

LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



La Belle et la Bête (1946)

Directed by Jean Cocteau



Jean Cocteau (French, 1889–1963)

Jean Maurice Eugène Clément Cocteau (French, born July 5, 1889–died October 11, 1963) was among the best, most multi-talented artists of the 20th century. He was a novelist, poet, designer, dramatist, filmmaker, artist, and playwright. He started writing at the age of 10, and, by age 16, was already an established poet. Most of his works were influenced by psychoanalysis, Surrealism, the Catholic religion, Cubism, and sometimes opium. During his time, Cocteau was a promoter of unconventional fashion and styles. He was connected to well-known artists, including writer Marcel Proust, Pablo Picasso, composer Eric Satie, and director Serge Diaghilev.

At the age of 19, Cocteau published *La Lampe d'Aladin*, his premier compendium of poems. Although he embraced Catholicism at first, he shunned religion entirely toward the end of

his life. Following the First World War, he was an ambulance chauffeur in Belgium, where the novel *Thomas l'imposteur* originated. Some of his very significant works of art were created during the years when he had become addicted to opium. These include *Les Enfants terribles* (1929) and *Orphée* (1926). Many other artists believed his most important play to be *La Machine Infernale* (1934). In 1930, he produced his first film, *Le Sang d'un poète*. In the 1940s, he reverted back to creating films, initially as a screenwriter, and, finally, as a director. This allowed him to produce such acclaimed films as *Orphée* (1949), *La Belle et la Bête* (1945), and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1960).

Throughout his filmmaking career, Cocteau created around 12 films, each using heavily surrealistic and symbolic imagery. When it comes to music, Cocteau had a close connection with a group of composers called Les Six. His other collaborations included ballet scenarios for Darius Milhaud and Erik Satie, *Le Boeuf sur le toit* (1920), as well as librettos for Milhaud and Igor Stravinsky. As an artist, he published several books with vivid illustrations, and worked as a designer

Born in Yvelines, France, Attended the Lycée Condorcet in Paris, France, however, left school shortly afterwards to pursue a writing career. Published his first collection of poems, *La Lampe d'Aladin* (*Aladdin's Lamp*) Met the famous Russian ballet-impresario Sergei Diaghilev, who ran the Ballets Russes

Founded the magazine *Le Coq* together with Raymond Radiguet Published his most famous novel, *Les Enfants Terribles* (*Children of the Game*)

1930 Made the first film, *Le Sang d'un poète*

Was awarded a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour

Won the Grand Prix at the Venice Film Festival

Became a member of the Académie française and The Royal Academy of Belgium

Died in 1963 in Milly-la-Forêt, France

Cocteau, Jean [Richard Misek](#)



b. July 5, 1889, Maisons-Laffitte, Île-de-France, France

d. October 11, 1963, Milly, Île-de-France, France

Jean Cocteau: Filmmaker In his own eyes, Jean Cocteau was not a filmmaker. Of course, he was a filmmaker as well as a dramatist, novelist, poet, painter, decorator, boxing promoter, essayist, librettist, journalist, and full-time celebrity. His three great films of the fantastic – *Le Sang d'un poète*, *La Belle et la Bête* and *Orphée* – remain central to his visual legacy, yet Cocteau always insisted that in the field of film he was an amateur.

Like many gifted artists whose talent falls short of genius, Cocteau did not feel drawn to one art form above all others. Instead he utilised all the media available to him to create a complex personal mythology which mixed imagery and text, poetry and prose, fact and fiction, realism and fantasy, history and modernity. This was further elaborated by numerous autobiographical writings and frequent interviews. Francis Steegmuller, Cocteau's most perceptive biographer, calls the result of this super-abundance of information that he provided about himself an "invisibility-by-autobiography" (1). In the forty years since his death, interest in Cocteau's life (especially in France) has burgeoned into a small industry. Invisibility-by-autobiography has been supplemented by invisibility-by-biography.

Steegmuller's characterisation of Cocteau's life can also be adapted to refer to his art. Cocteau interweaved all the different strands of his work with such thoroughness, that it is impossible to explore any single strand in isolation. Yet without a process of choice, the chaos of information available about his life and work can be overwhelming. So how to create an account of Cocteau that is both coherent and accurate? In my view, the only satisfactory approach would be through hypertext. What if his life and work were constructed as a hypertextual document in which it would be possible to jump every which way across media, as well as through time to sources and referents? Conflicting information could be presented in parallel, providing a constant source of alternative and contingent truths. Such a document could perhaps provide a new way of seeing Cocteau and his work as a totality.

