C. Orphée (1950)

There is perhaps no other film created by Jean Cocteau that has attracted as much public acclaim and extensive literary analysis as his cinematic chef d'oeuvre of *Orphée,* completed in 1949. The following year, it won the First Prize at the International Film Festival in Venice and has, since its birth, been received the world over as one of the truly great films of the twentieth century.

For Cocteau, the film *Orphée* took up and reworked an old and dear theme first presented within the stage-production *Orphée* of 1925 and, further, within his first film, *Le Sang d'un Poète,* of 1932. As the author himself states in the preface of this film:

> The poet must die several times in order to be reborn. Twenty years ago I developed this theme in *The Blood of a Poet.* But there I played it with one finger, in *Orpheus* I have orchestrated it.[21]

But the film *Orphée* is neither a regurgitation of *Le Sang d'un Poète* nor a strict cinematic adaptation of the earlier one-act play of the same name. In recreating his cinematic version of *Orphée,* Cocteau, it must be said, changed more than he let remain. The plot, the imagery, the rhythm, the dialogue, and the very nature of the leading characters underwent massive transfigurations. For example, the play's sinister horse has been replaced by an enigmatic Rolls-Royce; Heurtebise (Death's emissary) is no longer a glazier but a chauffeur; black-clad motorcyclists rode to and fro accomplishing Death's silent orders; and the young poet Cégeste (to be reborn once more in *Le Testament d'Orphée* at a later date) is added to the drama of the plot. No longer a rather lighthearted, quasi-comical one-act play, the film *Orphée* stands as an extremely serious and highly profound cinematic masterpiece, achieving, perhaps better than any other of Cocteau's films, those poetic moments of the Marvelous of which he theorized so much.

As would naturally be expected, the quantity of scholastic comments and interpretations for the film *Orphée* are too numerous to cite extensively within this particular study. Virtually every text dealing with Jean Cocteau at all speaks at length of his film *Orphée* as one of his most important artistic creations. Aside from such biographical

21. Jean Cocteau, *Three Screenplays (L'Eternal Retour, Orphée, La Belle et La Bête),* trans. Carol Martin-Sperry (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1972), p. 188.

Author Jean Cocteau during the filming of Orphée. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

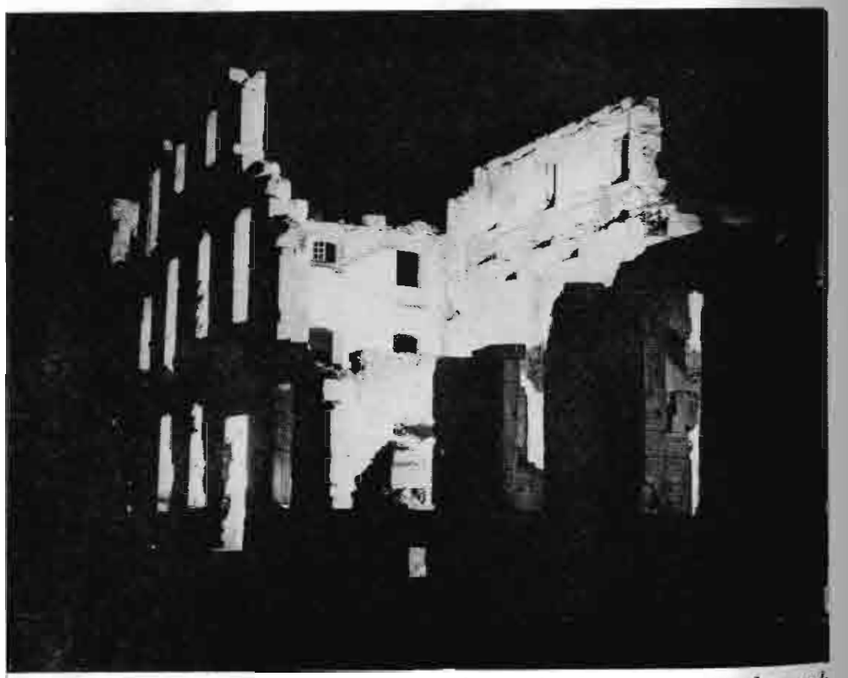
studies, many film texts themselves include *Orphée* when speaking of modern European cinema. That is not to mention the many newspaper and magazine reviews written in both Europe and the United States when the film was first released.[22]

However, among the most comprehensive and detailed of such cinematic studies (published in English), one must include Margaret Crosland's *Jean Cocteau, A Biography;*[23] the brilliant, if verbose, study translated from the French entitled *Jean Cocteau* by René Gilson;[24] a very impressive article found in *Films and Filming* (October 1963) entitled "Orphée" and written by Raymond Durgnat;[25] Frederick Brown's rather gossipy study entitled *An Impersonation of Angels;*[26]

22. For a more complete listing, *see* bibliography.
23. Crosland, pp. 156–60.
24. Gilson, pp. 80–94.
25. Raymond Durgnat, "Orphée," *Films and Filming* 10 (October 1963): 45–49.
26. Brown, pp. 256–66.

