



Dorothy Arzner

Lived:

January 3, 1897 - October 1, 1979

Worked as:

director, editor, film cutter, screenwriter

Worked In:

United States

by Allyson Nadia Field

With a film career spanning from 1919 to 1943, fifteen years of which were spent as a director, Dorothy Arzner remains the most prolific woman studio director in the history of American cinema. She has received significant scholarly attention from feminist film critics and queer theorists who have been interested in this pioneer filmmaker both for her body of work and for the critical possibilities suggested by feminist approaches to reading that work as a whole.

Arzner grew up in Hollywood, California, where her father owned a restaurant next to a theatre that was popular with actors. Her work in the film industry began when she started typing scripts for the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, which would later become Paramount. After six months, she became a cutter and editor at Realart Studio, a subsidiary of Paramount. As chief editor, she cut and edited fifty-two films before being recalled to Paramount to cut and edit the Valentino vehicle *Blood and Sand* (1922), her first “big picture” and the first film for which she had undertaken some of the filming (Peary and Kay, 21). At Paramount, Arzner worked on several pictures with director James Cruze, often mentioned as her mentor, then left to write scripts for independent companies, among them Dorothy Davenport Reid Productions, for which she adapted an [Adela Rogers St. Johns](#) story on a scandalous trial as the important *The Red Kimona* (1925). Returning to work at Paramount, Arzner wrote the shooting script for *Old Ironsides* (1926), which she also cut and edited. Soon, however, she received an offer to write and direct a feature film for Columbia, and stayed with Paramount only after being offered the opportunity to direct a more prestigious “A” picture. After four successful silent feature films for Paramount—*Fashions for Women* (1927); *Ten Modern Commandments* (1927); *Get Your Man* (1927); and *Manhattan Cocktail* (1928)—Arzner was entrusted with the studio’s first sound film starring Clara Bow, *The Wild Party* (1929), the silent version of which she had edited earlier.

Reflecting on her work for Paramount, and on women in the workplace, she later recalled in an interview by Gerald Peary and Karyn Kay: “No one gave me trouble because I was a woman. Men were more helpful than women” (23). At Paramount, she was given her choice of crew, and she maintained that she had little interference with her pictures. She recalls in that same interview that, “I was not dependent on the movies for my living, so I was always ready to give the picture over to some other director if I couldn’t make it the way I saw it. Right or wrong, I believe this was why I sustained so long—twenty years” (25). For Paramount, she directed eleven features including *Sarah and Son* (1930) and *Anybody’s Woman* (1930), both with Ruth Chatterton, and *Honor Among Lovers* (1931) with Claudette Colbert. She left Paramount in 1932 to work on a freelance basis, directing films for RKO, United Artists, Columbia, and MGM. During this time, she made *Christopher Strong* (1933) with Katherine Hepburn and *Craig’s Wife* (1936) with Rosalind Russell. After leaving Hollywood in 1943, a decision she made freely though arguably catalyzed by conflicts with Louis B. Mayer, she made training films for the Women’s Army Corps; produced a radio program, *You Were Meant to Be a Star*; worked in theatre production; and taught filmmaking at the Pasadena Playhouse and later at UCLA. She also made a series of fifty commercials for Pepsi at the behest of Joan Crawford.

The question that feminist scholars first faced, the relationship of gender to filmmaking, found an apt subject in Dorothy Arzner, whose films inspired the earliest feminist film criticism, as in Claire Johnston’s seminal 1973 essay. Arzner’s oeuvre continues to beguile and fascinate critics, and enough of her silent as well as sound era films are extant and thus available for further analysis. Also, situating her industry work within the silent as well as the sound eras as a career professional helps us to understand not only her personal strategy for surviving, but also attitudes towards gay and lesbian creative personnel working in Hollywood in the 1920s to 1940s. First, Arzner as product of the studio system received consummate professional training in many phases of film production, from editing and scenario writing to directing. For her work on *Blood and Sand*, she proved herself to be a savvy, cost-conscious problem solver by turning to stock footage to augment the bullfighting scene. It was her indispensability to Paramount that enabled her to leverage an offer to direct at Columbia Pictures into a promotion, leading to her directorial debut with the silent feature *Fashions for Women* (1927). Judith Mayne notes that since Arzner was constantly referred to as the sole woman director working in Hollywood, her first goal was to prove that she was competent. In the end, says Mayne, “competence was far more important than brilliance or originality in making her career possible” (Mayne 1994, 48). Mayne also emphasizes the importance of female relationships in her career; in addition to director James Cruze, Arzner was strongly influenced by producer-actress [Alla Nazimova](#) and editor Nan Heron. Thus, Arzner can be seen as a Hollywood film director whose gender explained her career trajectory in a positive way.

The question of gender and narrative emphases is, however, a different question that goes beyond Dorothy Arzner’s career trajectory to the question of feminist theory. In the surge of academic interest in Arzner in the 1970s, she was cast as an “overtly proto-feminist director,” a move more difficult to prove, Theresa Geller concludes, than the assertion that Arzner was a female director concerned with the female relationships on screen. It may not be finally possible to locate a

particular female sensibility in her directorial output, but it is possible to note the strong emphasis on women's relationships with one another in Arzner's extant sound films: *The Wild Party* (1929), *Working Girls* (1931), and *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940). Finally, Arzner has been embraced by both feminist film critics and queer film theorists who find in her unconventional characterizations a subversiveness that this theory connects with her lesbianism. We know that she maintained a long-term relationship with Marion Morgan, a dancer who headed her own dance troupe and who worked as a choreographer on several of Arzner's films. Mayne notes that although Dorothy Arzner kept her life private, in her dress and demeanor she "flaunted a style that signified 'lesbian'" (1994, 2). It is such questions that have kept Arzner research vital, and the insights we have to gain from studying her career will go a long way toward helping us to develop a fuller explanation as to why and how this director alone made the transition between work in the silent and sound industry when so many other women did not.