My first step in setting up such a narrative is to provide a linear and chronological account of the salient details of Cocteau's life and work. This I do below, with an emphasis on his work in film.

Jean Cocteau was born in 1889 of moderately artistic, bourgeois parents. Accounts of his first forty years suggest only a passing interest in film; it was theatre, not film, which dominated his upbringing. Cocteau often talked about watching his mother prepare herself for evenings at the theatre when he was a child. Through her, he developed the "fever of crimson and gold" that would mould his artistic life .

Cocteau's artistic debut came in 1908 with a public reading of his poetry, paid for and organised by the actor Edouard de Max. Cocteau became a frequenter of Parisian literary salons and cultivated a *fin de siècle* dandyism, which, despite subsequent adjustments to his persona, he never entirely lost. In 1909, he charmed his way into the extended family of Serge de Diaghilev, impresario of the Paris-based Russian Ballet. Through the Ballet Russe, Cocteau came to know many of the leading artistic figures of the time including Proust, Gide and Stravinsky (3). In the years that followed, he published two volumes of verse which he later dismissed as juvenilia, wrote the libretto for one of Diaghilev's less successful ballets, and established a short-lived poetry magazine. Despite his boundless creative energy, for several years he remained an artistic social climber, most appreciated for his youth and wit.

Cocteau was exempted from military duty during World War I. Though he worked for a time in the ambulance service with friends from the Ballet Russe, for him “the greatest battle of the war” (to use his own ill-judged phrase) was the production of *Parade* in 1917. *Parade* was an avant-garde ballet conceived by Cocteau, with backdrops and costumes by Picasso, music by Satie, and a programme note by Guillaume Apollinaire, which included the first documented use of the word *surréaliste*. Ridiculed by the press, the ballet was quickly withdrawn, though not before it had made Cocteau famous.

Parade's controversial reception also gave Cocteau a degree of kudos within the Parisian avant-garde. He became associated with the ‘Group of Six’ composers (Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and Germaine Tailleferre). In 1920 he composed a “Spectacle-Concert”, *Le Boeuf sur le toit*, to music by Milhaud. He also published four issues of a “merrily anti-Dada” magazine entitled *Le Coq*, though that didn't prevent him from making occasional appearances at Dada parties. In the same year, he entered the most intense personal relationship of his life – with the 17 year-old Raymond Radiguet, soon-to-be author of the celebrated novel *Le Diable au corps*. Spurred on by Radiguet's example, Cocteau now entered one of his most productive periods of creation. In 1922 alone, he wrote a series of poems, an adaptation of *Antigone*, and two short novels.

Radiguet died of typhoid in 1923, at the age of 20. The effect on Cocteau was seismic. Within weeks he had fallen into opium addiction. In his book, *Jean Cocteau and his Films of Orphic Identity*, Arthur B. Evans suggests that this addiction came to play a central role in his poetry:

[I]t could be reasonably argued that Cocteau's entire poetic philosophy, his life-style, and his very approach to his art were radically and permanently altered during his years of opium addiction from 1924 to 1929. It was during this time, and that immediately following, that the author came to find his personalized mythology of mirrors, angels, truthful lies, invisibility, and inevitably, his preoccupation with the literal and figurative aspects of death.

For Cocteau, the poet was a messenger, separated from common humanity by the gift of being able to cross into other worlds and bring back news of what he found there. Following on from the loss of Radiguet, death and rebirth became Cocteau's key metaphors for the journey between worlds that the poet undertakes. And, as Evans suggests, it was the ‘transporting’ medium of opium that came to be his key means of making this journey. Stravinsky put it more simply when he said that for Cocteau “the chief purpose of the drug-taking came to be book-making”.

Between 1924 and 1929 Cocteau wrote the stage play *Orphée*, his great poem *L'Ange Heurtebise*, a libretto for Stravinsky's oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, the autobiographical novella *Le Livre blanc* (published anonymously, apparently out of fear of offending his mother with its homosexual subject matter), the stage monologue *La Voix humaine*, and – written in three weeks while undergoing drug rehabilitation at a sanatorium – his most famous novel, *Les Enfants terribles*. It was in these works that the key elements of Cocteau's world, the elements that he would draw on for the next thirty years, were finally put in place.