Francis Steegmuller's excellent work of *Cocteau: A Biography;*[27] Wallace Fowlie's *Jean Cocteau: The History of a Poet's Age;*[28] Elizabeth Sprigge and Jean-Jacques Kihm's *Jean Cocteau: The Man and the Mirror;*[29] André Fraigneau's *Cocteau* (translated by Donald Lehmkuhl),[30] and a veritable host of other fine and extremely helpful essays, books, and articles as yet untranslated from the original French.[31]

Originally, prior to his stage production of *Orphée* (1925), Cocteau had intended to create a play about Joseph and Mary; their trials and tribulations as parents of the Christ child, the gossip they endured as



Ruins of Saint Cyr, where Cocteau filmed Orpheus' passage through the "Zone". (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

27. Steegmuller, pp. 478–84.
28. Wallace Fowlie, *Jean Cocteau: The History of a Poet's Age* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1961) pp. 110–14.
29. Sprigge and Kihm, pp. 184–87.
30. André Fraigneau, *Cocteau,* trans. Donald Lehmkuhl (New York: Grove Press, 1961), pp. 99–104.
31. *See* bibliography.

a result of the inexplicable pregnancy, and their escape to Egypt. But, as Cocteau later asserts:

> The plot led to so many misapprehensions that I gave it up and substituted the Orphic theme, in which the inexplicable birth of poems would replace that of the Divine Child.[32]

Thus, Cocteau, even at this early date, drew a parallel between the life of Christ and that of Orpheus, with relation to the poet and his poetry. If the theme of Orpheus offered to Cocteau a much more feasible context in which he could portray the "inexplicable birth of poems" in the theater (and later on the screen), his feelings concerning the close proximity of these two myths of Orpheus and Christ should nonetheless be strongly noted.[33] And, such being the case, one should not be surprised to find within the text of the film *Orphée* numerous images and symbols of Christian ideology, particularly where they relate to Cocteau's conception of the persecuted poet and his vengeful public.

But to what extent *is* the Orpheus of Cocteau's film *Orphée* a cinematic incarnation of Cocteau himself? To what extent does he "identify" with the martyred hero of this film? If the perspective constructed by this study is to be deemed a valid one and if *Orphée* parallels the nature of *Le Sang d'un Poète* regarding their respective, raisons d'êtres, then one should be able to discern a very large amount of Cocteauean autobiography in this film.

And, indeed, one *does* recognize via the hero *Orphée* a cinematic personification of Cocteau. But such an observation is by no means astounding, for Cocteau has always readily admitted that his film *Orphée* was but another portrait of himself and his complex identity as a poet. In a letter to Mary Hoeck, he says of *Orphée*:

> Its moral is that the poet should be personally committed rather than be a follower of causes and parties. I think that this film is worthy of you and of our friendship. It is much less a film than it is myself—a kind of projection of things that are important to me.[34]

32. Jean Cocteau, *Professional Secrets,* ed. Robert Phelps, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), p. 260.
33. Cf., section of this study in previous chapter entitled "Orphic Identity."
34. Steegmuller, p. 479.

Thus, it is crucial to understand at the outset of any detailed investigation into *Orphée* that the hero of this film *is Jean Cocteau himself,* and everything that Orphée says, does, or experiences is, to a very large degree, a portrayal of the author's own life, ideas, and self-examinations.

Having clarified this relationship of the artist to his film, it would be interesting to examine the technical aspects of the filming of *Orphée.* Unlike *La Belle et la Bête* and *Le Testament d'Orphée,* a diarylike journal—relating chronologically the many days of filming on location and discussing the behind-the-scene activities of decor construction, script alterations, and the like—does not exist for the film *Orphée.* However, a few of the technical accomplishments of this film seem worthy of brief mention.

