

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Jean Cocteau



JAMES S. WILLIAMS

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Manchester University Press

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In memory of my father



Detail of Cocteau on the set of *Le Sang d'un poète*, 1930–32

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Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent on national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as an art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about *auteurism*. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the *auteur* perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-

economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the informal and formal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES
ROBERT INGRAM

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His name was Jean

[R]emuer cette grande machine de rêves, se battre avec l'ange de la lumière, l'ange des machines, les anges de l'espace et du temps, voilà une besogne à ma taille. (J. Cocteau)

(To move this great engine of dreams, to do battle with the angel of light, with the angel of machines, the angels of space and time, this is work to my measure.)

Jean Cocteau (b. 5 July 1889, d. 11 October 1963) was, as he often liked to point out, as old and young as cinema itself. The first French writer to take cinema seriously, he made his first film in 1925, a 16 mm short now lost, entitled *Jean Cocteau fait du cinéma* conceived as a homage to Charlie Chaplin. His last, *Le Testament d'Orphée*, was completed in 1960 when he was 70. Between the two, he directed only five major films and a couple of shorts: *Coriolan* (1950) (never released) and *La Villa Santo-Sospir* (1951) (also never released though recently made available). Indeed, Cocteau's run of continuous work in the cinema lasted only ten years, from 1942 to 1952. Yet this slim corpus of extraordinary and utterly unique films, along with his other multiple interests in the cinema as a writer of screenplays, dialogues, commentaries and voice-overs, actor, editor, festival organiser and judge, established Cocteau as one of the supreme film directors in France, above all in the eyes of Nouvelle Vague directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut who considered him an *auteur complet*. He covered most of the great cinematographic genres, from the early avant-garde with *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930–32) to fairytale fantasy with *La Belle et la bête* (1946), historical melodrama with *L'Aigle à deux têtes* (1948), domestic bourgeois drama and vaudeville with *Les Parents terribles* (1948) (regarded by Cocteau himself as his greatest

success), detective thriller and mystery with *Orphée* (1950), to finally the unclassifiable *Le Testament d'Orphée* which, with its blend of classical legend, science fiction and self-mythologising, constitutes one of the most original self-portraits ever recorded on film. Of the four screenplays or sets of dialogue Cocteau wrote during the Occupation – for Marcel L'Herbier's *La Comédie du bonheur* (1940), Serge de Poligny's *Le Baron fantôme* (1942) (in which he played the eponymous role of Baron Carol), Jean Delannoy's *L'Eternel retour* (1943), and Robert Bresson's *Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* (1944) – *L'Eternel retour* proved the most successful, both artistically and commercially. Indeed, with this escapist fantasy and period melodrama starring Jean Marais, Cocteau imposed himself in the 1940s as one of France's most bankable directors.

Cocteau openly acknowledged the diffuse and often ungraspable nature of his film work which pursued a multitude of directions and, as we shall see in this study, even reversed itself mid-track ('Une œuvre doit être "un objet difficile à ramasser"', he once aptly-remarked (Cocteau 2003: 25) ('A work of art must be "a difficult object to bring together"')). Beyond the major works already mentioned, he collaborated on over fifteen other films, either full features or shorts, most notably those where he adapted material or provided dialogues: *Ruy Blas* (1947) directed by Pierre Billon, *Les Enfants terribles* (1950) by Jean-Pierre Melville (inspired by Cocteau's 1929 novel of the same name), *La Princesse de Clèves* (1960) by Jean Delannoy, and *Thomas l'imposteur* (1965), by Georges Franju, made after Cocteau's death. Also included in this list are texts and commentaries for Jiri Trnka's *The Emperor's Nightingale* (1951), Denise Tual's *Ce siècle a cinquante ans*, a documentary about key moments in the cultural history of the first part of the twentieth century (Cocteau took the period of 1914), and a short by Paul Paviot entitled *Pantomimes* (1956) featuring Marcel Marceau. In addition, Cocteau acted or appeared in six other films, ranging from Sacha Guitry's *La Malibran* (1943), where he plays the ageing poet Alfred de Musset, to Hans Richter's compilation film, *8 x 8* (1952) (a short sequence of reverse-motion photography by Cocteau entitled 'Queening the Pawn') and Yannick Bellon's *Colette* (1950), where Cocteau pays simple tribute to his friend, the great French writer Colette. There is also the strange and little-known case of a short Cocteau made in 1963 just before his death entitled *Jean Cocteau s'adresse à l'an 2000*, with the express intention that it not be seen until the year 2000 (we shall consider this film separately in Chapter 7).