These elements may be briefly summarised in the following terms:

Mythology. Cocteau had always been obsessed with classical mythology, as evident from his earliest poems. In particular, throughout his life Cocteau kept returning to the figures of Oedipus and Orpheus. The more time passed, the more he mixed classical mythology with his own personal mythology: Oedipus and Orpheus were transformed into modern figures, joined by

Dargelos the death-bringing schoolboy, the good angel Heurtebise, and numerous other characters loosely based on figures from Cocteau's life.

Melodrama. Cocteau was brought up on late 19th century French melodrama. Suppressed during the years he spent around the Ballet Russe, his taste for melodrama re-emerged in the aftermath of Radiguet's death, most notably in *Les Enfants terribles* (1929). From here on, Cocteau's obsession with death filtered through into almost all his works. Death in Cocteau's works is usually theatrical – suicides and poisonings are especially common – but it is also immediate, ever-present and frighteningly real.

The Fantastic. In Europe, throughout the 19th century and in much of 20th century, fantasy did not carry the same association with pulp fiction and popular entertainment that it did in the United States. Cocteau's use of the fantastic bore little relation to that of Poe and Lovecraft. Rather, it referenced the non-narrative tradition of poetic fantasy established by Goethe, Coleridge and Baudelaire. The Romantic poets were the messengers from the beyond that Cocteau aspired to be, and their use of fantasy was the inevitable result of their artistic journeys. At the same time, Cocteau's frequent use of camera tricks and *trompe l'œil* follows directly in the cinematic tradition established by Méliès in the last years of the 19th century.

In 1929, at the age of 40, Cocteau made his first film. The Vicomte de Noailles, a frequenter of avant-garde salons, asked Cocteau and composer George Auric if they would be interested in collaborating on an animation. Cocteau suggested they make a live-action piece instead. The news that he was making a film must, at the time, have seemed like further evidence of Cocteau's *dilettantism* (10). In fact, the result was an avant-garde landmark.



Le Sang d'un poète (*Blood of a Poet*) is divided into episodes, some connected, some discrete. Perhaps the most famous of these features the eponymous poet moving along a corridor in a hotel, looking through the keyholes of bedroom doors. Through these keyholes, he spies a range

of *tableaux vivants*. These include a bedroom in which a child annoys a governess by crawling up a wall, a Mexican firing squad in which the victim falls to the ground and then bounces back to life, and a dark space in which a couple write observations about each other while they embrace. The work is strongly indebted to (though in no way derivative of) *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). Its distinct similarity to Buñuel and Dali's film led mainstream commentators to label it as 'surrealistic'. This was of particular annoyance to André Breton, who was now running the Surrealists as if they were Communist cell. Cocteau himself pretended also to take offence at being labelled a Surrealist, though he probably quite enjoyed Breton's irritation. *Le Sang d'un poète* caused mild controversy, though this was as nothing compared to the controversy that was soon to be caused by Buñuel's *L'Age d'or*, the second and final film to benefit from the Vicomte de Noaille's artistic philanthropy.

Le Sang d'un poète is both a recapitulation and a new beginning. Viewed in the context of Cocteau's previous work, it can be seen as an anthology of his favourite images and themes. These include: mirrors (narcissism), eyes (voyeurism), statues (classicism), doors (the borders between different worlds) and blood (the sufferings of the artist). It also contains numerous elements of autobiography and references to previous works, both overt (for example, the snowball fight from *Les Enfants terribles*) and coded (for example, the magical 'transportation' of the poet into parallel worlds). Viewed in the context of Cocteau's subsequent career, it can be seen as a sketchbook for future films. Many of the techniques that would later become Cocteau's trademarks were first tried out in *Le Sang d'un poète*. These include the use of slow and reverse motion, voice-over narration, and the film's most famous trick of building the walls of certain sets on the studio floor. By filming them from above and getting his actors to lie on the ground, Cocteau creates the impression that the walls in his fantasy world emanate a magnetic pull. This last is a startling effect, but Cocteau's liking for it gets the better of him, and he uses it too often. In the end, it is difficult not to agree with Cocteau's own judgement of the film as a theme "clumsily played with one finger" which he would later orchestrate in *Orphée* (11). However, despite the film's clumsiness, the child-like delight that Cocteau takes in the possibilities of the medium gives *Le Sang d'un poète* an energy and playfulness that at the time only Buñuel and Dali surpassed.

