

Yale French Studies

Poetry in Three Films of Jean Cocteau

Author(s): Neal Oxenhandler

Source: *Yale French Studies*, No. 17, Art of the Cinema (1956), pp. 14-20

Published by: Yale University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2929113>

Accessed: 27/01/2010 05:28

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=yale>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Yale University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Yale French Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Poetry in Three Films of Jean Cocteau

Shortly before his death in 1918 Guillaume Apollinaire discovered that a machine was a rich poetic image, that machines had a kind of humanity and offered many analogies to the functions of mind or body. This idea appealed to Jean Cocteau as well as Fernand Léger and others. The painting, music and poetry of the years that followed Apollinaire's death is full of machines. The ballet *Parade*, created by Diaghilev, Picasso, Satie and Cocteau in 1917 and again in 1920, makes use of a typewriter and other machines in the musical score. Perhaps it is more than a coincidence that just at this time the most human of all machines, the motion picture camera, was being developed. The camera is an extension of the eye; it sees and records; it has remarkable patience; it can distort; it can blend and modify what it sees; in short, the camera is a mechanical device for projecting before an audience something like the visual processes of poetry.

But the motion picture camera, with its poetic resources, has been used chiefly in a naturalistic convention of theater. The impact of such naturalism (as in the early post-war Italian films) is of course great; still, naturalism is only a convention and open to the same criticism as the plays of Ibsen and Becque. For the film too must have point of view, it must have selection, it must have freedom and variety in the use of its idiom. It must surprise and sustain. It must, in short, be poetic if it is to live up to its full promise.

There have not been many great poets with the camera. In France perhaps the outstanding of these are Jean Vigo, René Clair and Jean Cocteau.

What Cocteau has attempted to do in his films is to convey, through the cinematic medium, the conception of poetry which exists in his purely literary works. Let me begin then by briefly characterizing this conception of poetry.

For Cocteau poetry is not primarily a dramatic representation of experience as in Racine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud. He is definitely in the tradition of "pure" poets for whom poetry is an end in itself and for whom morality is essentially an esthetic function. He insists in his poetry on purely verbal and syntactical manipulations. Any central thematic concern is often self-contradictory. He prides himself on his lack of allegiance or "engagement" to any school, cause or princi-

NEAL OXENHANDLER

ple. These notions are summed up for him by the key-words of "purity" and "freedom," and it is these terms, above all, which characterize his conception of the poet.

Cocteau is not fundamentally interested in dramatic action; nor is he interested in ideas. His concern is less philosophical than that of other pure poets such as Mallarmé, Valéry or Giraudoux. He manipulates language like a kaleidoscope, creating new and surprising combinations, enjoying the illusion that poetry can change the face of reality.

Poetry has also a self-revelatory role for Cocteau, but it is a limited one. He reveals shifting states of consciousness rather than some fundamental human drama expressed in symbolic polarities. The drama is only revealed implicitly, by what the poetry leaves out, and by a study of the *dramatis personae* of his plays and novels. These characters are distinguished by their lack of involvement and for their ability to use language as a means of resisting any form of concrete solicitation to a course of action. The great human drama of Cocteau's plays and novels is never expressed. It is a drama of flight and negation, brilliantly disguised, yet masking a tragic human failure.

The movies offered Cocteau an ideal medium. To begin with, of course, he was not only a writer but also a pictorial artist. His sense of caricature and his feeling for the literary rather than the more painterly aspects of art were ideal equipment for a *cinéaste*. The theater is primarily an art of words, but the cinema is an art of images. The images of Cocteau's films are in general more emotionally charged, more spontaneous and more free than the words of his books.

This is partly due to the fact that Cocteau thinks in images more directly than in words. Perhaps the most convincing proof of this fact is *Opium*. The words of the book comment lucidly and objectively upon the long process of a disintoxication; the pictures which accompany the words are a nightmare. It is undoubtedly true that Cocteau's imagination is subject to certain sexual obsessions; although he never writes about these things, he has less scruples about drawing them. One thinks, for example, of his illustrations for the writings of Jean Genet.

Cocteau seems to feel freer in attributing sexuality to the actors in his films than to the characters of his books. It is his own emotions that he must inject into the characters of a book or play; working directly with the actor he seems to feel less fear that he will be held responsible for the emotions represented.

These observations are, I believe, sustained by the strong sexual overtones of all his films and primarily by *Le Sang d'un poète*.

There have been innumerable and contradictory exegeses of this film, including one which sees it as the history of Christianity. Cocteau himself has repeatedly refused to explain the film. The best at-

tempt at exegesis that I know is the article by C. G. Wallis in *The Kenyon Review* (Winter, 1944). Mr. Wallis finds many unities in the film which he analyzes by techniques we are more accustomed to see used on lyric poetry. He is to my way of thinking justified by the fact that there is nothing inherent in a film (any more than a novel or play) which demands an explicit plot and thematic development—although people may not read such novels or watch such plays. The unity of a film may be achieved by metaphor and analogy rather than narration. This is certainly the case with *Le Sang d'un poète*.