Hence, even though all of his films, scripts and other interventions bear the indelible mark of their creator, it is often difficult to talk of a clear evolution in Cocteau's film work, still less of a narrative of professional mastery which in any case he always disclaimed. In fact, to appreciate Cocteau's cinema fully in its myriad forms and contours we will need to place it within the context of his prolific career as a whole. Cocteau's film work is arguably the summation of his artistic project because it integrates all the previous and still evolving aspects of his practice, from writing (poetry, theatre, novels, essays) to painting, design, graphic art, sculpture, music, dance, choreography, ballet and performance. Quite simply, the cinema is where Cocteau is most absolutely Cocteau. Moreover, his films bring together many, if not all, of the images and obsessions of his earlier literary work which is itself littered with allusions and stylistic nods to the cinema, for example, in his major collections of poetry such as *Le Cap de Bonne-Espérance*, *Plain-Chant* and *Opéra*, and in his 1930 essay, *Opium, journal d'une désintoxication*, an account of his treatment for opium addiction which refers directly to films by Buster Keaton, Chaplin and Eisenstein. In addition, his 1923 novel *Le Grand écart* is edited almost like a classic film with sequences of deep focus, long focus, and close-ups. Cocteau went so far as to describe his novelistic method in *Thomas l'imposteur* (1923) as that of a '*film modèle*'.

Cocteau's career was a series of turning points and transformations. Born in Maisons-Laffitte outside Paris into the old and gradually vanishing artistic world of the fashionable high bourgeoisie, he made his debut in the capital in 1908 as a brilliant salon poet, a self-styled 'prince frivole' (the title of his second collection of poetry in 1910). After seeing the Ballets Russes perform in 1909 and meeting their impresario manager Serge Diaghilev, he committed himself to modernism and participated in a branch of the Parisian avant-garde that comprised Picasso and Stravinsky. He worked for Diaghilev's company as a scene painter and publicist, a collaboration that culminated with the 1917 ballet, *Parade*. This 'scandalous' groundbreaking work, for which Apollinaire devised the term '*surréalisme*', exemplified Cocteau's search for anti-traditional, mixed-media art forms involving visual puns, fantasy, and irrational and dreamlike sequences. Other heterogeneous works for the stage followed, including the mime/jazz pastiche *Le Bœuf sur le Toit* (1920) and the satirical farce *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* (1921), produced in

collaboration with the group of composers called 'Les Six' with whom Cocteau became associated: Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Francis Poulenc, Darius Milhaud and Germaine Tailleferre. In his preface to *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, Cocteau coined the term '*poésie de théâtre*' in reaction to what he regarded as merely poetry in the theatre, for instance, the works of Paul Claudel, Edmond Rostand, Maurice Maeterlinck and the symbolists where, according to Cocteau, theatre was but a pretext for dramatised poetry in the conventional sense. For Cocteau, who excelled at creating concrete images and metaphors on stage, the theatre should be active and dynamic.