A rival young poet named Cégeste (Edouard Dermit) is killed by two mysterious motorcyclists, then transported to the eerie mansion of the Princesse (Maria Césares), who looks on. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

Foremost among such technical "tricks," and perhaps the most famous, was Cocteau's use of a large vat of mercury for the filming of

selective sequences where a close-up of a mirror was needed. Cocteau noted that, when penetrated, mercury does not ripple as water inevitably will, and, further, mercury reflects exterior images and yet does not reveal that which is thrust into it. Elaborating upon this technique, Cocteau says:

> The mirror into which Orphée dips his hands required about eight hundred weight of mercury. But there is nothing harder to come by than mercury, and nothing less simple to find than a tank big enough and strong enough to hold it. On top of that, it wouldn't have been safe to keep such a treasure in the Studio. So we had to do the shooting in one day, and we wasted a lot of time because it was almost impossible to get the caps off the drums in which the mercury had been delivered, and because the mercury itself was dirty. It had to be polished with chamois leather, like a silver dish. No sooner had one got that soft heavy surface clean than the impurities rose again and floated on top like oil stains. I thought I might be able to do without Jean Marais by putting the gloves on somebody else of his size. But when I tried I saw that hands were like a person, and we would have to have the actor himself. So he was sent for, and we spent the entire day, from seven in the morning till six in the evening, on that one shot.[35]

Another instance where Cocteau had to overcome the properties of the mirror occurred when the two motorcyclists walked nonchalantly through it (in actuality there was none there—just two adjacent rooms furnished identically) and yet when Jean Marais approached to do the same, he collided heavily against the glass. Cocteau explains his solution as follows:

> As there's only one shot, the motorcyclists couldn't have disappeared if there had been glass. Jean Marais knocked against an empty space and simulated the collision. I added the noise afterwards. The glass was put in only for the following shot, when Marais brushes against it and his cheek is flattened by the pressure.[36]

The grim motorcyclists themselves were conceived by Cocteau from the magazine *Paris-Match,* where he apparently saw a photograph of a postliberation funeral march. Leading the procession were two helmeted, dark-goggled and leather-jacketed motorcycle policemen.

35. Harry Geduld, *Filmmakers on Filmmaking* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1967), p. 151.
36. Ibid., p. 152.

Cégeste is resuscitated back to life and, recognizing the Princesse as Death, enters into her service. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

A stroke of luck located for Cocteau two twin brothers, both of whom owned identical Indian motorcycles, to typecast for the role of Death's emissaries.

The "Zone," the no-man's-land between life and death that was found beyond Orphée's mirror was, in actuality, a desolate former military academy, bombed during the Second World War. These ruins were located near Versailles, at Saint Cyr.

But what seems to be of most importance, when speaking of the technical production of *Orphée,* is not the individual cinematic "tricks" themselves and how they made the normally impossible possible, or even the perfectly chosen locations, decors, and cast. It is, rather, the *combined effect* of all these "magical" elements that truly gives *Orphée* its flavor and its permanence as a classic. In *Orphée,* Cocteau achieves better than perhaps any of his other cinematic creations those heights of technical credibility and "unreal reality" that Cocteau chose to label

as the Marvelous, which is the first stepping-stone toward the communication of poetry.

As the title of the film suggests, *Orphée* recounts a modern-day tale of Orpheus-the-poet, his trials and tribulations as an artist and as a man walking perilously between the worlds of the present and of the beyond. As Cocteau is quick to point out, the Orpheus of his film is neither Orpheus the Argonaut nor Orpheus the priest of Dionysus, nor is he the priest of Apollo. He is simply Orpheus the poet.

> In the film, Orpheus is not a great priest. He is a famous poet whose celebrity annoys what has come to be known as the avant-garde. In the film, the avant-garde play the role of the Bacchantes in the fable.[37]

The opening scene reveals Orphée defiantly visiting a café patronized by these hostile writers of the avant-garde. Orphée catches sight of the Princesse, a beautiful patroness of the avant-garde, trying to calm a drunken young poet named Cégeste. A fight develops and her chauffeur, Heurtebise, telephones for the police. They immediately arrive, but Cégeste is run down by two mysterious, uniformed motorcyclists who drive on without stopping.

