

Colette, Colette, I'm Crazy 'bout Colette, But Ooooh...That Mitchum!

Colette



- **The Lusty Women**
- **But oh! That Mitchum...**

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An iris shot reveals a sleepy French country village, south of Paris. We see a terraced house on an unassuming street. The house has a formal, respectable front. Inside, it is decorated with small objects of wonder (seashells, handiwork, dried flowers and other small trinkets) and it is filled with books, homegrown flowers, plants and herbs in cachepots. It is presided over by lazy cats, lounging on windowsills and stretched out in doorways (managing always, quite admirably, to be just in your way). The back of the house, with a wisteria-covered wall, gives way to a splendid garden. It is shadowy, green (there's enough rain during the year) and marked by red, luscious flowers such as roses and rare geraniums, and trees bearing red fruits. There is a rustle from behind a rhododendron and our leading lady appears: she is a fine young creature, with wavy hair (now in braids), a big ribbon in her hair, a half-smiling mouth and a pair of inquisitive eyes. An inter-title calls her 'the flower of Burgundy' and informs us of her wild and hungry spirit, of her zest for life, of her appetite for a perceptual and tactile discovery of the world, and of her strange foreknowledge of the many secrets of the heart. She is called Gabrielle-Sidonie Claudine Colette, 'Gabi' for short, but soon she will go by the name of Colette.

The next important figure in our cast is Sidonie ("Sido"), our heroine's mother, who has known excitement, artistic elation, and temporary freedom in her life but also country life, severe marital difficulties (and occasional bliss), and the strain of small town morality and religious fervor. Sido is introduced while looking at the sky (promising rain) and smelling the tobacco plants and thorn apples. She knows dusk is upon them and sure enough, she is right. Our *petite* Colette, out for an evening stroll, is caught in a surprisingly violent summer storm and comes home with a tale of little frogs falling from the sky. (Now, did this actually happen? It might have.) She is home just in time before dark.

photogénie



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These imagined opening shots could be part of a (fictitious) silent film about Colette's childhood in Saint-Saveur-en-Puisaye. A sensitive director would make sure to focus on the details of the sensual, natural world around Colette, but these images would not be able to recall the smells in the air, the textures of the objects the characters touch (flowers, fabrics, fruit, leaves, thorns), the sounds of small town life (a cat's paws on a clean floor, men spitting out tobacco on the street, tiny leaves blowing from one garden to another) and the numerous other perceptual impressions and sensations that Colette has observed and described with great care in her writings. My own description is of course very (very) poor and serves merely to remind us of the (inimitable) sensual richness of Colette's writing.

In the documentary *Colette* (Yannik Bellon, 1951), which was shown at the Cinema Ritrovato, Colette recalls her life through the several houses she lived in during her life (from Saint-Sauveur to the Palais Royal). Colette based the narration on her own writings and she speaks the voice over that accompanies the images. At some point in the film she receives flowers from a cat (so the accompanying card says) and Colette knows, wisely, that only "cats would have the tact to send flowers." Jean Cocteau (her neighbor at the Palais Royal) agrees. He is sitting at her feet on her bed, not unlike a cat himself, purring and smoking and adoring the by then older lady of letters with her mischievous smile and sparkling eyes.

The Colette program at the Cinema Ritrovato offered not only the opportunity to get to know the different cinematic endeavors of one of France's most eminent and loved literary monuments (the first woman to be president of l'Académie Goncourt, the first woman to receive a state funeral), but also tried to recreate the world of yesterday via those images, genres, controversies and the work of best friends or kindred spirits (Musidora, Mae West) that surrounded, inspired, and sometimes were created by Colette. Some highlights:

The Lusty Women

Leontine Sagan's 1931 charming *Mädchen in Uniform* (to the regret of many festival goers not the Romy Schneider version) must have appealed to Colette, who wrote the French subtitles for the subtitled version, not only because it was a job and paid the bills but also for its subject matter. It is a sensitive depiction of strict boarding school life about which Colette herself had written in her *Claudine* novels and an audacious portrait of same-sex infatuation among schoolgirls and pupil-teacher lesbian desire. In this adaptation of Christa Winsloe's largely autobiographical play *Ritter Nérestan*, a young seductive teacher is the subject of schoolgirl Manuela's fantasy (played by Hertha Thiele.) Manuela has recently lost her mother and her passion for her teacher/governess (Dorothea Wieck) can thus be read as either a craving for surrogate maternal love as well as a sexual awakening. The teacher strikes a chord with the other girls as well: her name, Elizabeth Von Bernburg, is embroidered in several schoolgirls' uniforms or drawn in ink on the flesh of their adolescent arms. A lesbian plot aside, the film explicitly questions the effectiveness of strict pedagogical discipline and required submission. One reason why Manuela and the other girls swoon over Frau Von Bernburg is because she offers an alternative to the strict authoritarianism of the school: she is emphatic, generous, and understanding.