Cocteau did not direct another film for the next sixteen years. By way of explanation, he later wrote:

The fact that I let twenty years [a typically casual]exaggeration] elapse between that film, my first, and the others, shows that I regarded it as something rather like a drawing or a poem – a drawing or a poem so expensive that I couldn't contemplate making more than one. (12)



Cocteau's implication that it did not occur to him to make another film is inadequate. Was he scared off by the controversy that his film generated? Did he consider another project but find himself unable to secure funding? Did he feel that he'd used up all his cinematic invention? Or was he still not that interested in film? In the absence of any clear evidence, one can only conjecture.

Le Sang d'un poète was Cocteau's last 'controversial' work. As the diplomatic climate darkened in the 1930s and the avant-garde became ever more politicised, Cocteau moved inexorably towards the French literary establishment. He became a prolific columnist and wrote a number of classical stage melodramas including *La Machine infernale*, *L'Aigle à deux têtes* and the immensely successful *Les Parents terribles*. By the end of the decade, Cocteau the avant-garde provocateur had become Cocteau the celebrity playwright.

His eventual return to film in the 1940s was as adventitious as his first experience of directing. However, this time it proved to be longer lasting. A number of explanations can be offered for this rekindled interest in filmmaking.

Cocteau's own explanation for his return to film emphasises the opportunity that cinema offered him for exploring his favourite themes in new ways. On the subject of *La Belle et la Bête*, he wrote:

Je voulais le dessiner, le peindre, le porter à la scène. En fin de compte, le cinématographe m'apparut comme la seule machine capable de donner corps à mon rêve.

As the ultimate synaesthetic medium, cinema allowed Cocteau to combine his diverse artistic instincts and incorporate literature, melodrama, drawing, design and stagecraft together into a new context. However, Cocteau's evocation of an artistic imperative driving him towards film conceals other, more pragmatic, motivations. His companion at the time, Jean Marais, had achieved great success on the stage in *Les Parents terribles* and was desperate to become a film star. Remaining close to Marais would have to involve a closer involvement in film. Quite apart from the influence of Marais, Cocteau himself was also hungry for attention. Film's steadily increasing popularity throughout the 1930s had turned it into a medium that no serious self-

publicist could afford to ignore. He also obviously greatly enjoyed the filmmaking process. This can be seen time and again in his writings on film, for example:

When I have manual work to do, I like to think that I take part in earthly things, and I put all my strength into it like a drowning man clinging to a wreck. This is why I took up filmmaking, where every minute is occupied by work which shields me from the void where I get lost.

The rôle of film director allowed Cocteau to develop his talent for collaboration, to indulge his social instincts and to become a patriarchal figure for an ersatz family of (largely male) artists.

In order to become a professional director, Cocteau needed to learn his craft. He began in 1943 by writing the dialogue for a B-movie fantasy entitled *Le Baron fantôme*. He graduated in the same year to a more personal project, an adaptation of his own play *L'Éternel retour*. The film, a modern-day reworking of the Tristan and Isolde story, provided Marais with his first starring role in a film. Though Cocteau did not direct, his influence at all stages of the production is clearly visible in both the film itself and in its list of credits. *L'Éternel retour* was a huge escapist success with its wartime French audience, and established Marais as one of the leading stars of 1940s French cinema. In 1945, Cocteau was commissioned to write the dialogue for Robert Bresson's *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*. Finally, in 1946, at the age of 57, Cocteau directed his first narrative feature – *La Belle et la Bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*).



La Belle et la Bête is based on the famous children's story by Madame Leprince de Beaumont. In it, Cocteau reaches a new level of artistic fusion, combining mythical narrative, visual poetry, cinematic trickery and even his own child-like writing in the credit sequence. The episodic, self-consciously experimental style of *Le Sang d'un poète* is left far behind. What Cocteau provides instead is a simple adaptation, strikingly visualised. Cocteau's claim that it was *La Belle et la Bête* that forced him to return to film may not be wholly convincing, but it does give a sense of his close affinity with de Beaumont's writing. In particular, her visual vocabulary – that of mirrors, doors, horses and jewellery – is extremely similar to Cocteau's own. Accordingly, Cocteau seamlessly integrates her imagery into his cinematic world. In turn, Cocteau's camera and editing tricks and his heightened visual imagination are seamlessly integrated into De Beaumont's narrative. For example, when Belle first walks through the main hall of Bête's castle, the film cuts to close-ups of candelabras lighting themselves as she walks past. Cocteau's use of

reverse motion serves the contextual purpose of emphasising the magical atmosphere of Bête's castle.

