**Between the Arts: Cocteau's *Orphée* as an Act of Self-Definition**

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Jean Cocteau's 1950 cinematic masterpiece *Orphée* offers a complex and enigmatic take on the Orpheus myth, with countless baffling features that not only stray altogether from the original myth, but also seem to complicate the narrative of the film itself. Part of Cocteau's Orphic trilogy,[[1]](#footnote-1) *Orphée* tells the story of a French poet, scorned by his left-bank rivals, who becomes enamored with a Princess of Death after meeting her at a cafe. After the Princess leaves, Orphée longs to see her again, and finally gets the chance to do so when his wife Eurydice dies. Full of surprises, the film's tone and narrative shift an astounding number of times, altering the mood dramatically on several occasions. Initially restless, Orphée scorns his wife and longs for the Princess of Death; then, in a tragic shift, Orphée mourns his wife and is torn between his desire to be reunited with Eurydice and his longing for the Princess. He then in an almost comical manner turns to resent the return of his wife from the Underworld, as he cannot look at her, and continues to restlessly seek out the Princess of Death. At the end of the film, after initially being reunited with the Princess, Orphée is ultimately returned to the world of the living with Eurydice, concluding the film on a note of domestic triteness. Although unpredictable and contradictory at almost every turn, *Orphée* is consistently fantastical and visually impressive, and Cocteau's unprecedented use of special effects and confident story-telling skills beautifully motivate the film's momentum.

A talented filmmaker with numerous films to his name, Jean Cocteau's oeuvre extends well beyond cinema. Born in 1889 in Maisons-Laffitte, Cocteau lived in Paris for most of his life, where he crossed paths and formed friendships with artists such as Pablo Picasso, Guillaume Apollinaire, Sergei Diaghilev, Erik Satie, and Igor Stravinsky, among others. Although he began his artistic career as a poet, Cocteau collaborated with a number of his contemporaries across a range of artistic media: he notably wrote the ballet scenario for Diaghilev's *Parade* (1917), and the libretto for Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927), as well as writing his own plays and films. With friends in every corner of the Parisian art world, Cocteau was, as Walter A. Strauss has pointed out, a *"flâneur des deux rives"* [loiterer along both banks of the Seine] and a perennial diplomat-ambassador for the world of dance [...], the plastic arts, music, and literature;"[[2]](#footnote-2) no artistic circle or creative discipline seemed beyond his reach. Throughout his career and the many roles he took on in the art world, Cocteau framed each and every one of his projects as poetic endeavors. He saw himself primarily as a poet, who simply worked in different poetic modes. He classified his work as *poésie, poésie du théâtre*, and *poésie cinématographique,[[3]](#footnote-3)* among other categories, and created a unified understanding of his opus that allowed him to elude a singular label or be constrained by one medium. He did not define himself as a director, playwright, painter, or author: he branded himself a poet of all forms, moving freely between various modes of expression.

Cocteau's desire for nonconformity in artistic expression saturates his film *Orphée*. Because of the visual ambiguities and polysemy of the film, at once its most fascinating and frustrating features, one of the central dilemmas of *Orphée* is whether the filmis intentionally indefinite in its construction of meaning, and if so, why. How should one interpret such an enigmatic film? What is the motivating concern of its ambiguity? In this paper, I will argue that through the use of mirrors and reflections, distortion of the original romantic sentiment in the Orpheus myth, and its concluding emphasis on immortality, Cocteau transforms the myth of Orpheus from a story about a man and a woman in love, to one about an artist's act of self-definition. In *Orphée*, Orpheus becomes an artist straddling worlds, and the film in turn becomes an autobiographical commentary on Jean Cocteau's perception of himself as an artist. Because of the film's complexity in themes, symbolism, and narrative, it certainly conveys multiple meanings simultaneously, and no singular characterization can account for every element of the film or address its significance as a whole. However, by arguing that *Orphée* has deep autobiographical significance and by interpreting the film as highly personal, I hope to present a more particular understanding of it, and demonstrate how the film may shed light on considerations of Cocteau and his works.