The Princesse orders Orphée to help her carry Cégeste into her Rolls-Royce and to accompany them. Orphée soon realizes Cégeste is dead but the car drives on into a strangely deserted part of the countryside and stops before an eerie mansion where Orphée, the Princesse, and Heurtebise enter inside and Cégeste is carried in by the same two unidentified motorcyclists. Cégeste is then resuscitated to "life" by the Princesse and, recognizing her as "his death," the resurrected poet enters into her service. The Princesse then leads Cégeste and her aides through the mirror, but, when Orphée tries to follow them, the mirror seems impenetrable and only a common mirror. He then loses consciousness.

Within these opening scenes of *Orpheé,* perhaps the most predominant theme expressed by Cocteau is his preoccupation with his own identity as a poet in the face of criticism by his literary rivals. Cocteau seemed especially sensitive to such criticism throughout his life, and the opening scene at the Café des Poètes serves as a pretext for an extensive portrayal of just such a preoccupation. In one manner, Cocteau seems to be answering the taunts of his enemies and offering, via *Orphée,* itself, a rebuttal to their condemnations.

37. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays,* p. 188.

Orpheus (Jean Marais) as he regains consciousness lying face down in a sandy landscape near a mirrorlike pool. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

Consider, first, the opening series of dialogue between Orphée and an older, retired poet who seems Orpheé's only friend present in the Café des Poètes. The subject of their conversation is the hostility shown by the younger avant-garde poets toward Orphée:

The Man: Oh well. . . . I'm no longer in the rat race. I stopped writing twenty years ago. I had nothing new to offer. People respect my silence.

Orpheus: They probably think I have nothing new to offer and that a poet shouldn't become too famous. . . .

The Man: They don't like you very much. . . .

Orpheus: What you mean is that they hate me.[38]

38. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays,* p. 105.

Such a realization of the animosity of his peers for not being "radical" enough and allowing himself to grow too "famous," would seem on the part of Orphée a direct statement reflecting Jean Cocteau's exact feelings at this time in his life (approximately sixty years of age). Reacting violently to his exclusion from one of the more comprehensive anthologies of contemporary French literature of this time, Cocteau seems to invest Orphée's confrontation in the Café des Poètes with a significance much more pointed than it would normally appear. The editor of this particular anthology, Gaëtan Picon, reasoned that Cocteau was very much passé as a poet and, further, belonged to a "1920 climate which has nothing to do with us today."[39] It is not surprising, then, to find Orphée as a typecast figure reflecting Cocteau's thoughts concerning this facet of his audience appeal. But Cocteau did truly believe that the general public loved him, and that it was just the pedantic literary critics and rival artists who felt the need to attack him and his works. For, as the same dialogue continues, Orphée insists: "The public likes me."[40] Whereas his friend mercilessly points out: "Ah, but they're the only ones."[41]

It would appear, thus, that Orphée is expressing Cocteau's feelings on a number of different levels as regards his public image. First, Orphée-Cocteau concedes that he is loved by neither his rivals nor the academic scholars who devote their time trying to unravel his works and classify him as a writer. Second, Orphée-Cocteau is quick to add that his public, however, still admires and respects him and his many artistic creations. Orphée-Cocteau reacts to the former of these two assertions by casting a rather blunt qualitative judgment on the nature of his younger rivals' "art." Handed a copy of Cégeste's most recent publication, Orphée exclaims:

Orpheus (opening it): I see only blank pages.

The Man: It's called "Nudism."

Orpheus: That's ridiculous.[42]

An illustration of Orphée-Cocteau's second assertion, of his public's admiration, rapidly follows as Cégeste instigates a brawl and the police

39. Steegmuller, p. 480.
40. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays,* p. 106.
41. Ibid., p. 106.
42. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays,* p. 106.

Night after night the Princesse appears (via the mirror) in Orpheus' bedroom. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

are called in to quell the disturbance. Methodically demanding everyone's identity papers, the police approach the table where Orphée and his friends are seated.

> First Policeman: Your papers. (*Orpheus takes his wallet from his pocket. The policeman looks at it and lifts his head.*) Excuse me, sir, I didn't recognize you, yet my wife has photos of you all over the place.
>
> Orpheus: This gentleman is with me.
>
> First Policeman: Please accept my apologies . . . (*saluting*) Sir! (*He moves away.*) [43]

Thus, Cocteau seems to utilize Orphée's presence in the Café des Poètes as another opportunity to express his own thoughts concerning

43. Ibid., p. 108.

the relationship of himself and his works to his public. This relationship, for Cocteau, seems to stand as a polarization between those who love him and those who hate (although perhaps secretly envy) him and his art. One can not help but feel, however, that Cocteau is once again portraying himself as an unjustly persecuted martyr, and that the role of Orphée is, in this respect, strongly paralleled to that of Christ who experienced the same polarization of public reception before his crucifixion and subsequent resurrection from the dead. Such an observation seems all the more strengthened if considered in the light of the preceding chapter, where Cocteau's "Orphic identity" is related to his natural inclination to see himself as a Christ-like figure.

