



Cocteau, Jean (1889-1963)

by David Aldstadt

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Prolific French poet, artist, playwright, actor, and filmmaker, Jean Cocteau published his first poems in his early twenties. He established his reputation, as both respected artist and popular Parisian man-about-town, with the success of several ballets and plays that he wrote in his late twenties.

Although his formal schooling was ragged, he educated himself through his wide reading and extensive travel. In the early 1920s, Cocteau's lover, novelist Raymond Radiguet, died of typhoid fever; the despondent Cocteau, reportedly to escape the pain of this loss, soon after began using opium.

In 1930, the poet broached filmmaking, which critics often cite as the medium best suited for his artistic expression. For instance, in *Le sang d'un poète* (1930), a stylized, homoerotic short feature about the arduousness of poetic creation, characters come to life out of Cocteau's own characteristic drawings--bold, simple strokes, accentuated eyes, minimalist outlines and profiles, and erotic, surrealistic portraits--that dominate the sets.

In his later films, Cocteau includes portions of his poetry written in his distinctive handwriting, samples of his drawings and paintings, narration in his own voice, and even himself in pivotal roles.

Frequently marked by whimsical special effects and exotic landscapes, Cocteau's films--at times adaptations of his own literary works, such as *L'aigle à deux têtes* (1947) and *Orphée* (1950)--contain themes and symbols common to the entirety of the artist's oeuvre, such as narcissism, the Orpheus myth, poetic creation, mirrors and other passages to secret worlds, fairy tales, flowers, and beautiful people in iconographic settings.

In 1937, Cocteau met Jean Marais, the most famous of his lovers, and helped make his talented, handsome, and athletic protégé into one of France's most beloved cinema stars. Among the notable films that Cocteau made with Marais are such classics as *La belle et la bête* (1945) and *Orphée*.

Cocteau's cinema demonstrates the artist's mastery of spectacular imagery. His cinemoems do not rely on a large studio system or fixed, narrative structures, but on his independent vision and experimentation.

Homoeroticism pervades Cocteau's films, especially through the featuring of attractive men and the suggestive depictions of their relationships. For instance, at the beginning of *Orphée*, Cocteau frames the Orphée and Cégeste characters (played by Marais and Edouard Dermit, Cocteau's last protégé and official heir) under a threshold as the two exchange a lingering gaze before crossing paths. Then, as the film progresses, Orphée becomes obsessed with listening to Cégeste's voice over a mysterious radio.

With Marais, Cocteau contributed to the rebirth of the French cinema industry during and after World War



Top: A portrait of Jean Cocteau by Amedeo Modigliani.

Above: A photographic portrait of Jean Cocteau by George Platt Lynes. Image of George Platt Lynes's photograph copyright © 2002-2004, Clipart.com.

II. At the same time, the artist endured criticism, usually unfair and homophobic in nature, for not taking a more active stance in the French resistance. Although Cocteau encouraged artists to speak out against unjust political domination, he himself was disadvantaged by the open secrets of his opium use and homosexuality, which made him particularly vulnerable to attack by the right-wing Vichy government.

During the Nazi Occupation, Cocteau's plays were interrupted and/or banned and Cocteau himself experienced physical violence and homophobic insults. Despite such difficulties, Cocteau wrote, made films, traveled and attracted famous friends, patrons, and protégés during this period and throughout the rest of his life.

Cocteau received numerous awards and honors including election to the prestigious Académie Française. The artist died, one hour after learning of singer Édith Piaf's death, while recovering from a heart attack. Cocteau continues to this day as one of France's most famous, and most adored, cultural icons.

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About the Author

David Aldstadt is a doctoral candidate in French cinema, modern French literature, and French culture at Ohio State University. His dissertation examines cinematic collaboration, authorship, and star personae in films by Marcel Carné with Arletty and by Jean Cocteau with Jean Marais.