Having said this I would then go on to maintain that *Le Sang d'un poète* has no more unity than Cocteau's verse. Unity in the sense in which Mr. Wallis would find it in Cocteau is something that this poet is not especially concerned with. Instead of the traditional unity of an unfolding plot he achieves a kind of unity through the use of parallel themes. The film follows the career of a poet through a number of episodes which are fairly typical of the modern conception of the artist. (Musset's *Nuits* treat the same subject as *Le Sang d'un poète*; the difference is chiefly a difference in idiom.)

The hero of the film discovers the demiurgic power of art when he wipes his hand on the face of a statue and she acquires a living mouth. He has a variety of sexual experiences—onanism, voyeurism, sadism and homosexuality. These, of course, are represented quite obliquely for the most part although they make up the central portion of the film. Through a flash-back we see the poet's childhood in which he acquires a symbolic wound and dies a symbolic death. Finally, I would agree with Mr. Wallis that the film tells us something about the poet's responsibility to his art (it must be paid for with blood) and his total abnegation before it.

These themes run all the way through the film but the form of the film is such that a truly dramatic development is impossible. We pass from image to image in a kind of "qualitative progression"¹ which does not attempt to produce anything like the classical dramatic structure of Purpose, Passion and Perception.² What we are given is a series of astonishing and unforgettable images which to a large extent justify the conception of poetry here implied.

Cocteau has generously insisted on the role played by his technicians in the making of a film. They provide him with the mechanical resources that he modifies in his own ingenious way, taking advantage of every accident in the studio—as on one occasion during the filming of *Le Sang d'un poète* when the maintenance men began to sweep

¹ The phrase is from Mr. Yvor Winters, *Primitivism and Decadence*. Such a style he further characterizes as a "dream float of images."

² Mr. Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater*. This definition of the tragic rhythm was first coined by Mr. Kenneth Burke.

NEAL OXENHANDLER

the dusty studio and he allowed them to continue in order to achieve a peculiar murky effect in the section of film he was shooting. The diaries of his various films record instance after instance of this kind when some technical ingenuity would be suggested to him by chance, by the camera-man or one of his assistants, and Cocteau would instantly incorporate it into the film. In his *Entretiens autour du cinématographe* he insists on this fact—that the film is a discontinuous series of images. Each image must be set off from the other, must not flow into the next.

The images of Cocteau's films defy the laws of nature. Props are always used suggestively with a hint that they themselves are part of the intimate life of the actors. The camera always finds the unexpected angle from which the event is illuminated in a new and true perspective. The image does not merely pass across the screen; it unfolds, using the full space of the screen, living organically with its background and every other object represented, painted in the infinite range of colors from white to black. Cocteau encourages his actors to be larger than life, to be the phantasms of the unconscious that they become on the huge movie screen.

The theory of the movies advanced by Mr. Parker Tyler is relevant here.³ The power of the image on the screen is such that its function as part of a whole, that is, a plot or a fable, is relatively unimportant. Each instant on the screen presents to us the mythic prototypes of our own unconscious. The evocative power of the films is greater than that of any art form. According to Mr. Tyler it is perhaps enough that a film evoke, that it fill us with half-recollected passions, that it stir our suppressed fantasies.

Yet, in his later films, Cocteau has specifically chosen to dramatize a myth or to tell a story. In what sense then does this theory of "discontinuous poetry" still hold true for *La Belle et la Bête* and for *Orphée*?

La Belle et la Bête is a fairy-tale fantasy. What is more natural than that it should be told in a fantastic way? This is a point which has unfortunately not occurred to the producers of most of our films. How can the Bible stories or the wanderings of Ulysses or *Moby Dick* be filmed as if they had been written by Ibsen? Each image of *La Belle et la Bête* is framed for the viewer as the fable itself is framed in enchantment and wonder and lore. The camera-work in this beautiful film situates it in that area of imagination where we half believe the impossible, where metaphor is normal speech and miracle is a deeper truth than nature.

Cocteau has said that with *La Belle et la Bête* he wished to plunge

³ *Magic and Myth of the Movies* and *Hollywood Hallucination* offer the most original film criticism done in this country.

into the "lustral bath of childhood." The persistent aspect of evasion of responsibility, flight from involvement or engagement in all his work suggests that there is something almost childlike in his conception of poetry. Poetry is a return to the same childlike world which is represented in *La Belle et la Bête*. (Note, by the way, that most of Cocteau's heroes and heroines are adolescents.) This film is one of his few works with a happy ending; and we are led to believe that for Cocteau happiness is possible only in fantasy. Happiness is only possible through a return to that stream where, like the river of Heraclitus, no one ever plunges twice.

What exactly is the nature of the fantasy which is dramatized in *La Belle et la Bête*? A monster of abnormality wins a beautiful maiden. Cocteau's work is full of such monsters who eventually discover their own monstrosity. Self-knowledge he considers the height of moral beauty; hence it is not surprising that the monster, at the close of the film, becomes physically beautiful. Real beauty, in other words, is moral beauty and moral beauty is self-knowledge. This psychological process must of course be dramatized on the screen by a symbolic outward transformation.