At the same time, the film's perfect fusion of story and telling belies the self-doubt that Cocteau felt when he was making it. From the evidence of the diary he kept during the filming of *La Belle et la Bête*, Cocteau seems to have believed that he was making an avant-garde work. Many of his artistic choices seem to have been made as an explicit response to conventional visual ideology. For example:

In a spirit of instinctive contradiction I am avoiding all camera movement, which is so much in the fashion that the experts think it indispensable.

So too, playing the role of frustrated genius, Cocteau frequently complains in his diary about how the logistics of the production, and even members of his crew, are preventing him from achieving his vision. About his cinematographer, Henri Alekan, he writes, "His mania for plotting his shots yet at the same time making them appear diffuse, revolts me. It's all too 'artistic'. And not within a mile of that documentary style that I wanted from him". But elsewhere in the diary he writes, "I suppose it's because I'm trying to keep the camera fixed and the shots simple, that makes Bérard say my angles are flat... [I]t certainly would be better if Alekan had an assistant so that he himself were free to choose the angles, and not have to do all the lighting and actual shooting himself" In one breath he criticises his crew, in another he reveals how creatively dependent he is on them. He elevates static camera set-ups to the level of ideology and then allows them to become a source of insecurity. Throughout his diary, Cocteau unwittingly affirms that he is indeed an amateur filmmaker.

Cocteau was no Orson Welles. His avant-garde temperament fuelled his desire to rewrite the rules of film. But unlike his great contemporary, also a self-confessed amateur in the field of film, Cocteau did not have a strong enough vision to counter the aesthetic conventional wisdom of the time. Faced with the technical and logistical pressures of shooting a full-length film, he often found himself unsure of what to do with the camera. So he fell back on his crew and on the conventional film language of the time: eye-level camera, strict continuity editing and of course the 180° Rule. A disparity between his unconventional subject matter and his adherence to classical film language can be seen to varying degrees in all his films. Cocteau always claimed that to work, fantasy needed to be rooted in reality, be it that of Belle's sisters hanging up their washing or angels of death riding around on motorbikes. Analogously, one might suggest that Cocteau's hallucinatory stories were always rooted in stylistic conformity.



This stylistic conformity can be seen even more clearly in Cocteau's two subsequent films, both made in 1948 and based around his own plays. The first, *L'Aigle à deux têtes* (*The Eagle Has Two Heads*), traces the developing love affair between a queen and an assassin sent to kill her. The original play was set almost entirely in a single location. In the film, Cocteau opens the action out, including a number of exterior sequences. But this does nothing to lessen the film's theatricality. In addition, without the fantasy of Cocteau's two previous films, the result is no more than a well made but rather dull film version of an old-fashioned melodrama.

Cocteau went straight on to direct *Les Parents terribles*, with Jean Marais reprising the role that had made him famous. Learning from the failings of *L'Aigle à deux têtes*, Cocteau chose an alternative strategy for transcribing his play into film. He set it in the same two interior locations as the stage play and restricted himself almost entirely to close-ups and medium close-ups. The claustrophobic locations and the unrelenting gaze of the camera create a disconcerting intimacy with the characters and reinforce the hermetic, incestuous atmosphere of the film's dysfunctional family unit. It is easy to see why Cocteau regarded *Les Parents terribles* as his greatest directorial success – it is a beautifully crafted fusion of form and content. At the same time, like Cocteau's previous two films, it never strays beyond the stylistic conventions of the time and its melodramatic element, like that of *Les Enfants terribles*, has not aged well.

