw itself as broadly supporting the efforts of _La Tribune_, which was hardly a club for Communists (that would be the Amis du Spartacus). The newspaper further understood the events at the club as contributing to a much broader and ongoing discussion that connected _La Tribune Libre_ du Cinéma to a Communist newspaper and also to a film journal like _Photo-Ciné_, and that included a wide range of adherents, among them one of Europe’s most important film theorists and filmmakers, Jean Epstein.

So many of the presentations at the club screenings seem too good to be true to the contemporary film scholar. There was the ubiquitous Dulac, who
spoke at so many club meetings. In 1935 Jacques Feyder presided over a screening of his 1934 French Foreign Legion melodrama, *Le Grand Jeu*, at Le Club 32. When the Cercle du cinéma presented a Jean Vigo retrospective in 1938, the late director’s films were introduced by Jean Painlevé, who himself would continue to make movies until the 1980s and had already made his documentary series about sea urchins, crabs, and seahorses, as well as any number of other short films. Here, then, we can see one of the important differences between the ciné-club and the more typical cinema. Fans understood the latter as a place for seeing movies. Those who attended the clubs, however, knew the former as a site for movies and also for active debate, discussion, and education, and as the place where they might encounter some of France’s leading artists and intellectuals.

The ciné-club also came to be marked as a location for controversial films. In 1936, at the elegant Marignan cinema, the Club cinégraphique showed "le grand film de Gustav Machaty," *Extase* (1933), famous internationally for its frank sexuality and for Hedy Lamarr’s nude swimming scene. But *Extase* had also had a standard run in Paris when it came out, at the fully respectable Théâtre Pigalle in the ninth arrondissement. Controversy itself, then, did not signify a film fit only for the clubs, but films banned in France might only be shown at the clubs. Film historian Yann Darré has claimed that the originating impulse behind the formation of so many of the ciné-clubs was precisely the showing of banned films, films that might now be presented because the clubs were private and not subject to the same laws as typical cinemas.

From an eighty-year remove it becomes difficult to know, exactly, which of the films shown at the clubs may have been banned from other, more typical cinemas. Many of the showings, however interesting, remain fairly conventional, and Darré himself may have been succumbing to the romance of the clubs as spaces for alternative cinemas. By the end of the 1930s, however, the ciné-club as a safe space for banned films became a legislative reality. Jean Zay, the Minister of National Education and Fine Arts (who himself would be assassinated in 1944 by a pro-Vichy French militia) instituted a regulation that put into place the absolute distinction between the clubs and typical cinemas. Now understood as fully private rather than public spaces, the clubs would not be allowed to charge an admission price from anyone who might turn up to watch a movie. Rather, only club members who had paid their dues for the entire year might attend a screening. “Any infringement of these rules,” as Paul Léglise has explained it, resulted in a club being declared a routine, public cinema, and therefore unable to show motion pictures that the state had banned. The club might have screenings in a regular cinema, but the
law of 1939 decreed the fluidity of that screening space from public to private, and determined when and to whom films deemed dangerous, and not fit for general consumption, could be shown.

The Gender of Ciné-Clubs

Even as France legislated this distinguishing characteristic of the ciné-club, there were, as well, nonregulated aspects of the clubs that also helped separate them from other locations for seeing movies. These aspects were perhaps not as immediately apparent as the constant debates and discussions that followed screenings, or the possibility for seeing banned films. From the available information, the club bureaucracies seem to have been much more welcoming of participation by women than the commercial film industry.

Of course, there was the indefatigable clubwoman Germaine Dulac. We know her today primarily for her work as a director, from World War I until the early 1930s, of commercial films that nonetheless incorporated an avant-garde aesthetic (La Souriante Madame Beudet from 1923) and for later and more inscrutable work (La Coquille et le clergymen from 1928). Also during this period, however, she performed tireless work in the formation of the ciné-club movement. Her films often screened at the clubs, and Dulac herself was also a presence there, and not just in Paris but in clubs throughout France.