Following the tragic early death in 1923 of his intimate companion, the writer Raymond Radiguet, which provoked a descent into opium and self-withdrawal, Cocteau produced in 1924 a remarkable set of thirty sketches where he presented himself for the first time as 'Jean l'oiseleur' ('Jean the bird-catcher') *l'oiseau* is also French slang for phallus). However, he was denounced by the surrealists led by André Breton who regarded him as no more than an *amuseur*, a court jester for upper-class dandies. This criticism stuck and only increased when Surrealists like Paul Eluard and Louis Aragon later joined the communist party. Cocteau's allegiances were to individuals, not to artistic movements or political causes, and this helps to explain – although not excuse – some of his actions during the Occupation. He was never a direct collaborator with the Nazi regime, although like many artists who remained in Paris he happily applied for licences to publish and produce his work. However, quite unnecessarily, he promoted the highly phallic creations of his friend, the German sculptor Arno Breker, in a burst of purple prose entitled 'Salut à Arno Breker', published in the French newspaper *Comœdia* on 23 May 1942. In fact, Cocteau found himself attacked from all political sides during the war, sometimes even physically in the case of the Fascist League, and in 1941 a revival of his 1938 play *Les Parents terribles* was banned from the Paris stage. He survived the war and Liberation largely unscathed by charges of collaboration and treason, yet considered himself out of place and even ostracised in the immediate post-war period, the era of political engagement and Existentialism centred around Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir. This heady new world associated in Paris with the jazz caverns and Juliette

Gréco is alluded to by Cocteau in *Orphée* with its mocking presentation of the Café des Poètes. During the 1950s Cocteau found refuge at Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat in the South of France due to a rich patron, Francine Weisweiler, who invited him to share her villa Santo-Sospir near Villefranche-sur-mer. This was the period of Cocteau the decorative artist, producing frescoes at Villefranche and also at Saint-Blaise-des-Simples near his home in Milly-la-forêt outside Paris where he later died and is buried.

Cocteau's long career was thus one of consistent experimentation in style and the mechanics of form and it embraced a range of traditions and disciplines. Alongside his early modernist novels (*Le Grand écart*, *Thomas l'imposteur*, *Les Enfants terribles*) and defiantly modern plays such as *La Voix humaine* (1930) and *La Machine à écrire* (1941) are works where Cocteau radically modernised classical theatre, for example, *Antigone* (1922), *Orphée* (1926), *La Machine Infernale* (1934), *Œdipe-Roi* (1938) and *Renaud et Armide* (1943), a tragedy written in Alexandrine verse. Whatever field and medium he was working in, however, Cocteau always considered himself a poet inventing '*la poésie*' ('*de théâtre*', '*de roman*', '*de cinéma*') as opposed to simply 'the poetic' as conventionally understood. This provides his multifarious work with an overall identity and clarity of purpose that foils any attempt to dismiss him as a *touche-à-tout*, or Jack of all trades, possessing, to quote Robin Buss, 'the talents of a polymath and the instincts of a dilettante' (Cocteau 2001: 7). Moreover, beyond their countless twists and turns, Cocteau's life and work functioned in parallel to form an overall ethical project, specifically a metaphysical engagement with questions of the self and the other. Indeed, Cocteau's almost feverish construction of the self through the Other, born of a profound 'difficulty of being' (the title of his 1947 collection of essays), is best regarded as a sustained 'work in progress', a continuous putting into question of the self that helps to account for his unparalleled capacity for self-transformation. In this regard, I am in broad agreement with the central tenets of Claude Arnaud's major biography published in France in 2003 entitled *Jean Cocteau*, an exhaustive volume that uncovers in its 800 pages new and important facts about Cocteau's life.