Les Enfants terribles was itself filmed in 1950 by Jean-Pierre Melville, in close collaboration with Cocteau. Melville had been making films since he was a child, and brought with him an instinctive understanding of film form. In contrast to Cocteau's modest camera movements, Melville utilised the full gamut of camera techniques at his disposal. He used long, elaborate dolly shots as well as handheld shots, long-lens close-ups and ultra-wide angle master shots. In his editing, he was not afraid to use ellipsis or to cross the line. And he finished the film with a crane shot so breathtakingly operatic that it immediately found its way into French film history.

In the same year, Cocteau directed the greatest achievement of his film career and, arguably, of his entire creative life. *Orphée*, loosely based on his 1925 stage play of the same name, can perhaps be regarded as the culmination of Cocteau's artistic development, the ultimate merging of his preoccupations with mythology, melodrama and fantasy into a unified whole.



The film begins satirically. In a scene reminiscent of Cocteau's youth, a group of passionate young poets sit in a café, talking art. They start to argue and eventually have to be separated by riot police. Suddenly a young poet called Cégèste is run down by two passing motorcyclists. He is taken into a limousine by a woman who claims to be his guardian. She insists that Orphée, an older poet also present at the cafe, accompany her. What follows is the ultimate Coctellian mixture of myth and autobiography, a fantastical story of death and rebirth, erotic obsession and travels through the afterlife. The film resurrects a number of figures from Cocteau's previous works, most notably Orphée, Cégèste and the Heurtebise. It balances many of Cocteau's favourite images (for example, magic gloves and the mirror as portal to another world) with realistic details and wartime iconography (for example, the afterlife is a bombed-out suburb, the messages that Cégèste relays from the beyond are broadcast over a radio). As in *La Belle et la Bête*, Cocteau's cinematic trickery is unobtrusive and subsumes itself to the demands of the narrative. When Orphée puts on the pair of gloves that will allow him to walk through mirrors, the use of reverse-motion leads to the impression that they mould themselves to his hands through some supernatural force. When Orphée and Heurtebise make their final voyage into the afterlife, Cocteau again uses the technique of placing the back wall of the set on the floor and filming from above, so creating a sense of displaced gravity. However, this time he uses this trick discreetly – not as the self-conscious expression of filmmaking bravado that it was in *Le Sang d'un poète* but as a means of communicating the disorientating otherness of the afterlife.

Orphée encapsulates Cocteau's life and work with definitive thoroughness. Perhaps sensing this, Cocteau did not direct another film for ten years. Instead, he slipped into semi-retirement, living off his reputation. He started painting, wrote a play, designed friezes for the interiors of buildings, continued his journalism (through which, among other things, he helped rekindle popular interest in Edith Piaf) and enjoyed his celebrity. In 1955, he was elected a member of the Académie Française; in 1956, he was given an honorary degree by Oxford University. Above all, perhaps sensing that his greatest achievements were in the past, he threw himself into the project of consolidating his personal myth. He released multiple volumes of autobiographical writing and personal essays, published conversations, and gave newspaper and television interviews on a regular basis. In doing this, he anticipated almost everything that any critic could possibly say about him, and interweaved all the strands of his life and work in such a way that nobody would ever be able to undo them.

When he finally returned to filmmaking in 1959 with *Le Testament d'Orphée*, it was to provide a coda to his career. "With hindsight," Cocteau wrote in 1961, "I can see that the film is not

properly speaking a film, but something that offered me the only means of expressing things that I carry within me” =

In it, Cocteau plays himself, no longer concealed behind a fictional persona, as a traveller wandering through a landscape synthesised from his previous works = Cocteau often ‘lost himself’ in his own imaginative world – for example, when he was taking opium, or when he was on set. During the filming of *La Belle et la Bête* he wrote, “I live in another world, a world where time and place are wholly mine. I now live without newspapers, letters, telegrams, without any contact with the outside world at all” = In *Le Testament d’Orphée*, the character of Cocteau literally loses himself in his own mythic world. The action begins on a film set, announcing immediately the meta-fictional nature of the film. Subsequent scenes occur either in locations from *Orphée*, in other typically Coctellian locations, or in real locations connected in some way with Cocteau’s life. Characters from *Orphée* make guest appearances, as do a number of Cocteau’s personal friends. The film culminates in an ‘interrogation’ set in the same location as the interrogation in *Orphée*. This time, however, the focus of the judges’ interest is Cocteau, not Orphée. The result is reminiscent of numerous interviews given by Cocteau over the decades, except this time he pens his own questions. With affected artlessness, he has himself accused of innocence and pleads guilty, a reminder that, despite his success as a filmmaker, Cocteau was above all a man of letters. It is also a reminder that most of Cocteau’s work is not primarily about romantic love, or death and rebirth, or space and time, but about Cocteau himself. In this, despite its self-indulgent longeurs, the film remains a fitting testament to Cocteau’s life’s work.