Mädchen in Uniform
(Leontine Sagan, 1931)

It is well known that Colette herself was no stranger to same-sex love affairs (she had enjoyed a very public one with Missy – Mathilde de Morny – for years) or relationships with significant age differences. She would emphasize time and again, both in real life

and in her writings that love in all its forms, is still love, however society judges it. One immediately thinks of the relationship Colette had with Bertrand De Jouvenel (her estranged husband's son) from 1920 until 1925 when he was 16 and she 47. In a Colette adaptation not in the program *Le Blé en herbe* (Claude Autant-Lara, 1954) an older woman (the magnificent Edwige Feuillère) romances a sixteen-year-old boy in Bretagne during the summer season. When she realizes she is endangering both herself and the boy's tender feelings and reputation, she pushes him away *dame aux camélias*-style. It is an act of true love. In *Chéri*, published in 1920, Colette had already dealt with the May-December plot. (Agnes Varda, who attended the festival to introduce her latest film, *Visages, Villages*, made a Colette-esque film herself in 1988 with *Kung Fu Master*.) There is a line in *Mädchen in Uniform* that must have pleased the writer for it resonated with her own views on life and love: what society calls sinful can be true love none the same. Years before, when Colette had been obliged to defend her relationship with Bertrand de Jouvenel, she had firmly stated: "Homosexual love is love. Love for a man is love. Love for a young man is love. Purity and impurity are quite the same" (cited in Kiki Coumans). In Colette's version of *One hour with You* (a 1933 Lubitsch comedy), it would not be Maurice Chevalier [singing \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A24V9FPnsJs\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A24V9FPnsJs) about his inability to choose between two exquisite ladies – his wife Colette and her good friend Mitzi – it would be Jeanette MacDonald, in the role of Colette, who would be torn between an honest devotion to her charming husband and an equally truthful affection for the coquettish Mitzi.

Also in the Colette program was *Lac aux dames* (1934), a film directed by Marc Allégret, scripted by Jean-George Auriol and Allégret and based on the novel by Vicki Baum. It featured dialogues by Colette.

Lac aux dames (Marc Allégret, 1934)

It was a big production in 1934 and introduced several young, charismatic stars but also relied on established character actors (Michel Simon) in minor roles. *Lac aux dames* is the story of Eric Heller (Jean Pierre Aumont), a young, hard-bodied swimming instructor, who becomes the object of affection, passion and lust in a holiday resort in Lake Constance, Austria. It is an atmospheric, amusing film, sometimes annoying – why do all the women swoon over its dull leading man? – and at times enrapturing – It suggests that there exists a secluded space between wickedness and innocence, an 'in-between' of adolescence and adulthood. The most appealing character in the film is Puck, a wild, poetic, innocuous, and wicked young creature – played by Simone Simon, who does not quite belong to the world of social decorum and bourgeois etiquette and seems to be living in a separate universe together with her absent father and gigantic dog. Yet, this unshackled elfinesque child of nature character is neither harmless nor selfless: she has dreams and desires of her own. Emilie Cauquy notes in the festival catalog that Simon's therianthropic qualities would make her a Pekinese dog in the hands of Colette, a cat in the hands of Jean Renoir, and a panther in the hands of Jacques Tourneur. She had me purring, wagging my tail, and howling at the moon.

Divine (Ophüls 1934), written directly for the screen by Colette and based on her own experiences as a mime and vaudeville star, is set in a Parisian music hall (complete with debauched stars, drug trafficking, and

Divine (Max Ophüls, 1934)

dangerous acts with snakes and lots of naked girls). In many ways it is a forerunner to Ophüls' later *Lola Montès* (1954) without the self-reflexive meta-commentary and cinemascope grandeur of that European monster production. 'Divine' is the stage name of the film's heroine, Ludivine Jarris (played by Simone Berriau, who also acted as

producer), who has come to the city to make money but who has difficulty shaking off the gullibility and innocence of the country. Of course, being a Colette character, she is not entirely meek. Early in the film she firmly proclaims: “Mes idées elles sont à moi et je ne veux pas en changer.” Sadly, Berriau is no Feuillère, no Darrieux, no Fontaine, even no Martine Carol, but Ophüls shows such confidence exploring the quickened heartbeat and frenetic and exciting atmosphere of music hall life, that you quite easily forget her blandness. Ophüls’ camera twirls around like an excited schoolgirl, explores space and seductive bodies, and there is always something happening in the corner of the frame. Despite the rather silly and melodramatic subplot (involving drugs traffic) and the off-key happy end, it does not let you down. Already in 1935, Ophüls’ cinema was breathtaking and exciting. Somebody said to me after the screening: why don’t they do a complete Ophüls retrospective next year? Pourquoi pas?