The academic consensus on Jean Cocteau generally asserts that his cinema was elusive and extremely difficult to define. Beyond that, many have disagreed on interpretations of the artist and his works. Scholarship on Cocteau and *Orphée* thus far has focused mainly on identifying his artistic context by analyzing his external influences and placing him within or tangential to an art movement. *Orphée* can be found in textbooks like Neil Coombs' succinct work *Studying Surrealist and Fantasy Cinema*, where he argues that Cocteau was influenced by Surrealism, but his film ultimately fits the criteria of fantasy cinema more closely. Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, who has edited a collection of essays titled *Reviewing Orpheus: Essays on the Cinema and Art of Jean Cocteau*, argues on the other hand that Cocteau's artistry was primarily classical and not post-modernist, with his artistic principles resembling more closely those of the Italian quattrocento. Scholars have also discussed his use of cinematic technique and style. Annette Shandler Levitt argued that his theatrical roots heavily informed his cinematic style,[[4]](#footnote-4) while Naomi Greene has written about the use of pastiche and mannerist features in Cocteau's cinema in order to argue for a neobaroque interpretation of his film.[[5]](#footnote-5) Discussions of Cocteau have independently addressed questions of style, artistic purpose, and personal struggles, yet they have rarely placed all three questions within the same conversation. Walter A. Strauss has perhaps come closest to doing so in his essay "Jean Cocteau: The Difficulty of Being Orpheus," in which he discusses Cocteau's life, his relationship with the Orpheus myth, and hinted at autobiographical elements in *Orphée*.[[6]](#footnote-6) Strauss powerfully argues that Cocteau uses the Orpheus myth to celebrate the poet and his work, which implies a celebration of Cocteau and his poetry. In response to this interpretation, my essay aims to explore specifically how the film centers visually on the self, represented by Orpheus as the emblematic poet, and strengthens the connection between the crossing of worlds in the Orpheus myth and Cocteau's work in multiple art mediums, or as Strauss called it his "poésie diplomatique."[[7]](#footnote-7)