This fable suggests to us, I think, the yearning of a man who has always secretly felt himself an exile from society and dramatizes his triumphant acceptance by society. At the same time it places this triumph in the impossible realm of fantasy. That is, Cocteau does not believe that the world will ever accept his personal morality; and perhaps he is right, for the world equates morality less with knowledge than with right action. (It might also be pointed out that the kind of self-knowledge that Cocteau proposes has a definitely Gidean ring—discovery and acceptance of one's total psychological diversity through the undifferentiated experience of life.)

The poetry of discontinuous images in this film is a product of a theory of lyric poetry which, as I have said, uses poetry as a means of evasion of responsibility. Poetry is a flight from and a substitute for action. But the theme of the film is itself an evasion of the real world and the facts of existence. It shows us the realization of a child's fantasy of reality. Because of the continuity of theme and technique this film is perhaps the finest work of Cocteau's in this medium. Although it is less pretentious than *Orphée*, it is more fully realized; it is, as every fine work of art should be, a seamless garment. The technique is a true illumination of the poet's vision of experience.

Orphée, which is Cocteau's third poetic film, revives once more the theme of *Le Sang d'un poète*. Again we have a poet searching for the meaning of his vocation in the midst of love and death. The poet is more in love with Death (played by Maria Casarès) than with his wife, Eurydice; again it is implied that poetry brings us into contact with another world and that this other world is somehow more sig-

NEAL OXENHANDLER

nificant than the routine and responsibility of everyday life. As in *La Belle et la Bête* the flight from responsibility is dramatized in striking images; the passage into death through a shadowy ruined world (these sequences were filmed at night in the ruins of St. Cyr outside of Paris) made a powerful impression on many moviegoers.

Because *Orphée* is based explicitly on a myth it has more dramatic unity than *Le Sang d'un poète*; it is less of a poem and more of a plot. The question to be raised in regard to *Orphée* is this: does the story of Orpheus require such a special and distorted vision? Granted that we want to see this story as myth, are all the concomitants of motorcycles, mirrors, radios, etc., necessary to the mythic perspective?

Orphée is the poet and we have seen what Cocteau's special conception of the poet involves. The poet is a man who frees himself from the world by making images, by entering into an oneiric world where the freedom of language is equivalent to the freedom of action.

Most of the images of *Le Sang d'un poète* suggest confinement and enclosure—a room, a hotel corridor or the confinement of death. There is confinement in *Orphée* too, but there is also freedom. There are many more exterior shots, more movement. The poetry has become oriented, it has orchestrated itself upon a theme. That theme is, paradoxically, the absence of theme in life, the recognition of the dangers of involvement and the determination to flee them in the hall of mirrors which is pure poetry. The difference in the two films, the principle difference, is this recognition, this undoubtedly unconscious orientation by Cocteau towards his ultimate principle. We can call it "freedom" or "purity" as he does or by one of the less flattering terms used by his critics—"bad faith" or "sleight of hand" or "mystification." But here again, as in *La Belle et la Bête*, it must be conceded that the technique of the film is essential to its truth. Mirrors and motorcycles are its version of pure poetry.

The radio speaks to Orphée a line originally written by Guillaume Apollinaire: "*L'oiseau chante avec ses doigts. . .*" A machine teaches a poet the secret of poetry; another machine records the lesson on film. Apollinaire's theory of poetry as the almost mechanical product of free-ranging sensibility reaches its culmination in Cocteau's film. The circle is closed. The dehumanization of the poet and hence his liberation from the normal chaos and constraint of life is, ironically, Cocteau's version of Orpheus. For the Greeks Orpheus was a priest and not a god.

The ultimate assessment of Cocteau's work is extremely difficult; perhaps it is enough that his films give a sharp and special pleasure, they can be and are seen over and over again. For they are poetry and that they be the ultimate in poetry is too much to ask. There have been few artists able to adapt the films to the expression of their own most intimate vision; and fewer still are able to narrow the gap be-

tween the profound intellectual concerns of literature and the filmy world of the screen. Cocteau has no predecessors and no imitators; as a maker of films he stands head and shoulders above the rest, one of those very few who came upon a business and made an art.

THE FILMS OF JEAN COCTEAU

Le Sang d'un poète (1932). Produced and directed by Cocteau.

Le Baron fantôme (1943). Produced and directed by Serge de Poligny. Dialogue by Cocteau.

L'Eternel retour (1944). Directed by Jean Delannoy. Scenario and dialogue by Cocteau.

La Belle et la Bête (1945). Written and directed by Cocteau.

Ruy Blas (1947). Scenario and dialogue by Cocteau.

Les Parents terribles (1948). Written, produced and directed by Cocteau.

L'Aigle à deux têtes (1948). Written and directed by Cocteau.

Orphée (1949). Written and directed by Cocteau.

Les Enfants terribles (1950). Scenario and dialogue by Cocteau.