

ORPHEUS

Jean Cocteau

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The visionary author, film maker, and poet Jean Cocteau, a mentor and friend of Rosicrucian singer Edith Piaf, drew a great deal of inspiration for his art from the classical myths, including those of Cupid and Psyche (*Beauty and the Beast*), Sisyphus (*The Infernal Machine*), and Orpheus (*The Orphic Trilogy*). In this essay, he discusses aspects of the middle film of his Orphic Trilogy, *Orphée* (1950).

I wanted to deal with the problem of what is decreed in advance and what is not decreed in advance—in short, with free will.

When I make a film, it is a sleep in which I am dreaming. Only the people and places of the dream matter. I have difficulty making contact with others, as one does when half-asleep. If a person is asleep and someone else comes into the sleeper's room, this other person does not exist. He or she exists only if introduced into the events of the dream. Sunday is not a real day of rest for me, I try to go back to sleep as quickly as possible.

Death in my film is not Death represented symbolically by an elegant young woman, but the Death of Orphée. Each of us has our own which takes charge of us from the moment of birth. So Orphée's Death, exceeding her authority, becomes Cégeste's, and Cégeste says to her—when she asks: "Do you know who I am?"—"You are my Death," and not: "You are Death."

Realism in unreality is a constant pit-fall. People can always tell me that this is possible, or that is impossible; but do we understand anything about the workings of fate? This is the mysterious mechanism that I have tried to make tangible. Why is Orphée's Death dressed in this way, or that?

Why does she travel in a Rolls, and why does Heurtebise appear and disappear at will in some circumstances, but submit to human laws in others? This is the eternal *why* that obsesses thinkers, from Pascal to the least of poets.

Any unexpected phenomenon in nature disturbs us and confronts us with puzzles that we are sometimes unable to solve. No one has yet fathomed the true secret of an ants' nest or a beehive. The mimicry and spots of animals surely prove that some species have thought for a long time about becoming invisible; but we know nothing more than that.

Myth, Mysteries, and the Supernatural

I wanted to touch lightly on the most serious problems, without idle theorizing. So the film is a thriller which draws on myth from one side and the supernatural from the other.

I have always liked the no man's land of twilight where mysteries thrive. I have thought, too, that cinematography is superbly adapted to it, provided it takes



Filming *Orphée*, with Jean Cocteau (center) and Marie Déa (standing, right). Photo © Marion Boyars Publishers.

the least possible advantage of what people call *the supernatural*. The closer you get to a mystery, the more important it is to be realistic. Radios in cars, coded messages, shortwave signals and power cuts are all familiar to everybody and allow me to keep my feet on the ground.

Nobody can believe in a famous poet whose name has been invented by a writer. I had to find a mythical bard, the bard of bards, the Bard of Thrace. And his story is so enchanting that it would be crazy to look for another. It provides the background on which I embroider. I do nothing more than to follow the cadence of all fables which are modified in the long run according to who tells the story. Racine and Molière did better. They copied antiquity. I always advise people to copy a model. It is by the impossibility of doing the same thing twice and by the new blood that is infused into the old frame that the poet is judged.

Orphée's Death and Heurtebise reproach Orphée for asking questions. Wanting to understand is a peculiar obsession of mankind.

There is nothing more vulgar than works that set out to prove something. *Orphée*, naturally, avoids even the appearance of trying to prove anything. "What were you trying to say?" This is a fashionable question. I was trying to say what I said.

All arts can and must wait. They may even wait to live until after the artist is dead. Only the ridiculous costs of cinematography force it to instant success, so it is satisfied with being mere entertainment. With *Orphée*, I decided to take the risk of making a film as if cinematography could permit itself the luxury of waiting—as if it was the art which it ought to be.

Beauty hates ideas. It is sufficient to itself Our age is becoming dried out with ideas. It is the child of the Encyclopaedists. But having an idea is not enough: the idea must have us, haunt us, obsess us, become unbearable to us.

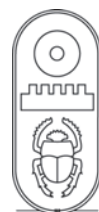
Le Sang d'un Poète was based on the poet's need to go through a series of deaths and to be reborn in a shape closer to his real being. There, the theme was played with one finger, and inevitably so, because I had to invent a craft that I did not know. In *Orphée*, I have orchestrated the theme, and this is why the two films are related, twenty years apart.

My film could not stand the slightest degree of fantasy, which would have seemed to me like breaking my own rules, so, as I was inventing the rules, I had to make them comply with numbers that were governed by nothing outside their relationships to one another. If I made Heurtebise disappear, once by using the mirror and once on the spot, this was because I thought it important to preserve the degree of latitude that intrigues entomologists, although its laws escape them.

I have often been asked about the figure of the glass vendor: he was the only one able to illustrate the saying that there is nothing so hard to break as the habit of one's job; since, although he died very young, he still persists in crying his wares in a region where windowpanes are meaningless. Once the machinery had been set in motion, everyone had to go with it, so that in the scene when he returns to the house, Marais succeeded in being comical without going beyond the limits of taste and with no break between lyricism and operetta.

The same is true of François Périer, whose mockery never becomes unkind or makes him seem to be taking advantage of his supernatural powers. Nothing was more demanding than the role of Orphée, grappling with the injustices of the youth of literature. He does not seem to me to have secrets which he divines and which deceive him. He proves his greatness only through that of the actor. Here again, Marais illuminates the film for me with his soul.