Cocteau died three years later, a few hours after providing an obituary for Edith Piaf. His posthumous reputation has ebbed and flowed, but – like Piaf – he has always remained a French institution. After almost two decades of relative critical neglect, there has recently been a resurgence of interest in Cocteau and his work, as evidenced by the 2003 massive retrospective at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and a new 864 page biography. Like his fictional poets, Cocteau’s work continues to endure in a cycle of death and rebirth.



Filmography

As director:

Jean Cocteau fait un film (1925) short

Le Sang d'un poète (Blood of a Poet) (1930) short, also writer

La Belle et la Bête (Beauty and the Beast) (1946)

L'Aigle à deux têtes (The Eagle Has Two Heads) (1948) also writer

Les Parents terribles (1948) also writer

Orphée (1950) also writer

Le Testament d'Orphée (1959) also writer

OTHER CREDITS

La Comédie du bonheur (Marcel L'Herbier, 1940) cowriter

Le Baron fantôme (Serge de Poligny, 1943) dialogue and actor

L'Eternel retour (Jean Delannoy, 1943) scenario and dialogue

Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne (Robert Bresson, 1945) additional dialogue

Ruy Blas (Pierre Billion, 1947) scenario, adaptation and dialogue

L'amore (Roberto Rossellini, 1947–48) two-part film, first part an adaptation of Cocteau's monologue *La voix humaine*

Ce siècle a cinquante ans (Roland Tual, 1949) cowriter

Les Enfants terribles (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1950) writer

Intimate Relations (Charles Frank, 1953) based on play *Les Parents terribles*

Le Bel indifférent (Jacques Demy, 1957) short, story

La Princesse de Clèves (Jean Delannoy, 1961) adaptation and dialogue

La Machine infernale (Claude Loursais, 1963) made for television, based on Cocteau play

Thomas L'imposteur (Georges Franju, 1964s) based on Cocteau novel

The Human Voice (Ted Kotcheff, 1967) made for television, story

Le Bel indifférent (Jacques Duhon, 1975) made for television, story

L'Aigle à deux têtes (Pierre Cavassilas, 1975) made for television, based on Cocteau play

La Dame de Monte Carlo (Dominique Delouche, 1979) short, writer

Les Parents terribles (Yves-André Hubert, 1980) made for television, based on Cocteau play

The Mystery of Oberwald (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1980) based on Cocteau play

Les Parents terribles (Jean-Claude Brialy, 2000) made for television, based on Cocteau play

Les Parents terribles (Josée Dayan, 2003) made for television, based on Cocteau play

Once Upon a Time...: *Beauty and the Beast* (Jean Cocteau, 1946)

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July 2020

CTEQ Annotations on Film

Issue 95

Scrawling the opening credits on a chalkboard, Jean Cocteau begins his 1946 romantic fantasy *La Belle et la Bête* (*Beauty and the Beast*) by immediately breaking the fourth wall. Further revealing the illusory nature of his film's fabrication, its first scene is marked with an on-screen clapperboard and a shout of "action". The artifice of the picture is instantly apparent, as is Cocteau's authorial voice, and it's to that end that he also directly addresses the viewer, proclaiming the necessities of faith and belief when watching what is about to unfold and making a self-conscious, sincerely poignant plea for "childlike simplicity."

When the narrative proper begins, Belle (Josette Day), a beautiful, inhibited young woman, is amid forbidding familial conflict. To the women in her life — her bitter, almost comically cruel sisters, Adelaide and Felicie (Nane Germon and Mila Parély) — she is the object of scorn and ridicule; to the men — her father (Marcel André), brother (Michel Auclair), and her brother's friend, Avenant (Jean Marais) — she is showered with loving consideration. In this rudimentary rustic setting the family is facing dire financial difficulties, and though Belle is routinely denigrated by her female siblings she remains dutiful and pure, a humble observer of the friction. Her more direct involvement is triggered, however, when her father, lost in the forest one evening, happens upon a mysterious castle. Finding refuge and a meal, he discovers the curious setting is an animate realm overflowing with wonders and horrors. He also encounters its proprietor, the Beast (Marais), who condemns the man for stealing a rose and, as punishment, makes a heartbreaking bargain: the father's life for that of his daughter. Informed of this, Belle, brave and selfless to her core, accepts the sacrifice and absconds to the Beast's abode where she becomes his feted hostage.