The latter portion of this first scene initiates the viewer to the elements of what will become the true drama of the film: the mysterious Princesse, her silent aide Heurtebise, the two ominous motorcyclists, and the now "dead" Cégeste. The Princesse, as following scenes will quickly determine, is a personification of "Death," or, at least, "Orphée's Death." In Cocteau's play of 1925 of the same name, one meets a similar incarnation of Death—an attractive woman dressed in elegant attire—but she carried no specific name. Why, then, does Cocteau choose to label the Death of his cinematic version as "Princesse?" One answer is offered via the research of Francis Steegmuller, who notes that, following Cocteau's dismissal by one of his closest female friends (Valentine Hugo), Cocteau sought comfort with the Comtesse de Noailles. This path of action soon proved to be a mistake, however, and Cocteau later came to call the Comtesse "Princess Fafner," after a legendary Norse ogre. Thus, Steegmuller points out, the inclusion of the "Princesse" in *Orphée* suggests a deepening of Cocteau's already rampant misogyny.

Such an explanation of the origin of Cocteau's "Princesse" is perhaps as feasible as any, but what of the other "changed" characters who bear very little resemblance to the play *Orphée*? Heurtebise, for example, who was a simple glazier (glass vendor) in the play, is now more closely associated with Death herself and the chauffeur of her Rolls-Royce; much the same as in the play, however, Heurtebise will subsequently fall in love with Orphée's wife. The Rolls itself, and its sinister radio, has replaced the horse; but both retain their capacities for mesmerizing the hero. And what of the inclusion of this new character, the poet Cégeste? And these fierce motorcyclists? And what happened to Death's "old" aides, Raphael and Azrael?

The answers to such questions are not immediately obvious and have

The Princesse, in her garb of Death, as she watches Orpheus sleep. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

been the subject of much debate since *Orphée's* first public showing.[44] Cocteau casually dismisses such interrogations, saying that he merely wanted to "modernize" the Orpheus myth and clothe it in a terminology understandable to the modern world. Further, Cocteau attests, such questions are irrelevant to the total import of the film. He elaborates:

> Why is Orpheus' Death dressed in such or such a style? Why does she travel in a Rolls-Royce, why does Heurtebise appear and disappear at will in certain circumstances, while in others he abides by human rules? It is the eternal "why" that haunts all thinkers from Pascal to the most minor poet. . . . I wanted to touch on the most serious problems with a light hand, without philosophizing in a void. . . .

44. Cf., Robert Hammond, "The Mysteries of Orpheus," *Cinema Journal* 11 (Spring 1972) :26–33.

> The closer one approaches to mystery, the more important it becomes to remain a realist. Automobile radios, code messages, short-wave broadcasts, power failures—such elements, familiar to all, make it possible for me to keep things down to earth.[45]

Following the death of his wife, Eurydice, Orpheus speaks with Heurtebise (François Perier) concerning the possibility of bringing her back. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

Thus, Cocteau dismisses such ponderings without offering any concrete solutions to such questions. Although the exact reasons for the presence of such individuals and props in *Orphée* may remain vague, their total effect is undeniable. In presenting a "modernization" of the Orpheus myth, Cocteau has ingeniously utilized and coordinated the elements of what Pauline Kael has described as the "new mythology." She observes:

> The motorcyclists are part of a new mythology, they suggest images of our time: secret police . . . black heroes . . . the anony-

45. Steegmuller, p. 483.

> mous and impersonal . . . agents of some unknown authority . . . executioners . . . visitors from outer space . . . the irrational. They are the men you can't reach and you can't deal with; they stand for sudden, shockingly accidental death.
>
> Cocteau uses emblems and images of the then recent Nazi period and merges them with other, more primitive images of fear —as, indeed, they are merged in the modern consciousness. This gives the violence and mystery of the Orpheus story a kind of contemporaneity that, in other hands, might seem merely chic; but Cocteau's special gift was to raise chic to art.[46]

Hence, from the first major scene where one is introduced to the protagonists of *Orphée,* it seems crucial to understand that the question of "why are they as they are?" (particularly in comparison to Cocteau's previous play) is not at all as important as the questions of "*how* are they?" and "whom do they recall?" As Cocteau would undoubtedly affirm, it is necessary to *believe* rather than laboriously trying to understand his hidden motives and technical procedures that, by necessity, impede the communicative purpose of the film.

