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Yannick Bellon, Director; Jacqueline Jacoupy, Producer. *Colette*. VHS; 29 minutes, black & white. Distributed in the U.S. by First/Run Icarus Films, 2003 [1951].

Review by Judith Mayne, Ohio State University.

Colette (1873-1954) is one of France's most beloved authors. Her artistic output includes over fifty works that span different genres (fiction and memoir) and media (literature and film). Colette also had a distinct persona as the embodiment of women's desires for both love and independence. Her books have always been popular, and the artist herself has been an icon of French literary life. There is no shortage of books, articles, and films on Colette's life and her works, ranging from biographies to works of literary criticism. Julia Kristéva's recently-published study of Colette is the third volume of her series on female genius (the first two volumes were devoted to Hannah Arendt and Melanie Klein).^[1] But Yannick Bellon's 1951 film is a special treasure, showing us the artist in old age (Colette was in her late seventies when the film was made) as she reflects upon her childhood in the French countryside, her homes, and her later life in her Paris apartment overlooking the Palais Royal. While the film does not necessarily provide new information about Colette, it is nonetheless a significant contribution to our understanding of Colette's influence, for it gives the viewer a vibrant portrait both of the artist in old age (Colette wrote the text that she reads aloud in the film), and of the fascinating persona that has charmed readers and audiences for decades. The film has not been widely shown in either the U.S. or France in the last few decades. First Run/Icarus Films acquired the film for distribution in 2003, along with other documentaries about French writers (Marguerite Duras, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jean-Paul Sartre). These films (along with others in the First Run/Icarus catalogue on French cinema and culture) offer viewers a unique opportunity not only to watch writers discuss their own work, but to witness how these writers were seen by previous generations of critics and filmmakers.^[2]

The film establishes an intimate tone from the beginning, when we move from shots of the Palais Royal in Paris to the interior of Colette's apartment where her various collections--books, mounted butterflies, glass paperweights--are shown in close-up. We meet the writer as she greets her longtime housekeeper, Pauline Tissandier, and her third husband, Maurice Goudeké. As Colette and Goudeké chat over breakfast, he brings up the subject of the production of the film we are watching. He asks his wife if she has made a decision about whether to go ahead with the film. Colette tells her husband that she is no longer photogenic; she protests when he tells her that there is pressure to make the film; she claims that if she were stronger she would refuse to agree to make it, but if it had to be made, it would have to be done chronologically. And thus begins Colette's own narration, as the camera takes us to the town of Saint Sauveur where the writer was born. While some might find these opening scenes a bit artificial, they allow Colette to shine as a gifted performer whose presumed reluctance to make the film allows her to seduce her audience with her presence and her words.

The camera moves through Colette's childhood home as the author narrates, in voice-over, a description of the house and the gardens, and familiar themes of Colette's writings: emergence, sensuality, and a world where "animals and people expressed themselves gently." Colette's narration, accompanied by (mostly) well-known photographs of the author and her family at various ages, traces her departure from the countryside, her first marriage and her arrival in Paris, and her earliest publications. Interestingly, in telling of her past, Colette does not dwell on her Parisian life or her literary career, but rather speaks more about her love for the country and her various country homes. Colette's career as a pantomime (the inspiration for one of her best-known novels, *The Vagabond* [1910]) is summarized by

an interview with friend and former stage performer Georges Wague (the basis for the character of Georges Brague in *The Vagabond*), who praises her gifts as a performer and provides his own commentary on the music hall stages they shared.

Colette's voice-over narration returns to sing the praises of the countryside as the place where she found refuge and solace after the end of her first marriage in 1906 to the somewhat notorious Willy (Henri-Gauthier Villars). Under Willy's tutelage (some have described their relationship as exploitative, with Colette doing the writing and Willy the publishing), Colette co-signed her first Claudine novels (*Claudine à l'école* [1900]; *Claudine à Paris* [1901]; *Claudine en ménage* [1902]; and *Claudine s'en va* [1903]). Throughout the film, Colette's passion for natural surroundings, animals and the rhythms of a life attuned to the cycles of the seasons, is apparent (in fact, far more attention in the film is devoted to her country houses than to her career!). Touring her last country house, where the author wonders if she will finally stay put, Colette brings us to her current life in Paris at the Palais Royal.

While Colette's love for the countryside is as amply demonstrated in the film as it is in her writing, Colette's descriptions of what she sees from her Paris apartment make clear that she is attentive to place (urban or rural) and to the geographies of everyday life. "The arcades, so mysteriously alike and mysteriously unlike at the same time," says the author, as the camera shows us the famous pillars of Palais Royal, making the viewer aware that the most familiar sight can be understood anew when described by an artist like Colette. After the voyage through Colette's past, we return to the Palais Royal apartment where she and her husband eat their breakfast. Flowers are delivered; Pauline returns from the market and Colette samples the produce. The film concludes with an evening visit from Jean Cocteau, who exclaims, tongue-in-cheek, upon Colette's ability to "do nothing."

Colette is a valuable resource for educational libraries, and the film has potential for extensive classroom use, particularly in courses on twentieth-century French literature. The film is a precious archive of one of France's most gifted and popular writers near the end of her life. When the film appeared in France, critic Jean Quéval praised it as a "miracle of cinema."^[3] Although Colette is immobile in her Palais Royal apartment, her voice and her gestures take the viewer on a moving journey less valuable for the new light it shines on her career than for the opportunity it allows to appreciate that in old age, Colette's storytelling abilities are as enchanting as ever.

NOTES

[1] Two of the best-known biographies of Colette are Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier, *Colette* (Paris: Perrin, 1997); and Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: Colette* (New York: Knopf, 1999). Films about Colette's life include *Becoming Colette* (1991; dir. Danny Huston) and *Colette, une femme libre* (2004; dir. Nadine Trintignant). There is a vast amount of secondary literature on Colette's writing, and in the last several decades two aspects of her writing have received particular attention, *l'écriture féminine*, the experimental writing celebrating the female body, and autobiography. See Jerry Aline Flieger, *Colette and the Phantom Subject of Autobiography* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), and Julia Kristéva, ed., *Notre Colette* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2004). Kristéva's study of Colette is *Colette: Le génie féminin* (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 2002).

[2] First Run/Icarus's catalogue can be consulted online at <http://www.frif.com>.

[3] Jean Quéval, "Le Critique désarmé," *Cahiers du cinéma* no. 32 (February 1954), p. 58.

Judith Mayne
Ohio State University
mayne.1@osu.edu

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