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La belle et la bête: Stylistic Convergence and the Subversive Imagination of Jean Cocteau

by Erin Nunoda

The literary tradition of fairy tales began in the précieuse salons of France in the late 17th century: gilded assemblages that were predominately female in demographic and latently subversive in intent. In these environments, young noblewomen would weave peasant folklore, social commentary, and elements of autobiography into stories of rebellion hidden beneath layers of poise and decorum. They deconstructed the popular modes of the time, particularly the children's tales written by Charles Perrault, fashioning a collage of their era's values, and the means by which they could be transgressed. One example of a typical salon story was Jeanne-Marie Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast," which makes subtle use of dialogue, is bolstered by strong, multifaceted characterization and eliminates most of the insipid moralizing that plague other fairy tales. Moreover, the story also contained strong undercurrents of social commentary derived from Beaumont's experiences of a "failed marriage to a man who professed elegance, but was in reality a monster" (Pauley 85). She tucked her personal suffering under a façade of light escapism: like many fairy tales, her seemingly simple story acted as a deconstruction of a culture that was defined by appearances and surface designations.

In this sense, Beaumont's story presented a reasonable template onto which Jean Cocteau could construct his filmic interpretation, one that was born out of his own personal fascination with dichotomies: masculine and feminine, beauty and ugliness, reality and fantasy (Popkin 100). While Cocteau's primary interests lay in French surrealism and the poetic avant-garde, he also recognized that the illusory quality of filmmaking had no impact if it was not contrasted with a sense of authenticity. Therefore, the stylistic and thematic content of *La belle et la bête* (Jean Cocteau, 1946) is a mirror of two artistic classifications: the dreamlike trances (Magrini) and fantasy logic of surrealism and the optique perspective (Andrew 19) and rich cinematic canvases of pre-war poetic realism. As well, the confluence of these generic elements can also be used to examine the circumstances of the film's making and the specific authorial preoccupations of Cocteau's work.

Somewhat curiously, the film does not begin with an immersion into a fantasy landscape, but with a metatextual introduction by Cocteau commenting on the naïve, somewhat less critical perspective that is required to view the film: "Children believe what we tell them. They have complete faith in us... I ask of you a little of this childlike simplicity." Ironically enough, the ensuing film is not particularly simplistic and in fact requires a degree of participatory activity on the part of the audience. Although the protagonists are clearly denoted as sympathetic, many of the proceeding events and elements of the *mise-en-scène* are infused with symbolic, subjective meaning. The film gives equal dramatic weight to the stories of both Belle and The Beast, invoking

Andrew's concept of the *optique*, where the audience judges the events taking place through their own "ocular and ideological mechanisms," rather than the specific intentions of the director (Andrew 19).

In addition, Andrew's theories concerning 1930s French cinema can also be applied to Cocteau's proficiency in multiple artistic fields, fashioning a "permeability of spheres," that in turn enriches the film's variety of expression and thematic depth (Andrew 21). The opening scenes, which are mostly rendered in period naturalness, are contrasted with the gauzy tone of Belle's chambers, the theatrical extravagance of the castle grounds, and the baroque grandiosity of the banquet hall. For *La belle et la bête*, Cocteau was influenced by both the formalistic structure of Neo-Classical painting and the liberation of the European modernist aesthetic. However, Cocteau was not inspired by a single artistic movement (as Renoir and Carné were by French impressionism) and he generally disagreed with the premise that filmmaking should be engineered by politics or philosophy. In Cocteau's view, film should be generated by its emotional content: it is a vindication of the artist's identity, not an opportunity for the director to assert their opinion on outside events (Popkin 106). *La belle et la bête* alternates between various stylistic modes with no regard for the strictures of a particular movement, mostly because Cocteau viewed such adherences as ulterior to the purpose of film. "I do not seek to please or conform to any standards" Cocteau once said in reference to his critics, "but I do request that I be understood" (qtd. in Hayward 47).

In this sense, most of Cocteau's frustrations grew out of his feeling of artistic persecution. Just as his homosexuality prevented him from being accepted in traditional French society, his unwillingness to subsume his idiosyncratic personality into either the surrealist or poetic realist camps meant that he was also discredited by the critical elite. He never saw his style as contradictory, any more than the average person's imagination is contradictory. "A childlike response is precisely what the modern audience lacks, and because of their desire to be treated like grown-ups, adults accept nothing but complacency and boredom" (qtd. in Popkin 106). Children, Cocteau proposed, could accept simultaneous impulses towards realism and surrealism in the same work because they did not view the world as orderly or contained. They did not look for ideology or political subtext and were therefore the ideal audience. They could become immersed and consumed by the world presented before them; their emotional response would always supersede their intellectual one.