At that 1929 meeting of the Congrès des ciné-clubs, Dulac announced that she planned a series of presentations at clubs in Grenoble and Agen on the evolution of cinema, using some of her own films as examples as well as those by Dimitri Kirsanoff (Ménilmontant; 1926), Séverin-Mars (Le Coeur magnifique; 1921), Henri Chomette (Cinq minutes de cinéma pur; 1925), and others. By 1932, Dulac had become president of the Section cinématographique du Conseil national des femmes françaises. The Conseil itself, which still exists today, dated from 1901, supporting universal suffrage and organizing around health, education, work, peace, and other topics and activities, including cinema. Under Dulac’s leadership, the Section cinématographique seems to have been linked to the clubs, screening films at least occasionally as well as facilitating the national distribution of scientific and educational films that were a staple of the clubs.

In the still mostly masculine administration of the ciné-clubs, Dulac stood out as extraordinary. At about the same time as her leadership of the Section cinématographique she also served as the president of the Fédération française des Ciné-Clubs. The significance of both of these positions, at least to those associated with a spectrum of leftwing political movements in France, motivated Le Populaire, the newspaper of the country’s Socialist Party, to
run a front-page story about Dulac, referring to her as both “a film master” ("Un maître de l’écran") and as exemplifying “the modern woman” (“la femme moderne”).

The case of Dulac seems somewhat overdetermined. Her fame was so exceptional, at least among the Parisian avant-garde and political left, that her standing in the clubs may not tell us much about the possibilities for other women interested in working in the cinema. Instead, another much more obscure career that intersected with the clubs, as well as with the broader cultural scene in France, indicates some of the gendered dimensions of the ciné-club movement. Lucie Derain made films, earned money as a journalist and novelist, and socialized with movie stars and other filmmakers from the late 1920s until the late 1950s, and she worked tirelessly for ciné-clubs at least throughout the 1930s. Her lengthy career on France’s cultural periphery shows how the clubs might intersect with film production and with journalism, and the ways in which women no less than men could remain active in and important to a range of aesthetic practices.

Derain seems to have been involved in directing at least two short films, and the second, Désordre (1930), screened in October 1930 at the Ursulines cinema in the fifth arrondissement in Paris, along with a Mack Sennett comedy and a William Wyler western. At the same time, and probably to support her filmmaking, Derain had begun writing about cinema for serious film journals: a 1929 appreciation of King Vidor’s La Foule (The Crowd; 1928) in Cinémonde, and, a year later, a defense of the director Robert Florey in Cinéa. She became well enough known as a critic that, when the film studio Sofar organized a 1927 luncheon at the very upscale Ledoyen restaurant in Paris, the journalists covering the event mentioned her presence there, along with that of Jean Renoir, Renoir’s actress wife Catherine Hessling, and others prominent in the French film scene. By 1933, the exhaustive Annuaire général des lettres listed her as one of France’s two hundred or so film critics, a compilation that included only about a dozen other women. Derain’s notoriety may have been enhanced when she was injured in the 1931 car crash that killed the most famous passenger, the actress Janie Marèse, who had just starred in Renoir’s La Chienne.

Throughout the 1930s, Derain acted as a constant advocate for, and participant in, various Parisian ciné-clubs. With Dulac, we see a club career at the highest levels. She oversaw a nationwide organization of clubs, and she visited them in Paris and elsewhere to deliver lessons on film history and aesthetics. With Derain, we get to experience the clubs more from ground level, from the point of view of someone much more involved in the day-to-day activities of
Figure 2.3  A column in Cinémonde, from April 6, 1933, by journalist, filmmaker, and ciné-club activist Lucie Derain. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
organizing screenings and debates, and whose movements from one club to another showed the connections between them. In particular during the mid- to late 1930s, Derain curated showings at the Ciné-Club Mercredi. These included Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur’s *Le Goujat* (*The Scoundrel*; 1935) followed by a debate on the merits of the film; Julien Duvivier’s *La Bandera* (1935) once again followed by debates; a film of “the new school,” Marcel Carné’s *Jenny* (1936) with a discussion afterward with the star, Françoise Rosay; and *Winterset* (1936), along with a *Marche du temps* (*March of Time*) newsreel about the fighting in Abyssinia.42

