

Cocteau Films Come to Hofstra

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This October, with the assistance of a generous gift from the Florence Gould Foundation, the Hofstra Cultural Center presented “A Pen of Light: The Films of Jean Cocteau.” Commemorating the 40th anniversary of Cocteau’s death, the conference is both a film retrospective and an exchange of new ideas. New College and the Hofstra Museum had significant roles as supporters and instigators in the development of “A Pen of Light...” The Hofstra Museum holds a collection of artwork by Jean Cocteau that has not been exhibited until now. This is an apt excuse for an exhibition, but why a film retrospective?

Jean Cocteau was a poet. He practiced his poetry in many mediums; film was only one. He was an interdisciplinary artist, who searched for the clearest voice in each of the disciplines/mediums in which he worked. He claimed never to mix mediums, but rather to explore each in its purest sense. In this way he treated artistic media as disciplines. Cocteau wrote poems, novels, librettos and plays, and made drawings, films, murals, mosaics, paintings and ceramics.

The work of Jean Cocteau combines a keen understanding of the deep relationship between creative arts and humanities. New College provides Hofstra University with such a focused diversity. Perhaps “inter-relation” more accurately describes the interdisciplinary approach taken at New College. Jean Cocteau would have made an excellent New College faculty member.

We thank the Florence Gould Foundation for recognizing the special opportunity, 40 years posthumously, to examine the films of Jean Cocteau, and the Hofstra Cultural Center for its commitment to create this event. The timing of this conference afforded us the chance to understand Cocteau as an



Jean Cocteau, Jean Marais and Josette Day during shooting of *Beauty and the Beast* (1945).

artist whose life and career were shaped by the same forces that we may encounter: new technologies, war, political crises and paradigm shifts.

Jean Cocteau was born in 1889, the same year that Thomas Edison and W.K.L. Dickson were taking pictures with their new camera called the Kinetograph. The following year their Kinetoscope machine enabled the first viewing of successive “moving”

pictures. Kinetoscope parlours were opened in American cities in 1894. In 1895 Charles Pathé brought this technology to Paris. On September 28, 1895, the first projection of films to a paying audience was given at the Grand Café, Boulevard des Capucines in Paris (O’Leary 11). Cocteau was 6 years old.

The work of Jean Cocteau was influenced by early cinema, by the phonograph, the telephone and the microphone. The early Cocteau was thoroughly modern. He reinvented the Greek chorus into a single, sometimes mechanical voice (Ade 2). He used devices such as doppelgangers and mirrors in his fiction as a bridge between natural and supernatural worlds. For Cocteau, machinery also served as a transforming device between two worlds. Imagine the hallucinatory effect of merging reflections on the windows of passing trains (Wall-Romana 6).

Cocteau wrote poems and a novel about World War I. His own experience was that of a volunteer ambulance attendant. He admired soldiers and airmen and was intrigued by airplanes.

Cocteau was an active participant in the development of the avant-garde in Paris. He flirted with the dadaists and befriended painters, musicians, writers, composers, playwrights and poets from both Montmartre and Montparnasse. Essentially always a society poet, Cocteau took advantage of the patronage system. From 1929 until 1932 he completed a commission by the Vicomte Charles de Noailles to create his first well-known film, “The Blood of a Poet.”

In the same year (1929) he entered a clinic to cure from an opium addiction. While in the clinic he completed his second novel, *Les enfants terribles* or *The Holy Terrors*. It was 10 years from the completion of *The Blood of a Poet* before Cocteau worked on another film. Cocteau won favors in Nazi-occupied Paris. He wrote the screenplays for *The Phantom Baron* in 1942 and *The Eternal Return* in 1943 then continued to make his own film, *Beauty and the Beast*, in 1945-46.

He received negative criticism in the Vichy press during the war. After the war he was exonerated of collaboration with the Germans. Though he maintained friendships on both sides, Cocteau remained true to his own muse. *Beauty and the Beast* became one of the first examples of *film d'auteur*, or a film to be known by its director. (Hitchcock films reached this status in the 1950s.)

Jean Cocteau created most of his films between 1946 and 1950. Each year he turned one of his plays into a film. The most famous was *Orpheus* in 1949. In 1950 he successfully collaborated with director Jean-Pierre Melville to bring his novel *Les enfants terribles* to the screen. The star of the film, Nicole Stéphane, was named the Hofstra Cultural Center's Joseph G. Astman Distinguished Conference Artist.

Madame Stéphane, whose real name was Nicole de Rothschild, produced the film with the help of her cousin Alec Weisweiller. Alec's wife, Francine, became a close friend of Jean Cocteau and became his last important patron. Cocteau spent much of his time in the 1950s at the Weisweiller home in the south of France, la villa Santo Sospir.

Madame Carole Weisweiller was one of the keynote speakers at the Hofstra Cultural Center conference. She told us that villa Santo Sospir was purchased for

a modest fee at the end of the war as a gift from her father to her mother for surviving the Holocaust. Her grandmother perished in Auschwitz.

Carole Weisweiller's presence at our conference was instrumental in bringing us in contact with a Jean Cocteau that was more than enigma. We were able to feel the human side of an artist whose reputation may or may not have survived the war. Carole Weisweiller helps Cocteau survive through a clearer understanding of his work and a closer proximity to his person.



Jean Marais and Josette Day from
Beauty and the Beast (1946).