But oh! That Mitchum...

Lee Server, Robert Mitchum’s biographer, has described his acting as belonging to no real school or tradition. Instead he built his characters from “a mental storehouse of observational and experiential data and a musical approach to pace and intonation and the special relationship of performer to camera.” The larger part of this description could actually be applied to Colette as well (she offered something new and unique in literature, her observational skills were exceptional, and there is definitely a musical sensitivity to her language), and I’ll freely take these shared characteristics to function as a bridge from one exceptional character to another. I have a feeling they would’ve gotten along should they have met, but as far as I know, they never did. Before Bologna that is.

Out of the Past (Jacques Tourneur, 1947)

So on to the man whose biography is called *Baby, I Don’t Care* and about whom there exist several, very cool and highly amusing stories and anecdotes usually involving heavy drinking, smoking (weed), women, a laconic attitude, a perpetual air of disinterestedness (and generally very few fucks given). That man was this year’s festival’s poster boy. In the poster, Mitchum’s eyes are lit by nothing but a baby spot, keeping the rest of his face in the dark. His eyes are simultaneously sleepy, endearing, pleading, innocent, but they could just as easily turn menacing, hard, merciless. There is no way of knowing what really goes on behind them. They make you wonder what they have seen – and from the biography I have learned they witnessed a great deal as he spent some of his youth as a wild boy of the road (perhaps not unlike the 1933 Wellman film of the same title that was shown in Bologna two years ago). The poster kept commanding my attention and I found myself staring at these eyes for quite some time, I even bought the poster to take home so I am still gazing, wondering, occasionally swooning too.

The famous stories about Mitchum – he wore the same raincoat in more than 40 movies, he chose his parts based how many days he got off during shooting, he was arrested for smoking marijuana – collected in that excellent summer read by Lee Server, make us forget that this actor starred in more than 120 movies (so, was he *really* lazy?) and that he very often did *not* end up getting the girl, which is unusual for a big star. Of course, it all depends on what Bob Mitchum film you are watching. The Ritrovato program featured several films that prove the ‘lazy Mitchum’ hypothesis wrong as they had the actor move around quite a lot (swimming, running, fist fighting, chasing girls, lots of dialogue). They also showed the man if not exactly visibly *acting* (he wouldn’t be caught dead acting, or emoting, or making grand gestures or speeches) but convincingly taking possession of his character none the same. According to Jacques Tourneur, who directed Mitchum in *Out of The Past* (1947), the actor was exceptionally good at *listening* on screen. Most

actors are too busy waiting for their lines or try their best to steal scenes from their co-stars, but Mitchum never deliberately vies for our attention and patiently listens (instead of waits) until it is his turn to talk. In *The Yakuza* (Sidney Pollack, 1974) there are moments when Mitchum's reaction shots show him *almost* saying something, but deciding against it.

The festival kicked off with early Bob: *The Story of G.I. Joe*. Made in 1945, it has all the ingredients of what

Jeanine Basinger calls the 'World War II combat picture,' a specific subgenre of war movies that has

The Story of G.I. Joe
(William A. Wellman, 1945)

been very influential in terms of providing the dramaturgical structure, reliable stock characters and characterization schemes for the war movie genre as a whole. It features mail call, a little dog for a mascot, a journey, combat, heroic deaths, stupid deaths, camaraderie and rivalry, rookies, and an uncertain outcome. The film was based on the Pulitzer Prize winning articles by Ernie Pyle, played in the film by Burgess Meredith. The film is often painfully honest about war's day-to-day business. This includes a lot of waiting, the writing of letters to mother's of deceased soldiers, more waiting, undernourishment, extreme exhaustion and insomnia (Mitchum's character quips that "W.C. Fields' sure cure for insomnia" is "to get plenty of sleep"), more waiting, and finally madness. The festival catalogue reports that Mitchum's understated, underacted audition for the role impressed William Wellman, who was looking for a non-star in the emotional lead. The film must have impressed *connoisseur* of all things WWII, Steven Spielberg, too, as there are several scenes in the film that reminded me of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) such as the skirmishes in a church in ruins. A soldier comments that a church is a funny place to be killing men in. Mitchum's character looks at him, thinks it over, and characteristically doesn't reply.