Among the misconceptions which have been written about *Orphée*, I still see



Heurtebise described as an angel and the Princess as Death. In the film, there is no Death and no angel. There can be none. Heurtebise is a young Death serving in one of the numerous sub-orders of Death, and the Princess is no more Death than an air hostess is an angel.

I never touch on dogmas. The region that I depict is a border on life, a no man's land where one hovers between life and death. The tribunal bears the same relationship to the supreme tribunal as the investigating magistrate to the trial. The Princess says: "Here, you go from one tribunal to the next."

Critics describe as *longueurs*, the waves between the knots, the passages of relaxation between moments of intense activity. Shakespeare is all longs and shorts: this is what makes him worthy of attention. The English do not notice the *longueurs* in Shakespeare because they know they are coming and respect them.

When Marais is praised for his acting in *Orphée*, he replies: "The film plays my parts for me."

Themes in *Orphée*

The three basic themes of *Orphée* are:

1. The successive deaths through which a poet must pass before he becomes, in that admirable line from Mallarmé, *tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'éternité le change*—changed into himself at last by eternity.

2. The theme of immortality: the person who represents Orphée's Death sacrifices herself and abolishes herself to make the poet immortal.

3. Mirrors: we watch ourselves grow old in mirrors. They bring us closer to death.

The other themes are a mixture of Orphic and modern myth: for example, cars that talk (the radio receivers in cars).

I should point out that the scene of the return to the house is comic. To paraphrase, when a Frenchman has fallen out of love with a woman, and can't stand the sight of her, what he says, literally, is:



Scene from Cocteau's *Orphée*—(from left to right) Jean Marais, Marie Déa, and François Périer. Photo © Marion Boyars Publishers.

"I can't see her any more." (*Cinéma*, No. 842, September 25, 1950).

A poet's film is like a huge print run of one of his books. It is quite natural for many people not to accept this book, but its huge circulation multiplies our chances of touching some minds, the few people that, at one time, a poet would only reach in the long term, or after his death. Moreover, the experience of *Orphée* shows that these few people are countless. Just as ten francs become a thousand, it seems that some rate of exchange is operating with the audience. People who like the film and write to me (I count them among the countless few) all complain about the rest of the audience in the Parisian cinema, which they consider a lifeless mass. They forget that without the cinema they could not have seen the film.

Orphée is a realistic film; or, to be more precise, observing Goethe's distinction between reality and truth, a film in which I express a truth peculiar to myself. If that truth is not the spectator's, and if his personality conflicts with mine and rejects it, he accuses me of lying. I am even astonished that so many people can still be penetrated by another's ideas, in a country noted for its individualism.

While *Orphée* does encounter some lifeless audiences, it also encounters others that are open to my dream and agree to be put to sleep and to dream it with me (accepting the logic by which dreams operate, which is implacable, although it is not governed by our logic).

I am only talking about the mechanics, since *Orphée* is not at all a dream in itself: through a wealth of detail similar to that which we find in dreams, it summarizes my way of living and my conception of life.

These receptive audiences are more and more so, the further north the film travels, or when a mass audience immerses itself in it sincerely, without the coldness of soul of an élite or its fear of dipping its toes in dangerous waters that might disturb what it is used to.

Already, when the wish to make such a film is transformed into a concrete undertaking, everything is disturbed through the machinery, actors, sets, and unforeseeable events.

So I have to admit that the phenomenon of refraction begins even before the work leaves me, and I run the ultimate risk of the phenomenon of multiple refraction.

Marcenac's piece for *Ce soir* (since you have asked what I think of it), provides me with a remarkable example of this phenomenon of refraction, after a work has been launched.



Jean Marais as Orpheus in Cocteau's *Orphée*. Photo © Marion Boyars Publishers.

And, just as the analysis of a film by a psychoanalyst can tell us about some implications and some sources of a labor that is all the less tightly under our control since the material problems we encounter during it make us insensible to tiredness and leave our unconscious quite free, so the interpretation of one of our works by the mind of an outsider can show it to us from a new, and revealing perspective.

How disturbed we should be, were there some machine that would allow us to follow the strange progress of a story as it winds its way through the thousand brains in a cinema! No doubt, we should stop writing. We should be wrong to do so, but it would be a hard lesson. What Jules de Noailles said (recounted by Liszt), is true: "You will see one day that it is hard to speak about anything with anyone." Yet it is equally true that each person takes in or rejects the sustenance that we offer, and that the people who absorb it, do so in their own way; and this it is that determines the progress of a work through the centuries, because if a work were to send back only a perfect echo, the result would be a kind of pleonasm, an inert exchange, a dead perfection.

Obviously I was quite stupefied when, one Sunday in the country, I heard *Orphée* on the radio and caught the following remark, intended to depict the no man's land between life and death: "They go through the subterranean cathedrals of hell." But when a serious and attentive man (whom I do not know personally) takes the trouble to recall a plot and, in several stages, with an almost childlike elegance, tries to draw a simple and easy-to-read storyline out of this very complex plot, without abandoning either his personal viewpoint or precision, I can only refrain from criticizing him. To do so would be as inappropriate as those critics who hastily condemn a work that is the product of thirty years of research.¹

Endnote:

¹ From *Les Lettres françaises*, November 16, 1950.

