**Cocteau, Jean (b. 5 July 1889, Maisons-Laffitte, France; d. 11 October, 1963, Milly-la-Forêt, France)**

Jean Cocteau (Jean Maurice Eugène Clément Cocteau) was an influential, prolific, multi-talented French artist, writer, critic and filmmaker. He wrote poetry, plays, libretti for ballets, journals, and screenplays; he also adapted his own and others’ writing for the stage and screen. He illustrated books, painted, created mosaics, tapestries, and stained glass windows, and designed sets and costumes. He also occasionally appeared on stage and in films and starred (essentially playing himself) in his last film *Le Testament d’Orphée* [*The Testament of Orpheus,* 1960]. Outside France, Cocteau remains best known for his films and for his plays, which continue to be staged regularly around the world.

Cocteau was born in Maisons-Lafitte, France, to a wealthy, art-conscious family. He began to attract attention with his poetry in his late teens. He was friends, and collaborated creatively, with the most prominent artists of his time. Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, and photographer Man Ray, for example, all made portraits of him. It was to a young Cocteau in 1912 that ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev issued his famous challenge, “Etonne-moi!” [“Astonish me!”]. In 1917, Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes premiered *Parade*, written by Cocteau, for which Erik Satie composed the music, Léonide Massine choreographed the dance, and Picasso designed the sets and costumes.

Cocteau associated with major Dada figures, including Francis Picabia (1879-1953) who sponsored a 1920 exhibition of his work, but Cocteau did not count himself a Dadaist. His plays, films, and poems often exhibit dreamlike qualities and seemingly surreal imagery, but neither Cocteau nor the Surrealists considered him a Surrealist – in fact, the Surrealists criticized his work for only appearing to be surreal.

Cocteau derived much of his imagery from Greek tragedy and myths, such as Sophocles’ tragedies *Oedipus the King* and *Antigone*, and the myths surrounding Orpheus. Cocteau saw himself as an orphic poet and his Orphic trilogy — *Le Sang d’un poète* [*The Blood of a Poet*] (1930), *Orphée* [*Orpheus*] (1950), and *The Testament of Orpheus* is a sort of visionary autobiography of him as an artist. *The Blood of a Poet* presents visual tropes that recur throughout his career; a traumatic snowball fight among schoolboys, for instance, introduces Dargelos, a bully who became an object of his longing as a youth and who reappears in various forms throughout his later works. *Orpheus,* starring Jean Marais, Cocteau’s longtime lover, recasts the Orpheus myth in modern trappings along with Cocteau’s own ideas about the esoteric nature of poetry and the special status of the poet. The film alsoprovided an enduring cinema trope in the leather-clad motorcyclists who roar through it as the messengers of Death. *The Testament of Orpheus* reprises three iconic characters from *Orpheus* (Death, the young poet Cègeste, and the angel Heurtebise) for a tribunal scene in which Cocteau himself discusses his career and his ideas about poetry. In the scene Cocteau seems to convey that a poet writes only for those who speak the same unknown language as the poet – that is, other poets.

After World War II, Cocteau was briefly accused of collaboration during the Occupation, but the charges were quickly cleared and he went on to receive some of France’s highest literary honors.

**References and Further Readings**

Andrew, D. (1995) *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Cocteau, J. (1972) *Cocteau on the Film: Conversations with Jean Cocteau recorded by André Fraigneau.* New York: Dover.

Lanzoni, R. (2004) *French Cinema: From Its Beginnings to the Present.* New York: Continuum.

Official Site of the Jean Cocteau Committee:

<http://www.jeancocteau.net/index_en.php>

**Filmography (Major Works)**

*Le Sang d’un poète* [*The Blood of a Poet*] (1930) written and directed by Cocteau.

*La Belle et la bête* [*Beauty and the Beast*](1945) written and directed by Cocteau.

*Les Dames du bois de Boulogne* (1945) adapted by Cocteau from [Denis Diderot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denis_Diderot)'s [*Jacques le fataliste*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_le_fataliste); directed by Robert Bresson.

*L’Aigle à deux têtes* [*The Eagle Has Two Heads*] (1947) written and directed by Cocteau, adapted from his stageplay.

*Les Parents terribles* (1948) written and directed by Cocteau, adapted from his stageplay.

*Les Enfants terribles* (1950) adapted by Cocteau from his novel; directed by Jean-Pierre Melville

*Orphée* [*Orpheus*] (1950) written and directed by Cocteau, adapted from his play.

*Le Testament d’Orphée* [*The Testament of Orpheus*] (1960) written and directed by Cocteau.

**Major Theatre Works**

*Antigone* (1922) Adapted from Sophocles

*Orphée* (1928) Based on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

*La Voie humaine* (1930)

*La Machine infernale* (1934) Based on the story of Oedipus

*Les Parents terribles* (1938)

*Le Bel indifférent* (1940) Written for and originally starring Edith Piaf

*L’Aigle à deux têtes* (1946)

**Paratextual**

Many images on the Official Site of the Jean Cocteau Committee:

<http://www.jeancocteau.net/index_en.php>

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