Mitchum's breakthrough, however, and much of his persona, is rooted in another 'genre,' the noir world of the cynical detectives, fishy policemen, or washed-up losers of the late forties. Breakthrough in noir (and an apprenticeship in westerns and war movies) means that his early characters were likely to die or at least will be badly beaten up at some point. Mitchum accepts it all. *Out of the Past* (1947) was shown in such a fine 35 mm copy that it felt completely new to me (even though I have seen it many times), and seeing as this is such a marvelously enjoyable film, that was a real treat. It is endlessly quotable (it was written by Daniel Mainwaring, who adapted it from his book *Build my Gallows High*) and compared to *The Big Sleep* it also boasts a plot that can be understood *and* reconstructed. It makes sense! (But couldn't that be said of almost any plot compared to *The Big Sleep*? – a movie I love, by the way.) The film greatly benefits from the sympathetic rivalry between Kirk Douglas (still something of a rookie then) and Mitchum. Douglas is outstanding, mastering the charming-but-arrogant weasel character he would play several times in his career. As an actor he was intelligent enough to know it was useless to try to steal a scene from Mitchum, who slyly underplays him and whose genuine contempt for pomposity and people trying too hard made him impossible to upstage. Mitchum may have won the battle of cool here, and the battle of the dimpled chins, he does not get the girl (good or bad) here either! And what a girl!

Film noirs often have (voice over) lines that point out that the girl the hero is about to fall for is really, really worth it. There is a similar line in *Out of The Past* spoken in voice over – "And then I saw her, coming out of the sun, and I knew why Whit [Douglas] didn't care about that forty grand..." – but I think that of all femmes fatales only Jane Greer has completely succeeded in convincing me she is truly a woman for whom intelligent men would risk it all. Even I would risk all for her. (But I wouldn't risk it all for Lizabeth Scott.)

The film is told from Mitchum's point of view (his voice over, his flashbacks, his mistakes) but not completely, as there is a coda to the film that cannot be told by Mitchum's character. Perhaps this coda was a remnant of the first draft of the screenplay, which was originally written by Mainwaring from the point of view of Mitchum's deaf-mute assistant at the gas station. (David Bordwell tells you why this idea was discarded on his [blog \(http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2013/09/10/innovation-by-accident/\)](http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2013/09/10/innovation-by-accident/)). A similar thing happened some 30 years later when the original point of view of the 'mute' native American 'Chief' in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman 1975), whose interior monologue is the book's perspective, was shifted in the screenplay to Jack Nicholson's R.P. McMurphy. As usual, stars taking precedence over narrative experimentation. (Although here too, the final three scenes are not McMurphy's perspective or experience.)

In a later Mitchum film on the program, *The Yakuza* (something of a Japanese noir – ok I am stretching it), he *still* fails to pocket the girl. The film, written by Robert Towne and Paul Schrader, is delightfully melancholic. Mitchum's aged Harry Kilmer, a retired detective, remembers his days as a military policeman in Japan where he enjoyed the only important love affair of his adult life with a Japanese woman, Keiko. When a kidnapping business brings him back to Japan, Mitchum meets up with his lost love but the situation is still hopeless. The scenes of quiet reminiscence are touching and I appreciated the time (and cheesy soundtrack) devoted to older men who know and have accepted regret and disappointment and who carry this weight with grace. Japan's big star Ken Takakura, who plays Mitchum's adversary/ally is very impressive and Mitchum gallantly lets him fill the screen with his compelling attractiveness. (He wasn't about to start stealing scenes now.) Kilmer learns that a woman's love may be a grand thing, but that masculine honor and respect are rewarding as well. When a washout Mexican character in *Bandido!* (Richard Fleisher, 1956) told him that all a man needs is a cigarette and a cup of coffee, Mitchum didn't listen and went after the girl after all (successfully I must add, but in his noir days that would have gotten him killed!). In 1974 he is wiser and content with that cigarette and a cup of green tea.

In conclusion to this Mitchum love fest I do have one critical note: the only thing Mitchum doesn't do well on screen is kiss. It's a very unappealing thing to watch. He just offers his lips to his co-stars and then waits until the obligatory moment is over. This is not to say that his characters are not potential promising lovers – look at the eyes, they tell a different story! – but the kissing never seems to interest him that much. So, I'll be signing off here with a peck on the nose and a rustle through that great hair (both Colette and Mitchum had good, solid, glorious hair) and I'll return to the city of stars (Bologna!) next year.

Notes

(https://cinea.be/photogenie/?cinea_artikeltype=notes)

Il Cinema Ritrovato

(https://cinea.be/photogenie/?cinea_thema=il-cinema-ritrovato)

Anke Brouwers

(https://cinea.be/photogenie/?cinea_auteur=anke-brouwers)

OVER DE AUTEUR

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