By 1936, at about the same time as this flurry of activity for the Ciné-Club Mercredi, Derain had become the director of the Ciné-Club de la Femme, which dated from at least the early 1930s. During Derain’s directorship, the club elicited the alarm of a cinema columnist in the newspaper *Le Temps*, who believed that the name itself might exclude, “a priori,” any men from attending the screenings.43 The fear seemed unfounded because, at the time, the Ciné-Club de la Femme had announced a retrospective of the work of Marcel L’Herbier, hardly a filmmaker of simply feminine, or feminist, appeal. Nevertheless, while Derain’s screenings for the Ciné-Club Mercredi seemed in keeping with those of other clubs, with its broad array of national cinemas and types of film, the Ciné-Club de la Femme did at least have some commitment to a more feminist cultural sensibility. Along with the usual Clair retrospectives or showings of a film that seemed to make the rounds of all the clubs, Murnau’s *L’Aurore* (*Sunrise*; 1927), the Ciné-Club de la Femme served as a location for screenings of films that might be thought to appeal to women, often presented by leading female intellectuals and artists, perhaps not at Dulac’s level but significant nonetheless.44

In 1935, for instance, the club showed George Cukor’s *Little Women* (1933), with a presentation by the prominent feminist attorney Yvonne Netter, and then a public discussion about a topic motivated by this film about the nineteenth century, “the young girl of the past.”45 The club also screened Leontine Sagan’s *Jeunes filles en uniform*, presented by the well-known feminist novelist and, in historian Mary Lynn Stewart’s phrase, “fashion chronicler,” Magdeleine Chaumont, followed by a discussion about adolescence.46 Of course, there is no record of the viewers at either screening, but both seem to be programs designed with female audiences in mind, with films about young girls and families, introduced by the intellectual Netter on the one hand and the writer Chaumont on the other, and leading to discussions of presumed feminine interest, adolescents in general and young girls in particular.
If we return for a moment to Dulac, in her club work, and despite her bona
fides as a feminist filmmaker, she appears to have been devoted to an idea
of pure cinema aesthetics, and to presenting all manner of film while never
forgetting the importance of the avant-garde. This was precisely the commit-
ment, and exactly the same practice, of most of the clubs. From the late 1920s
to the beginning of World War II, the clubs sought to explain, preserve, and
expand an aesthetic of cinema that could contain both Hollywood commer-
cial movies and obscure experimental ones, and the clubs’ primary politi-
cal commitment, endorsed by the state, was to an absolute openness in the
kinds of films they might show. Derain, with the Ciné-Club de la Femme,
both endorsed this general club policy and also made a commitment to a
more specific feminist agenda. From examining club programs from eighty
years ago, and without knowing the content of the debates and discussions
at the clubs, we can have no way of knowing whether other groups, besides
the Amis de Spartacus and just a few others, had any interest in ongoing po-
litical or cultural issues. Some of the clubs met in less well-heeled neighbor-
hoods, which might tell us something about the clientele and their political
inclinations, but so many of them, including the Ciné-Club de la Femme,
gathered in the same fashionable screening space, at the Marignan cinema
on the Champs-Élysées, that location might not tell us much at all. But the
case of Derain and the Ciné-Club de la Femme indicates not only the over-
lap between the clubs in terms of interests and practices, but also the pos-
sibility for difference.