A brief outline of the Orpheus myth and its history in Western literature, as well as an examination of Cocteau's knowledge of the myth, illuminate the significant ways in which *Orphée* strays from the original narrative and structure of the story. Beyond fragmentary information on Orpheus and his parentage from Pindar, Ovid and Vergil provide the two most well known and fully-fledged accounts of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, with Vergil composing *The Georgics* around 29 BC and Ovid penning *Metamorphoses* around 8 AD. The accounts in both texts appear nearly identical in their telling of the love between Orpheus and Eurydice, her death, his failed attempt to retrieve her from the Underworld, and his death at the hands of the Ciconian or Bacchantes women. *Metamorphoses* and *The Georgics* were both important texts in the Middle Ages, and became immensely popular in the Renaissance.[[8]](#footnote-8) Orpheus became particularly associated with the opera, inspiring works ranging from Monteverdi's *La favola di Orfeo* (1608), to Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), to Jacques Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* (1858). In many ways, Orpheus became the archetypal poet and musician in Western culture. He is rarely if every featured alone, however. Works that treat the Orpheus myth have consistently centered on the love story between Orpheus and Eurydice, celebrating their love as Gluck does, or parodying it as in Offenbach's case. Cocteau's interest in the figure of Orpheus might have been initiated by his friendship with Apollinaire.[[9]](#footnote-9) Cocteau first began publicly engaging with the myth when he debuted his 1926 play *Orphée.* Orpheus continued to engage with the myth in his cinematic Orphic trilogy, a series of three films, the first premiering in 1930 and the last in 1960.[[10]](#footnote-10) Cocteau clearly became well acquainted with the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. He prefaces his film *Orphée* with a voice-over summarizing the myth in order to indicate the inspiration for the film's story, and perhaps in order to make clear his intentions to stray from the original tale.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The focus of the myth is one of the crucial aspects Cocteau changes, as he transfers the story's attention away from Orpheus’ love for Eurydice, and centers it on Orpheus alone. In *Orphée*, Orpheus engages with the Underworld well before Eurydice dies, and does so in a particularly personal manner that charges the film with an emphasis on the artist's self. The mirrors in the film, particularly in the moments when Orpheus attempts to and succeeds in entering the Underworld, allow Cocteau to visually emphasize the importance of Orpheus himself and his relationship with his reflection. By making mirrors the portal to the Underworld, Cocteau centers the myth on Orphée and his own image, and defines the movement between the realms of the living and the dead as an act that has personal significance. When Orphée first reaches the Princess' villa after being whisked away from the *Café des Poètes* in a Rolls Royce, he stumbles onto the Princess, her newly resurrected assistant Cegeste, and her motorcyclist aides crossing through a mirror into the Underworld.[[12]](#footnote-12) Startled, he rushes over and attempts to follow them, but fails to do so, despite the ease with which the last motorcyclist aide disappeared into it. Orphée feels around the hard surface of the mirror, pounds his fists upon it, but to no avail. The scene offers no narrative indication of why the mirror denies entrance to Orpheus. However, Cocteau's framing of the characters might indication an answer. Cocteau uses two distinct camera angles to create the mirror portal illusion, cutting from an initial shot framing the characters before the mirror's surface, to a shot from within the mirror, filming the characters and the room behind them as they move through the mirror's passageway. The camera shows the Princess approaching her reflection with arm outstretched and touching the mirror's surface, right before cutting to an interior mirror shot as she crosses the entrance. Cocteau, therefore, shows the Princess confronting her own image moments before entering the Underworld. As Orphée attempts to follow her, however, Cocteau jump cuts from a shot of Orphée striding towards the mirror from the room's doorway to an interior mirror shot.[[13]](#footnote-13) Orphée's attempt to enter the Underworld does not feature a confrontation with his own reflection. Cocteau never shows him facing his own image in the scene, but rather only implies he did so through careful use of editing, a significant distinction. Orphée's failure to confront his own reflection the way the Princess did suggests that the crossing of realms must be accompanied by an acknowledgment of one's own reflection. Cocteau explicitly provides visual evidence of the Princess' acknowledgement of her own image, but not Orphée's, demonstrating the necessity for the artist to move towards himself in order to move into the other world.

The significance of the reflection returns in the scene where Orphée finally passes through a mirror, as Cocteau emphasizes Orphée's confrontation with his own reflection in a prolonged manner from multiple angles.[[14]](#footnote-14) The scene includes a continuous, twelve-second POV shot, in which the camera advances towards Orphée's reflection with hands outstretched before it. Not only does Orphée directly engage with his reflection this time as he crosses into the Underworld, but Cocteau also has the camera assume Orphée's perspective in a frontal, visual engagement with the mirror's surface. Cocteau repeats Orphée's engagement with his reflection in a second shot, where reflecting liquid filmed in a ninety-degree angle close up creates the illusion of Orphée's hands going through the mirror's surface. Cocteau twice visually marks Orphée's ability to finally enter the Underworld through a direct acknowledgement of his own reflection. The mirror in *Orphée* not only acts as a portal or boundary: it symbolizes a literal movement into one's self when crossing worlds. Orphée walking into his own reflection in a sustained, visually vivid manner illustrates the intimate association Cocteau makes with the journey between worlds, and ties this journey to the artist's self.

Cocteau further transfers the myth's focus to the artist alone by distorting its original romantic sentiment. In *Orphée,* Cocteau does not present the myth as a love story between a man and a woman, but rather as the story of Orpheus the artist and his love for his poetry, which acts as the main impetus of the film's narrative. Orphée initially neglects his wife in favor of the car radio in the Princess' Rolls Royce, becomes vexed by Eurydice upon her return from the Underworld, and persistently shifts his attentions between Eurydice and the Princess. Through this interpretation of the myth, Cocteau liberates Orphée from his commitment to Eurydice and allows him to float between several loves, reflecting Cocteau's own refusal to commit to a distinct art medium and his desire to inhabit multiple art worlds.