Through this lens, Cocteau's introduction becomes a defence, his means of arguing for film as a "surveyor of the collective imagination," with the frame offering a glimpse into a universe of dreams and unconscious desires (Galef 96). Cocteau accomplishes this effect in a manner reflective of his earlier surrealist proclivities, demonstrated by the extensive usage of mirrors, anthropomorphic creatures and other representations of the fracturing of the human psyche. Symbols of duality or other psychological dichotomies are frequently present, most obviously in the contrast

between animalistic sexuality and stately decorum that palpitates throughout the protagonists' conversations. The animation of household objects aids in the establishment of the castle's otherworldly atmosphere and compels additional contemplation of the physical boundary between human and inhuman.

Moreover, although this surrealist tendency is situated in a magical aura rather than a deliberately revolutionary discourse, it is also possible to consider *La belle et la bête* a transgressive work. For the future New Wave filmmakers, Cocteau's films "represented a radical break with the inward-looking and safe narratives of the time: they countered dominant production practices and showed the way that France's cinema could be reborn" (Hayward 48). Cocteau's conception of filmic nationalism was informed by his dislike of Hollywood's simplistic storytelling, and he laboured to preserve the heterogeneous quality of French artisanal film crews, where "products were doctored by specialists working serially and in increments" (Andrew 11). Working on a limited budget and encumbered by the multitude of creative constraints imposed during the Second World War, Cocteau "often had to resort to theatrical tricks in order to capture his visual effects" (Hayward 44). However, instead of coming off as regressively primitive, the effects have a handmade touch that renders them both nostalgic objects and deeply unsettling oddities.

This tone characterizes the entire film: it has its touches of regal warmth and pastoral comfort, but it also works to envelope the audience into an alien environment of sumptuous romanticism. Perhaps more important than his formal subversions or his dalliances with literary accoutrements was Cocteau's sympathy for the sexual expressions of traditionally marginalized groups. The most common reading of *La belle et la bête* interprets the story as a coming-of-age parable: Belle's transition from the protective hold of her father into the unknown realm of adult sexuality. Once released, she encounters a man who is attractive but cruel, and one who is kind but appears monstrous. Crucially, the conclusion of the film reveals the two male figures as merged into one, succinctly representing the transformation of her feral desires into the domesticity of human marriage. Although this conclusion is rather conventional, "the advocacy of female subjectivity contained the suggestion of equality: a woman was no longer just the object of fantasy, but the perpetrator of fantasy" (Hayward 47).

The other significant interpretation is generally supplemented by Cocteau's own biographical details, particularly in the manner in which he dealt with his sexuality. Cocteau kept an appended copy of Beaumont's story in his diary throughout the filming, and through his annotations it is clear that he identified with The Beast's conception of shame (Popkin 105). In the fairy tale, Beaumont states that the curse was a result of a familial mistake, thereby avoiding any implicit statement about personal responsibility. Cocteau decides to excise this explanation, thereby changing The Beast into a more ambiguous character, one who is significantly influenced by the folkloric vision of "the other." Although he is eventually revealed to be benevolent, Belle spends much of the film in fear of him, and he often prefaces his conversations

with statements suggesting his inherent monstrousness. The casting of Cocteau's lover, Jean Marais, enhances this second interpretation: The Beast's guilt is Cocteau's guilt, one that can only be reconciled through the compassion of human love.

This latent sexual content is fitting for a fairy tale adaptation, and is certainly more exaggerated by the presence of a surrealist artist like Cocteau, but most of these subversions exist below the film's surface. Any kind of socio-political provocation is cleverly masked by the impeccably composed tableaux and the stylized *mise-en-scène*. In essence, Cocteau is evoking a humanist sense of wonder rather than a reflexive stab into the heart of the establishment. The child is the one who has fixed the film's gaze: the representatives of an audience that is unconcerned with trivialities like artistic sensibility or political context, and merely wishes to be transported by the universe on screen.

The film is book-ended by the firing of arrows. The first is shot by Avenant, Belle's potential suitor, and symbolizes his needless aggression and (more notably) his lack of essential kindness. Belle rejects him, choosing instead to place herself in the maternal role of caregiver for her father. In these first scenes, there is no musical score and Belle's house is nearly empty. Although her father has misappropriated his funds and their lack of furnishings may reflect their pecuniary destitution, the rendering of Belle's home as barren might have other implications. Belle "wants more from life than a marriage of reason, she wishes to be excited or frightened or provoked" (Hayward 47). In essence, she desires an adult relationship, one where she can claim her own sense of agency and will not be encumbered by the expectations of paternalistic male figures. In this sense, she is painted in contrast to her shallow, materialistic sisters and her foolish, immature brother. She is an exception in her household, and therefore she does not belong there.

Although it might seem like an odd proposition, the film borrows from the poetic realist aesthetic as often as it does from surrealist fantasy. For instance, the film's tone is infused with Renoir's "tragic naturalism and tangible anxiety about the future" in that Belle's unique longing for self-actualization means that her home environment can only ever represent death and finality (Andrew 14). Therefore, even though the film can be placed in the generic context of period fantasy, it is ostensibly making a comment about female sexual and political identity in post-war France. The plainness of these opening scenes is later juxtaposed with the sumptuous opulence of The Beast's castle: a place that is alluring and uncanny, forbidden and entirely seductive.

