

film

The Jean Genie

Early erotic masterpiece finally sees the light on DVD

by Christopher McQuain

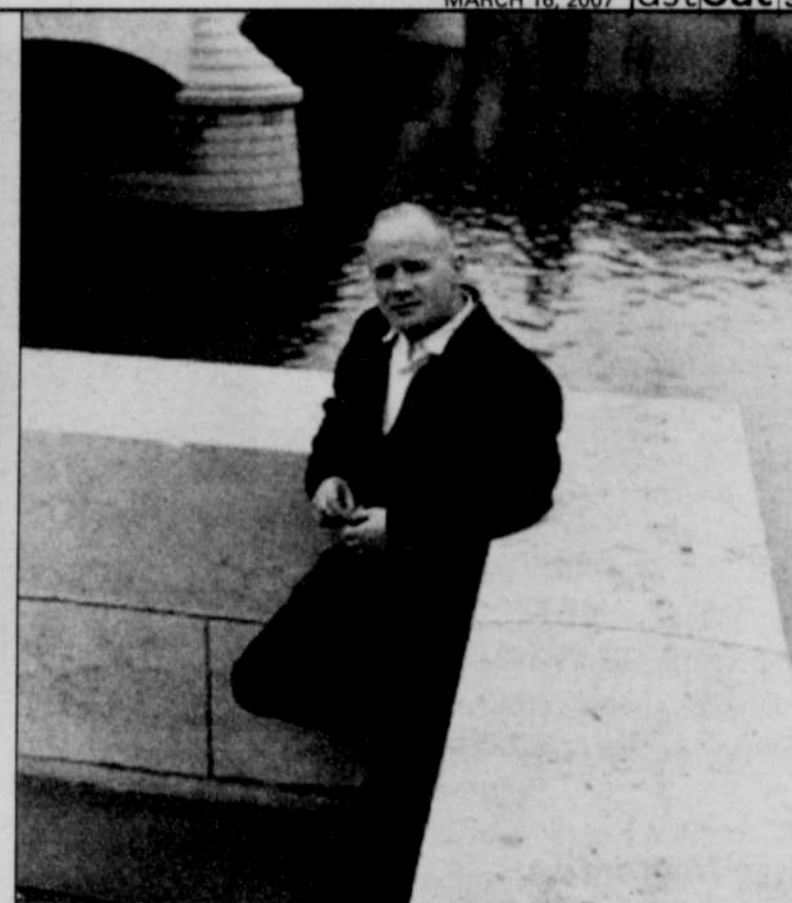
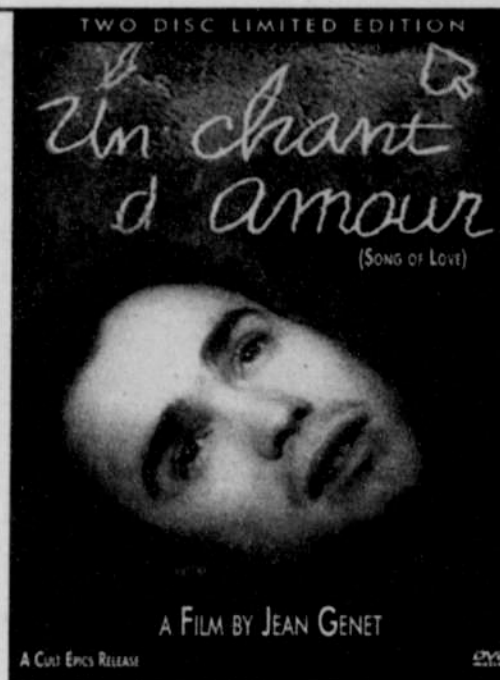
In a recent discussion about the general lack of subversion associated with mainstream gay culture now that such a thing is (thankfully) possible, I found myself saying, by way of illustration, "Jean Genet would never have shopped at Abercrombie & Fitch."

This French novelist, playwright and filmmaker—who became famous in the 1950s and 1960s with provocative, homoerotic novels and plays like *Our Lady of the Flowers* and *The Maids*—is a figure whose homosexuality can be said to have been the most "normal" (i.e., socially acceptable) thing about him. A chronically recidivist prisoner since his troubled childhood, Genet was turned on by the criminals he found himself surrounded by, and was able to parlay his feverish erotic obsessions and misanthropy into some of the most beautiful prose ever written. He rejected "straight" society in all senses of the term, and he saw himself as an eternal and irredeemable champion of whomever he considered to be oppressed, whether that meant gays (when we were considered "perverts"), thieves, jailbirds, Black Panthers, immigrants, Palestinians, etc.

But there was always a deep, tense core of tenderness to Genet's work. He evidently took Oscar Wilde's famous line, "All of us are lying in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars," to mean that the deeper in the gutter one lies, the better view of the stars one is afforded.

This paradoxical, quixotic—some might say perverse—worldview is on full display in Genet's 1950 film *Un Chant d'Amour* (*A Song of Love*), which has just been released to DVD for the first time in the United States. The film, a 25-minute silent short, can be likened to those of Jean Cocteau, Genet's fellow aesthete of excessive feeling and eroticizer of male flesh (especially the former's 1930 film *Blood of a Poet*). There is a sort of narrative to *Un Chant d'Amour*, but much of the imagery, gorgeously composed and shot, is purely poetic. Like any erotic dream, which is what the film unequivocally resembles, "reality" is a mere jumping-off point, a source of raw material to be transformed and lent profounder meaning by the imagination.

The film takes place in a prison, where the inmates are separated from one another in solitary cells. A prison guard watches through peepholes as they masturbate in various stages of undress, which arouses the voyeur. Two prisoners in particular draw his attention: The first, darkly handsome, is attempting to communicate with an object of affection, a cherubic and narcissistic young man in the adjacent cell. The first man pounds on the wall that separates them; one masculine arm swings a flaccid bunch of flowers back and forth from a barred cell window, teasing the extended arm in the next window as it attempts to grasp what must be a rare (if not unique) cinematic instance of a phallic bouquet.



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In what might be the film's most beautiful and memorable image, the first prisoner passes a thin straw through a tiny hole in the wall separating them, via which the smoke from his cigarette can be generously transferred through his lips and into the waiting mouth of his object of desire. The guard, evidently jealous of this interplay, enters the cell of the first man and physically assaults him, sending him into a reverie in which he and his paramour are a free couple frolicking and exploring one another in the woods. The vivid fantasy, romantically and sexually powerful, is consolation enough for the imprisoned protagonist, who is both defeated and satisfied. In the last shot, the reaching arm in the cell window finally catches hold of the swinging bouquet.

The film is supplemented with an enlightening introduction by Jonas Mekas, a legendary curator and exhibitor of underground film; a surprisingly tentative, dispensable commentary by acclaimed

American queer filmmaker Kenneth Anger; and an additional disc containing two documentaries from the early 1980s featuring interviews with Genet as a wizened, chain-smoking curmudgeon, charming for retaining his irascibility well into old age. (He died at age 75 in 1986.) This release is a treasure trove of background and insight for Genet aficionados, neophytes and cinema buffs alike, but the real prize is the film itself. "Pornography" and "art" are highly subjective terms, but for those swept up in its overpowering erotic and aesthetic currents, *Un Chant d'Amour* will easily qualify as a masterpiece in either category. 10

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