The film does not present a positive portrayal of the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice until the very end. After Orpheus fails to follow the Princess into the Underworld from her villa, her chauffeur Heurtebise drives him back to Eurydice in a Rolls Royce. Tormented by his memory of the Princess, Orphée's finds refuge in the mysterious messages transmitted by the radio of the Rolls Royce, which offer snippets of poetry written by Cegeste, the Princess' assistant. Eurydice attempts in vain to coax him back into the house, but her pleas cannot override his obsession with the radio messages; he refuses to leave the car, even when Heurtebise tries to tell him that Eurydice has died. In contrast to typical presentations of the myth, which describe Orpheus as "inflamed by love"[[15]](#footnote-15) for Eurydice, Cocteau replaces Orpheus' passion for Eurydice with his passion for his art, poetry. His relationship with Eurydice deteriorates in an increasingly comical manner, seemingly mocking the marital "bliss" by adopting slapstick humor conventions. After Orphée realizes Eurydice is dead, he brings her back with him from the Underworld on the condition that he not look upon her ever again. Orpheus finds it increasingly difficult to avoid her gaze, and Cocteau caricatures the circumstances by having Eurydice dive beneath tables and Orphée dramatically cover his eyes. The parody alone seems to reference Offenbach's comedic opera *Orphée aux enfers* (1858): yet the addition of the Princess of Death in *Orphée* suggests a purpose to the marital unhappiness that extends beyond simple comedic relief. Cocteau not only presents Orpheus as disconnected from and exasperated with Eurydice: he introduces a second love interest, the Princess, and indicates that Orphée is undecided about which woman he desires most. When begging Heurtebise to bring him to the Underworld so he may save Eurydice, Heurtebise, already critical of Orphée's attachment to the Princess and her Rolls Royce, asks him: "Is it Death you wish to find, or Eurydice?"[[16]](#footnote-16) To which, after a long pause, Orphée casts his eyes down and replies, "Both."[[17]](#footnote-17) This desire of Orphée to be with both women, unique to Cocteau's interpretation of the myth, drastically adapts the story, transforming Orpheus from a man so committed to his wife as to follow her to the Underworld, to a man willing to visit the Underworld, but unable to specify a love he wishes for alone. By crafting Orphée's character in this manner, Cocteau defines Orpheus as an uncommitted man and an uncommitted artist, a choice that directly reflects Cocteau's own experiences in the art world as a creator working in multiple mediums with equal passion. Up until the film's end, Cocteau leaves unclear which of the women Orphée prefers. Upon dying, Orphée arrives in the Underworld to embrace the Princess, vowing to obey and love her forever. Yet when the Princess returns him to the realm of the living, Orphée embraces a living Eurydice, telling her: "There's only one love that counts: ours." Orphée's freedom to desire both women and embrace both at the end of the film reflects Cocteau's love of multiple art mediums, and celebrates the artist who does not choose one passion and forsake another.

Cocteau concludes *Orphée* by having the Princess grant Orphée immortality, which becomes the ultimate reward for his multiple journeys in and out of the Underworld, directly contradicting the tragic ending of the original myth. As Orphée could only accomplish the fantastical feat of entering the Underworld by confronting and passing into his own reflection, the immortality given to him ties directly to his ability in the film to finally confront and engage with his reflection, and therefore to Orphée's relation to the self. Immortality becomes an award attributed to the self, to Orphée's innermost accomplishments as an artist and a man. Through the character of the Princess of Death, Cocteau allows Orphée to live on in the mortal world and beyond it. The film attributes Orphée's otherworldly achievements specifically to his status as a poet. When Orphée expresses doubts about whether he can enter the mirror as a mere man, Heurtebise tells him, "a poet is more than a man," indicating that his artistry elevates him above the status of a mere mortal. This elevation ties Orphée's movements in and out of the Underworld directly to his craft, transforming them into poetic achievements. The ultimate prize given to Orpheus then becomes a prize attributed to his artistry: his immortality becomes a poetic celebration of his craft and his status as a poet. As immortality in the poetic world quite often translates to immortality through the written word, preserved in a literary work, Cocteau implies that he bestows on Orphée the immortality of legendary mythology. Indeed, through the transformations of the original Orpheus myth made in *Orphée*, Cocteau crafts his own new legend and mythology, one that celebrates a poet of extraordinary talent and immortal achievements. While in the accounts of both Ovid and Vergil, the Orpheus myth ends tragically with Orpheus losing Eurydice and being torn apart limb by limb by the Ciconian women despite his astonishing musical gifts, Cocteau's Orphée manages to both retrieve Eurydice from the Underworld and live to tell the tale beyond the span of his own lifetime. While the classical Orpheus fails to conquer mortality, Cocteau's Orphée triumphantly succeeds in overcoming every aspect of it, becoming "a legend [...] entitled to live beyond time and place," [[18]](#footnote-18) as Cocteau states in the opening lines of the film. Orphée's immortality is his transformation into a new legend, a new interpretation of the Orpheus myth that establishes a poet uncontained by the boundaries between worlds, who has metaphorically and physically delved into his own reflection.