War

Evidence about the clubs from the end of the decade and the beginning of
World War II remains scant, so it becomes difficult to determine whether
screenings became more politicized around current events. Film periodicals
often acknowledged the emergency of the war, with Pour Vous, for example,
running a weekly “journal de guerre” and publishing frequent articles about
the role of cinema during the fighting. But the tabloid’s film club, Des Amis
de Pour Vous, from the details that still exist, held fairly innocuous screenings
rather than anything associated with the national crisis: premieres of major
French films (L’Enfer des anges; 1941) and reprises of popular movies (Jacques
Feyder’s Le Grand Jeu and the Evelyn Brent vehicle The Pagan Lady [1931]).47
Then, just after the French surrender in June 1940, the traditional ciné-clubs
disappeared altogether, at least in the highly bureaucratized, government-
approved system that had become such a significant aspect of French film
culture. In their place, the Nazi occupying authority established two Parisian
ciné-clubs, each one linked to a German film tabloid published in France for French film fans, *Vedettes* and *Ciné-Mondial*.

We have at least some evidence about the latter. *Ciné-Mondial* often ran notices about its club, which started toward the end of 1943 and met in a Parisian concert hall, the Salle Pleyel in the eighth arrondissement, and also nearby in the Salle des Agriculteurs in the ninth, both areas central to the concentration of Nazi power in the most prosperous parts of the city, those with the fewest Jews and immigrants. The club itself served different purposes from those before the war, and movies might not always be shown. Instead, the club was a place for film stars and other celebrities to gather and entertain an audience. At a meeting in early January 1944, the movie stars Bernard Blier and Charles Moulin were present, and so too were Jean d’Yd and Piéral, two of the supporting actors from the Jean Delannoy/Jean Cocteau film *L’Éternal Retour* (1943), which had been produced during the Occupation and released in Paris just a few months before. At club sessions a couple of months later, Blier returned, accompanied by Louis Jourdan and the performers Monique Rolland, Monique Helbling, and François Perier, the latter telling stories about the early years of his acting career. The following week, Sessue Hayakawa appeared along with other actors and musicians. To the extent that evidence exists, the stars appearing at the club always seem to have been French rather than German, or, as in the case of Hayakawa, foreign performers who had had extraordinary success in France.

Thus the club relentlessly stressed entertainment, with stars telling funny stories about their careers or musicians performing familiar numbers, or using such films as *L’Éternel Retour* to celebrate the possibilities of cinema-as-usual during the Occupation. There would be some very occasional debate and discussion, as when the journalist Jeander lectured at the club in March 1944 on the future of French cinema. The week after Jeander’s talk, however, all of the club’s functions went back to normal, as guests would be amused by the movie stars Georges Marchal, Yvette Lebon, Alexandre Rignault, and Armand Mestral. The Germans believed that this *Ciné-Mondial* club, at least, played such an important role in the Nazi cultural project in Paris that it remained open even as the city was on the verge of being liberated, and as power shortages closed down almost everything there. At the end of May 1944, *Ciné-Mondial* ran an advertisement stressing that its club would continue to meet, “despite the crisis in electricity.” While the cinéma-clubs of the 1930s usually were regulated by the state, during the Occupation the Nazi-sponsored clubs served the state directly, by asserting the benign nature of German control and the continuity of French popular culture. The Occupation-era club preserved
just the traces of the prewar ciné-club, merely the idea of a place for a different sort of interaction with the cinema.

Well before the Occupation and prior to the beginning of the war, a late 1930s article in Le Temps referred to habitués of the clubs as the “last amateurs of pure cinema.”\textsuperscript{55} Le Temps said this both admiringly and somewhat dismissively. The term might apply to de Fouquières, our flâneur at the beginning of this section, but hardly to Dulac, Vigo, or others who made clubs into such a vital part of their professional lives. Here Le Temps proposes the marginality of the ciné-clubs, demonstrated perhaps by the significant participation of women like Derain as well as Dulac, given the generally masculinist culture of French cinephilia at the time. Nevertheless, the ciné-clubs seem also to have been central to the broad cultural contours of Paris during the period. This was certainly true during the Occupation, when the Nazis used their carefully regulated clubs as one of the signs of the return of “normal” Parisian cultural activity. But it also was the case in the 1930s when, just as we saw with de Fouquières, the clubs would be among the desirable destinations of any well-brought-up Parisian’s stroll through the city.