See also: [Dorothy Davenport Reid](#), [Alla Nazimova](#), [Adela Rogers St. Johns](#)

Bibliography

Geller, Theresa L. "Dorothy Arzner." *Senses of Cinema* 26 (2003): n.p.

<http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/arzner/>

Johnston, Claire. "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema." In *Notes on Women's Cinema*. Ed. Claire Johnston. London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973. 24-31.

Kay, Karyn and Gerald Peary, eds. *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Dutton, 1977.

Mayne, Judith. *Directed by Dorothy Arzner*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

Peary, Gerald and Kay, Karyn. "Interview with Dorothy Arzner." In *The Work of Dorothy Arzner: Towards a Feminist Cinema*. Ed. Claire Johnston. London; British Film Institute, 1975. 19-29.

Archival Paper Collections:

Dorothy Arzner Papers. [University of California, Los Angeles, Performing Performing Arts Special Collections](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Dorothy Arzner as Screenwriter

The Red Kimona. Dir.: Walter Lang, st.: Adela Rogers St. Johns, adp.: Dorothy Arzner (Mrs. Wallace Reid Productions US 1925) cas.: Priscilla Bonner, Mary Carr, Tyrone Power, si, b&w, 35mm, 7 reels. Archive: [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).

When Husbands Flirt. Dir.: William A. Wellman, sc.: Dorothy Arzner, Paul Gangelin (Columbia Pictures Corp. US 1925) cas.: Dorothy Revier, Forrest Stanley, si, b&w, 6 reels; 5,625 ft. Archive: [Svenska Filminstitutet \[SES\]](#).

Old Ironsides. Dir.: James Cruze, sc.: Harry Carr, Dorothy Arzner, Walter Woods. (Paramount Famous Lasky Corp. US 1926) cas.: Esther Ralston, Wallace Berry, si, b&w, 35mm, 10,089 ft. Archive: [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique \[BEB\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [George Eastman Museum \[USR\]](#), [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#), [Gosfilmofond of Russia \[RUR\]](#).

2. Dorothy Arzner as Director

Get Your Man. Dir. Dorothy Arzner (Paramount Famous Lasky Corp. US 1927) cas.: Clara Bow, Charles B. “Buddy” Rogers, si, b&w, 35mm., 6 reels, 5,718 ft. Archive: [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#).

The Wild Party. Dir. Dorothy Arzner (Paramount Famous Lasky Corp. US 1929) cas.: Clara Bow, Shirley O’Hara, si&sd, b&w, 7 reels; 6,036 ft [si]; 7,167 [sd] ft. Archive: [UCLA Film and Television Archive \[USL\]](#).

3. Dorothy Arzner as Editor

Blood and Sand. Dir.: Fred Niblo, sc.: June Mathis, ed.: Dorothy Arzner (Famous Players-Lasky Corp. US 1922) cas.: Lila Lee, Rudolph Valentino, si, b&w, 8,500 ft. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée \[FRB\]](#), [Museum of Modern Art \[USM\]](#), [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique \[BEB\]](#).

The Covered Wagon. Dir.: James Cruz, sc.: Emerson Hough, Jack Cunningham, ed.: Dorothy Arzner (Famous Players-Lasky Corp. & Paramount Pictures US 1923) cas.: Lois Wilson, Alan Hale, si, b&w, 9,200 ft. Archive: [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique \[BEB\]](#), [Library of Congress \[USW\]](#), [Cinematca do Museu de Arte Moderna \[BRR\]](#).

B. Filmography: Non-Extant Film Titles:

1. Dorothy Arzner as Director

Fashions for Women, 1927; *Ten Modern Commandments*, 1927; *Manhattan Cocktail*, 1928.

2. Dorothy Arzner as Screenwriter

The Breed of the Border, 1924; *The No-Gun Man*, 1924.

3. Dorothy Arzner as Editor

Inez from Hollywood, 1924.

C. DVD Sources:

The Red Kimona. DVD (Kino International 2008)

Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers. DVD/Blu-ray. (Kino Lorber US 2018) - contains *The Red Kimona* (1925)

D. Streamed Media:

Blood and Sand (1922) (with Dutch intertitles)

[*Blood and Sand*](#) (1922) is streaming online via Kanopy

[*The Red Kimona*](#) (1925) is streaming online via Kanopy

Credit Report

While neither Paul Spehr or AFI list Arzner as editor on *Too Much Johnson* (1919) or *The Six Best Cellars* (1920), in *The Parade's Gone By*, Kevin Brownlow quoted Arzner as saying she started as a cutter under Nan Heron on both films.

Citation

Field, Allyson Nadia. "Dorothy Arzner." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2013. <<https://wfpp-test.cul.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-dorothy-arzner/>>