The immortal celebration of the poet Orphée as a new mythological legend translates into a direct celebration of Cocteau as well. Cocteau exults in his identification alongside Orphée. Over the course of three decades, Cocteau developed his Orphic trilogy, which became increasingly autobiographical and personal. By the last installment, *The Testament of Orpheus* (1960), he took center stage as the protagonist, becoming Orpheus. Although Cocteau's longtime partner Jean Marais, and not Cocteau, was the on screen star of *Orphée*, the film's subject matter and themes had extremely personal connections to Cocteau's life. Unraveling the multiple meanings of the film in one place would result in an argument as complex and puzzling as the film itself. Cocteau's eccentric statements on *mourir pour vivre* and his view that "the poet - like the Phoenix - must die in order to be reborn,"[[19]](#footnote-19) the academic speculations on the similarities between the character of Cegeste and Cocteau's deceased protégé Raymond Radiguet, the numerous other uses of advanced special effects in the film, and countless other aspects of *Orphée* left unaddressed in this paper, make this film one of the most fascinating productions to come out of 20th century European cinema. Although my argument relies on a fairly narrow focus in order to flesh out celebrations of the poet figure through the use of the Orpheus myth in the film, my hope is that this attention to smaller details of *Orphée* will add to the kaleidoscopic facets of Cocteau's life and works.

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1. *The Blood of a Poet* (1930), *Orphée* (1950) and *The Testament of Orpheus* (1960) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Strauss, Walter A. "Jean Cocteau: The Difficulty of Being Orpheus," *Reviewing Orpheus*. Page 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Strauss, 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shandler Levitt, Annette, "The Cinematic Magic of Jean Cocteau." *Reviewing Orpheus.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Greene, Naomi. *Jean Cocteau: A Cinema of Baroque Unease*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Strauss, Walter A. "Jean Cocteau: The Difficulty of Being Orpheus." *Reviewing Orpheus*, pages 27-41 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Strauss, Page 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Strauss, page 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Strauss, page 30. See this section for more information on the Orpheus myth in Western culture and on Cocteau's artistic career. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *The Blood of a Poet* (1930), *Orphée* (1950), *The Testament of Orpheus* (1960) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Orphée,* 02:00. "The legend of Orpheus is well-known. In Greek mythology, Orpheus was a troubadour from Thrace. He charmed even the animals. His songs diverted his attention from his wife Eurydice. Death took her away from him. He descended to the netherworld, and used his charm to win permission to return with Eurydice to the world of the living on the condition that he never look at her. But he looked at her and was torn to pieces by the Bacchantes. Where does our story take place...and when? A legend is entitled to be beyond time and place. Interpret it as you wish..." [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The following analysis refers to a sequence of *Orphée* that begins at 00:18:15 and ends at 00:18:58 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Orphée,* 00:18:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Orphée*, 00:56:54 to 00:58:04 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ovid, Book X, line 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Orphée*, 00:56:09 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Orphée*, 00:56:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Orphée* 02:00 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Clergue, *Jean Cocteau*, page 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)