Yet if Cocteau's work is inextricably linked to his life which he fashioned like a legend into a living work, we need to approach it with care. So cleverly and persistently did he blur the usual artistic boundaries, forging new links between what he delineated as 'the living

man' and 'the posthumous artist', that he generated much critical misunderstanding and public confusion. The obvious ambivalence about Cocteau – gay transcendence or simply self-display? – is characteristic of other modern gay artists too such as Oscar Wilde and Jean Genet, but it is not enough to make full sense of Cocteau. Moreover, a fascination with the fanfare of Cocteau's public and mythical persona – the dazzling surfaces and multiple masks, the who's who of his address book, his 'flirting' with fashion and artistic movements like Surrealism – has too often obscured the unwavering intelligence and seriousness of a man whose fundamental asceticism produced one of the most coherent, original and influential artistic statements of the twentieth century. To return specifically to Cocteau's film work, let us establish the four key modes of his filmic practice: his status as an *auteur*, his role and range as a collaborator; his commitment to experimentation; and his importance as a film theorist. We begin with a basic question: what type of filmmaker was Cocteau?

Cocteau as *auteur*

Cocteau is usually regarded as a 'literary filmmaker', part of a peculiarly French tradition of writers who also became innovative filmmakers (see Michalczyk 1980: 1–28). Godard has referred to Cocteau in this respect as one of a 'bande des quatre', or 'gang of four', that includes Sacha Guitry, Marcel Pagnol and Marguerite Duras (see Godard 1988: 140–2). Yet this term is rather limiting and creates the false impression that Cocteau's films were simply an extension or faithful adaptation of themes and styles already well rehearsed in his literary work or plays such as *L'Aigle à deux têtes*, *Les Parents terribles* and *Orphée*, in other words, part of a continual recycling of a set number of themes and images in different formats. These include most obviously troubled masculinity, incestuous desire, death, resurrection, fate, phallic women, mirrors, doubles, reversals and false identity. While there is certainly continuity, Cocteau's films were above all a direct response to a specific medium with its own particular problematics and thematics. In fact, what makes Cocteau a 'pure' filmmaker is precisely the fact that because key themes and figures were already well in place in his work – the emptiness of childhood, Dargelos the school bully and object of fascination, the poet as Orpheus,

etc. – he could devote himself even more thoroughly to the fundamentals of cinematic form. The beautiful written works that arose from the filmmaking process, such as the screenplay of *Le Sang d'un poète* which is accompanied by short texts and a series of drawings, and his gripping diary of the long and tortuous production of *La Belle et la bête*, stand on their own terms as unique cinematic documents.

If Cocteau was wont to describe himself as a 'false cineast', it was because he considered himself above all a self-taught 'amateur' (in the French sense too of a lover of cinema) and 'artisan' rather than a paid-up member of the industry. He was a humble 'cabinet maker' of sounds and images who learned his craft on set and through watching editors at close hand. Yet Cocteau also styled himself as a sharpshooter of the cinema working both within and against the system, another manifestation of his self-willed identification with a long tradition in France of the *artiste maudit*, which encompasses such poets as Villon, Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Like his contemporaries Robert Bresson and Jacques Tati, he was an independent filmmaker whose work stood out from the French *cinéma de qualité* of the 1940s and 1950s with its strict rules and hierarchical structures where film production was divided out among a set of highly trained specialist technicians. Dialogues, for instance, were regarded as quite separate and distinct from the original script. With *L'Éternel retour* in 1943 Cocteau was deliberately transgressing the standard methods of commercial cinema by conceiving the project himself, writing both the script and dialogues, choosing his own director (Delannoy) and actors, and even helping to edit the film. Like every other dimension of his art, Cocteau's films were a statement of artistic and aesthetic will and provided evidence of his special destiny as a poet. That said, Cocteau never conformed to the particular myth of the *auteur* as martyr prevalent in French cinema and embodied by such figures as Jean Vigo who died a tragic early death and left only a small body of prodigious work. Cocteau could have left France at the onset of the Second World War and gone into voluntary exile yet stayed to pursue his artistic career, much like the French film industry itself which, although its production rates fell, nevertheless consolidated its quality and status under the Vichy government. Cocteau is defined, in fact, by his longevity and staying power despite – yet also perhaps because of – his numerous self-transformations. True, he did suffer a kind of premature death in the 1950s when, following