

At Every Epoch under a Different Disguise: Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1950) & the Poet-Hero

"Tradition appears at every epoch under a different disguise, but the public does not recognize it easily and never discovers it underneath its masks."—*The Cock and the Harlequin* (1918)

"Heaven would shock Earth. It is enough to contemplate the gait to Jesus to realize that Heaven could not be official. Jesus refuses to make a career. He wants to be born and to die every minute. Our crusade will be to shock out of love."—Jean Cocteau, *Art and Faith* (1926)

"The theme of inspiration: one should say expiration rather than inspiration. That which we call inspiration comes from within us, from the darkness of our own night, not from outside, from a different so-called divine night. Everything starts to go wrong when Orpheus ignores his own messages and agrees to accept messages coming from outside."—from the screenplay notes of *Orpheus*

"The danger with films is that we get used to seeing them without paying the same attention we would pay to a play or a book. But it is a first-class vehicle of ideas and of poetry that can take the viewer into realms that previously only sleep and dreams had led him to."—"The Film-maker as a Hypnotist"

Exploratory Questions

- Does the inevitability of death shape not only the content of our art (poetry, cinema, music, etc.), but also its various forms?
- Is poetry (art, film) from the world beyond death in any explainable way?
- Does art bear a relationship to our dreams? Our sleep?
- Is the artist a hero?
- What makes an art work valuable? What makes it great?
- Does the art work and the artist bear any relationship in meaning and/or value?
- Are art works spiritual?



Orpheus is often described as the centerpiece of Cocteau's Orphic trilogy. This is something of a misnomer. The three films—*Blood of a Poet* (1930), *Orpheus* (1950), and *Testament of Orpheus* (1960)—are related to one another, more like a conscious triptych of panels than a set of narratives. Cocteau himself described *Blood of a Poet* as “playing with one finger” what he would “orchestrate” in *Orpheus*. At the same time, the 1950 film was based quite closely on his 1926 one-act play of the same name. *Testament of Orpheus* talks back to a number of scenes and characters in *Orpheus*, for it is created for a “public who wish to go beyond the plot and do not try to flee the obscure . . . unafraid or else with an adorable childish fear.” *Blood of a Poet* is one of the first surrealist films, or perhaps a critique of surrealism. It is a montage of images and dream-like scenes and has not real plot. *Testament* observes a more traceable plot, but it willingly goes beyond *Orpheus*'s fairly straight-forward storyline, a story which does follow more closely something like the original myth. Cocteau wrote of the film:

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.

Content Questions

1. How important is the relationship between Cocteau's film(s) and the original Greek myth?
2. What does the film suggest about the absurdities of the avant-garde?
3. Does the film ask us to identify with any of the characters? Does it distance us from them? If so, how?
4. How does the film appropriate and challenge the normal world?
5. Why is Orpheus constantly told that he talks too much and shouldn't always want to know why?
6. Why is the Princess both so imperious and yet strangely attractive?
7. What is the meaning of the mirrors? Do we need to know?
8. How would you describe Orpheus and Eurydice's marriage?
9. Why is Orpheus so obsessed with discovering the messages on the radio? How important is this to the film's “meaning”?
10. Why does Orpheus desire both Eurydice and the Princess (his death, though perhaps not Death per se)?
11. What exactly is the Zone? The review board?
12. What does the film conclude about God? The Afterlife? Beauty?
13. What is the meaning of poetry and time in the film?
14. How would you describe the ending of the film?

Jean Cocteau and Jacques Maritain—Letters on Art and the Supernatural

“In the artist there is a *litterateur*: a double heart, a mummer that would fool God. There is also a craftsman; sometimes a poet: an apprentice of the Creator.”

—Jacques Maritain, *Art and Faith* (1926)

Several of the concepts we have looked at this semester—the artists as subcreator, the potential sacramental of transcendent qualities of art, the potential for craft, wisdom, or glory in the art object—all carry the potential danger of what might be regarded as heresy: namely, the exaltation of the freedom of the artist or the creative power of the artist’s work as spiritual or religious substitutes, as idols. The poet, artist, and filmmaker Cocteau in the 1920s was friends with the neoscholastic philosopher Jacques Maritain, and Maritain was partially responsible for a brief conversion of Cocteau’s to the Catholic Church. Cocteau, a cradle Catholic, returned to the Church on June 19, 1925, only to flee again three years later once he found himself unable to give up his homosexual affairs. In June 1926, Maritain and Cocteau published, *Art and Faith*, a series of letters between them that explored questions of the vocation and calling of the artist and its relationship to elements of the supernatural. Maritain, even twenty years later, saw Cocteau’s one-act play as a significant part of that conversation.

Cocteau held there to be a higher order and form in art that shocked the too genteel civilities of the general public, and he held that this order was above and beyond the fluid changes of the modern arts. However, Maritain’s own quixotic method would always tend to prize beauty as something irrational or perhaps better stated, *supra-rational*. The artistic desire to give a form to the mystery of humanity and its fragments was a marker of high modernism in the various artistic movements of the first half of the twentieth century, and certainly Cocteau shared with these a desire to awaken a dull modern world to something higher and more powerful. Cocteau’s experience as an artist was one of fecundity of image, even as he desired a clarity and austerity, even a measure of suffering, to discipline and polish his outpouring of art.

At the heart of the Cocteau-Maritain correspondence is a series of important questions, including whether art works can point to God who is Love, Beauty, the True, the Good, and so on. Maritain would agree that the natural task of art can ascend to the supernatural end of beholding and standing in God, but he insisted that this can only be because grace calls one forward and upward. The relationship between art and the supernatural is one of analogy, not equality. The artist is more a hero, than a saint, though the two share a commitment to suffering and a vision beyond the normal confinements of human life. Maritain came to understand that the creative intuition of the artist has to draw upon the natural and human worlds in a way that is not always rational or that can even draw clear lines between the artist’s sinful life and the work itself. The artist’s sinfulness may even enter into the power and beauty of the work. This does not excuse or even justify the sin involved, but it does acknowledge the mystery of art, and by analogy even the mystery that God can overcome our sinful acts sometimes alongside them without any contagion to his holiness. There is a kind of innocence which is only ignorance, while holy innocence transcends and restores by the purity of its fullness. Art is preparatory for grace, even used by grace, but cannot be grace itself: “art heralds without understanding them the invisible order and glory of which all beauty is but a sign.”