Produced under trying circumstances, *La Belle et la Bête* was a discreet effort. Post-war conditions resulted in lackluster equipment, food and electricity shortages, and a general lack of material for sets and costumes. Compounding the complications was Cocteau's persistently poor health. Still, working with director René Clément as his technical adviser, Cocteau and his team enliven (quite literally) the routine storybook milieu of the farmhouse and the Beast's château, creating a dense dominion of magic and possibility. It's also a world of profound emotion. The Beast is promptly enamored of Belle, but he is also aware of his ghastly physical condition and his inexorable animalistic impulses. He suffers from the shame and corresponding trepidation and, combined with Belle's repeated denial of marriage, which he proposes every evening like clockwork, he endures tremendous despair. After spending time with the tormented creature, though, Belle recognizes his inherent decency, his near nobility, and he earnestly earns her sympathy. "I have a good heart, but I am a monster," the Beast bemoans. But Belle consoles him, stating what will soon be obvious when her family succumbs to their greedy aspirations: "There are men far more monstrous than you, though they conceal it well."

Modeled on Marais' Alaskan husky, the Beast is a phenomenal conception of makeup and prostheses. While it was an arduous application process for Marais, a frequent Cocteau star and the director's lover of many years, such is his performance, complemented by Day's responsive

engagement and Cocteau's delicate treatment, that the creature's latent goodness and the mutual trust — indeed, the genuine love — between he and Belle override any amorous convention of physical attraction. Per Cocteau: “My aim would be to make the Beast so human, so sympathetic, so superior to men, that his transformation into Prince Charming would come as a terrible blow to Beauty.”¹ The tortured soul evinced so compellingly and tenderly, then arguably upended by this comparatively banal transformation, was so effective that when seeing the film for the first time, Greta Garbo supposedly proclaimed, “Give me back my Beast!”

As he demonstrated with the films of his “Orphic trilogy” — *Le Sang d'un poète* (*The Blood of a Poet*, 1930), *Orphée* (*Orpheus*, 1950), and *Le testament d'Orphée* (*Testament of Orpheus*, 1960) — Cocteau easily transferred his painterly and poetic gifts into a luminous, enchanted cinema. On *La Belle et la Bête*, in conjunction with cinematographer Henri Alekan and with lavish production design by Christian Bérard and Lucien Carré, his *mise-en-scène* radiates an exquisite rendering of air, light, and texture. Heightening the charmed expressiveness of the picture, Cocteau employs whimsical slow-motion, reversed action, and a series of graceful movements (Day is at one point placed upon a small, hidden wagon, gliding along the castle's corridors), and the oftentimes surreal vision is enriched by smoke and mirrors and practical trickery. As statuary comes to life and candelabras are held by live human arms, the special effects, low-key though they may be, are nevertheless awesome and thoroughly efficient.

Written by Cocteau, based on Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont's 1740 story, *La Belle et la Bête* was neither the first nor hardly the last iteration of this tale “as old as time.” Yet Cocteau's version, aside from being quite different from its source, is also miles away from the prior and subsequent screen versions. Writing in 1947, Bosley Crowther called it a “priceless fabric of subtle images [...] a fabric of gorgeous visual metaphors, of undulating movements and rhythmic pace, of hypnotic sounds and music, of casually congealing ideas,”² and the film would win the Prix Louis Dullec award in 1946 and was nominated for Cannes' Grand Prize that same year. There is a requisite suspension of disbelief, as with any fantasy work, and some have argued for the film's Freudian imagery and its sexual undercurrent, both of which are understood yet somehow irrelevant. *Beauty and the Beast* is best appreciated as modestly as Cocteau stated at the start, as a work of simple, charming imagination. “When I make a film,” he wrote in reference to *Orpheus*, “it is a sleep in which I am dreaming.”³ Here, one is privileged to enter that dream. It just takes a little faith.

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la Belle et la Bete (1947)

Directed by Jean Cocteau