Carole was 8 years old during the making of *Les enfants terribles*, which was filmed in a house that was built by her great-grandparents, lost during the war and then reclaimed by her father from the government after the war. She spent her adolescent years watching Cocteau fill her home with murals, mosaics, tapestries and ceramics.

For Carole, the real Cocteau was a man of joyous creative inspiration. "Jean Cocteau never stopped working," she explained. "He was always drawing."

The Hofstra Cultural Center, Hofstra Museum and New College of Hofstra University in cooperation with the Film and Liberal Arts Departments at Rhode Island School of Design, the Florence Gould Foundation, Cultural Services of the French Embassy in New York, the French Institute Alliance Française and the Cinema Arts Centre in Huntington, Long Island, hosted the conference "A Pen of Light: The Films of Jean Cocteau" from October 1 to 4, 2003.

The program included screenings of all of Cocteau's own films and most of the films for which he wrote the screenplays. We also included screenings of three documentaries about Cocteau, including one he made himself called *La Villa Santo Sospir*. The conference covered topics such as experimental film, surrealism, romanticism, classicism, behind the scenes during film production and psychological, mythical and political interpretation.

The conference began on Wednesday, October 1, with the opening of an exhibition of photographs in the Rochelle and Irwin A. Lowenfeld Conference and Exhibition Hall on the 10th floor of the Joan and Donald E. Axinn Library titled "In the Eye of the Camera: Jean Cocteau in the South of France." Both contributors of the work in the show, Madame Carole Weisweiller and photographer Lucien Clergue, were present at the reception. On Thursday,

October 3, the conference banquet featured a guest appearance by composer Ned Rorem, whose own work takes inspiration from Cocteau and who also collaborated with Cocteau in his two compositions "Visits to St. Elizabeth's" and "Anna la bonne." "Anna la bonne" was performed at the conference banquet by Hofstra student Elisa

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Castiglione and pianist Morton Estrin from the Hofstra Music Department.

The exhibition "By the Hand of Jean Cocteau: Works From the Hofstra Museum Collection and the Howard L. and Muriel Weingrow Collection of Avant-Garde Art and Literature at Hofstra University" opened in the David Filderman Gallery on the ninth floor of the Axinn Library. This exhibition continues until January 23, 2004.



Actors Jean Marais, Marie Deo and Francois Perier, *Orpheus*, (1949). Photocredit: Photofest

Professor Emerita Dr. Jeanne Fuchs returned to Hofstra for the conference along with her mentor, Dr. Alex Szogyi, Professor Emeritus of French Literature from Hunter College and co-founder of the George Sand Society. Professors Fuchs and Szogyi performed a live version of a rare interview that took place between Jean Cocteau and William Fifield in 1963, the year of Cocteau's death.

The conference culminated with two 35mm screenings. One of *Les enfants terribles* (1950) on Friday night, October 3, at the French Institute Alliance Française hosted by Madame Jacqueline Chambourd, artistic director of FIAF. (Thanks again to Mr. John Young of the Florence Gould Foundation.)

The second 35mm screening was a Saturday morning matinee in Huntington at the Cinema Arts Centre. The film was *Beauty and the Beast* (1946). After the screening, our final panel convened. *Beauty and the Beast* was a grand finale as we viewed a newly restored print on a big screen.

References

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Prior to joining Hofstra University's New College as an Assistant Professor of Fine Arts/Creative Studies, David Pushkin was on the faculty at American and Columbia Universities. He is a fine artist whose work can be found in such diverse private and public collections as those of the American University School of Law, and the West Virginia Parkways and Tourism Authority.

Solo exhibits of Professor Pushkin's work include: *Prayer Windows* at Venturella Stained Glass Studios, Union Square, New York; *New Abstract Works on Paper* at the Frank Art Center of Shepherd College; and *Drawings on Wood* at the Vegetable Mineral Gallery in New York. He has participated in numerous group shows, including those at the Clemente Soto Véllez Cultural and Educational Center, the Dadian Gallery at Wesley Theological Seminary, and the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, among others.

Professor Pushkin also brings his artistic sensibilities to his work as a curator. This fall, he co-directed the Hofstra Cultural Center conference *A Pen of Light: The Films of Jean Cocteau*. He curated the following exhibits at the Joan and Donald E. Axinn Library: *By the Hand of Jean Cocteau* at the David Filderman Gallery, as well as *In the Eye of the Camera: Jean Cocteau and Beauty and the Beast* and *In the Eye of the Camera: Jean Cocteau in the South of France*, both at the Rochelle and Irwin A. Lowenfeld Conference and Exhibition Hall.

His curatorial work also includes *Vue de pre/Close Up*, a group showing of artists from Paris and New York held at the Cuchifritos Gallery in New York City in 2002; *Free Produce* at New York's Charas/El Bohio Cultural Center Gallery in conjunction with the New York City Fringe Theater Festival; and *Broken Pictures*, featuring the art of Mark Flood and David West at the Rochelle and Irwin A. Lowenfeld Conference and Exhibition Hall at Hofstra's Axinn Library.

David Pushkin earned an M.F.A. in drawing/printing at Columbia University in 1990. He was awarded a B.F.A. in filmmaking/drawing from the San Francisco Art Institute and studied at the Rhode Island School of Design. A grant recipient of The Florence Gould Foundation and the National Arts Club, among others, Professor Pushkin has contributed scholarly articles to diverse publications and conferences.