Also, despite its trappings as a children's story, Belle's arrival at the castle is accompanied by an immediate feeling of sexual tension and saturated eroticism. When she is brought to her room the bed sheets peel backwards: a clear sign of what the castle will portend. As The Beast first enters the banquet hall, Belle's reaction is not entirely one of fear: it is also tinged with excitement and anticipation. Throughout

their first conversation she clutches a knife, symbolic of her sexual power and her lack of submissive femininity. Although she is presumably The Beast's occupant (the result of her self-sacrifice for her father), she still holds a position wherein she is allowed to determine her own fate. As The Beast states, in the castle "there is no master but you." She is the one who refuses The Beast's proposal of marriage, who is permitted to explore the castle without inhibition, who orders him to leave her bedroom, who allows him to drink from her hands. Cocteau's implication is that the castle represents Belle's fantasies: a lush score is introduced, she is decorated in lavish gowns, the landscapes are rendered in soft focus, she is unperturbed by her meddling sisters, and (most importantly) she is given the opportunity for romantic liberation. The Beast gains her affection through respecting and listening to her concerns, and by not being an imposition on her freedom.

Within the castle landscape, Cocteau merges these master/servant dynamics with his interest in thematic dualities: the blending of two separate identities into one. Animated statues occupy the walls: imitations of various human parts that perform specific, servile tasks. They give off an eerie impression of architectural imprisonment: even though some of the statues have faces, none ever speaks; yet their eyes continuously scan the surroundings. Despite their lack of immediate power, they are symbols of godlike surveillance and silent judgement. Their omniscient presence only serves to heighten The Beast's own bodily shame and sexual indecision. In one scene, he stalks the hallways with his hands engulfed in smoke, the implication being that he has given into his animalistic nature. Immediately after this scene, Belle is shocked to find him in her bedroom, where he offers her a pearl necklace, seemingly as a token of penance. Along with this more Catholic-centred symbolism, Cocteau had a continuous interest in classical mythology, an obsession he used to pursue his explorations of human and societal dichotomies.

Like many modernists, Cocteau wished to disprove the Platonic philosophical statement that the human mind and body are structured arenas, and within this discourse, that the nature of identity is ever absolute. Early in the film, the psychic contact between Belle and The Beast is established through the device of an all-seeing mirror, "reflect in your heart for me, and I will reflect for you" (Cocteau 1946). Belle and The Beast, despite the boundaries of class and appearance are bound by the similar creed of the outsider. The castle defies rational logic, and therefore is conceived as separate from Belle's "waking life" of complacency and regulation. The world of the castle represents escape: a shared experience of dreaming that is akin to the "conscious hallucinations" (Magrini) of the surrealist aesthetic. It is also a tone that Cocteau uses to represent love: in this illusory space, divisive signifiers cease to be of much significance. In one of the film's more memorable shots, Belle and The Beast descend a garden staircase, their hands held high in a union of two displaced souls. The Beast allows Belle to leave the castle to attend to her ailing father, even though he knows that her departure will likely result in his death.

In this sense, the conclusion of *La belle et la bête* contains a degree of the “fatalistic romanticism” characteristic of pre-war French cinema, but this arrives in a rather curious, controversial form (Bazin 196). Avenant, driven by rage and jealousy at Belle’s preference for The Beast, follows her to the castle and is struck by the arrow of Diana, the goddess of chastity. Cocteau dissolves Avenant’s face into that of the dying Beast, who soon assumes the dead man’s visage. In terms of surrealist theory, it is possible to suggest that what this resurrection represents is “the portrayal of death as the ultimate culmination of desire, the ultimate possibility of being” (Magrini). Moreover, even Cocteau was aware that many viewed this ending as disappointing, for Belle “had not wished for Prince Charming or to go and live happily ever after” (Hayward 47). Of course, this is the same ending that had been written by Beaumont centuries earlier, and perhaps it was adherence to the literary source that defined Cocteau’s decision.

What seems more likely is that the ending of *La belle et la bête* was the apotheosis of its subversion. It represents the final reconciliation of fantasy and reality, dichotomies of sexual identity, and the realms of childhood and maturity. For Cocteau, the illusions of the castle were analogous to the illusions of the film: the cinema represents the possibility of release to a universe of desire and imaginative escape. In this sense, to watch Cocteau’s film is to understand what it means to be a child: consumed with the possibilities of enchantment, but also deeply fearful of what lies hidden in the darkness. If nothing else, *La belle et la bête* is a story about sacrifice, disappointment, ecstasy and finally understanding. It is Cocteau’s sincere illustration of what it feels like to make art, and perhaps more importantly, what it feels like to be loved.

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