In the second major scene, Orphée comes to, lying in a sandy landscape, and is hailed by Heurtebise who then drives him home where Eurydice, Orphée's wife, is discussing the sudden disappearance of her husband and Cégeste with both the police and Aglaonice, leader of the League of Women, a friend of the avant-garde, and an old enemy of Orphée. Orphée pacifies the police, sends Aglaonice away, and becomes immediately obsessed with "poetic" transmissions from the radio of the Rolls-Royce, parked in his garage. Spurning Eurydice, Orphée offers her no explanation of his absence, while Heurtebise consoles her and tries to reassure her of Orphée's love. That night, and for several following nights, the Princesse appears (via the mirror) in Orphée's room and silently watches him sleep.

Aglaonice, meanwhile, accuses Orphée of complicity in Cégeste's death, but Orphée, indifferent to both Eurydice's emotional pleas and the counsel of Heurtebise, spends his time listening intently to the cryptic messages on the car radio. Eurydice, frantic, tries to go into town to appeal to Aglaonice but is promptly run down by the two motorcyclists. Orphée refuses to go to her aid. Heurtebise then carries her body to the bedroom where the Princesse has appeared with her new aide, Cégeste, who is broadcasting the radio messages that keep Orphée at the car's receiver in the garage. The Princesse performs her duties and leads Eurydice through the mirror to the underworld, but forgets one

46. Pauline Kael, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1968), p. 327.

of her rubber gloves—that part of her apparatus that enables one to pass through mirrors. Heurtebise remains behind, tells Orphée of his chance to reclaim his lost wife, and both, aided by the glove, pass into the mirror.

Within this second major portion of the film the plot begins to quickly unravel. One learns of Orphée's strange fascination with the beyond, his total indifference to his wife, and his hatred for Aglaonice, leader of the Bacchantes. The Princesse's attraction to Orphée becomes clear, as does Heurtebise's attraction to Eurydice. However, two particular themes seem predominant in this scene: the Cocteauean themes of poetic *inspiration* and his unique use of the *mirror.*

With the aid of a rubber glove that the Princesse had left behind, Heurtebise and Orpheus pass through the mirror. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

As regards the individual theme of the poet's inspiration, Cocteau reiterates in the preface to *Orphée*:

> 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 dif-

ferent so-called divine night. Everything starts to go wrong when Orpheus ignores his own messages and agrees to accept messages coming from outside. Orpheus is tricked by the messages that come from Cegestius, not from the beyond.[47]

Much the same as the poet in *Le Sang d'un Poète,* Orphée initially accepts a false inspiration, this time transmitted through the radio of the Rolls-Royce; such an inspiration can not be true, for the poet did not "die" to achieve it. It is only after Orphée's many descents to the underworld and his many spiritual and physical deaths at the hands of the Bacchantes and the Princesse that he can truly attain poetic inspiration and be reborn. Thus, through *Orphée,* Cocteau seems to have materialized all of his poetic doctrine concerning the mandatory Orphic nature of the artist's inspiration, as previously discussed within an earlier chapter of this study. Indeed, Orphée's entire plot and its very raison d'être as a film-poem seems to hinge upon the same fundamental questions that were answered in part through *Le Sang d'un Poète*: "what is poetry?", "where does it come from?", and "what is a poet?" If, according to René Gilson, *Le Sang d'un Poète* was the "initial speleological descent into the abyss of the poetic condition,"[48] then it must be agreed that *Orphée* affords to the viewer of Cocteau a second such exploration.

In addition to the theme of false versus true inspiration, which is, perhaps, the most noteworthy thematic "message" of *Orphée,* one also discovers a number of Cocteau's favorite items from his personalized artistic mythology. One such item of major importance throughout the film is the *mirror*: long established as one of Cocteau's most preferred images for portraying the doorway to the beyond. But what do Cocteau's mirrors signify in terms of the underlying meaning of *Orphée,* and further, in terms of all of the preceding discussions aimed at clarifying Cocteau's enigmatic film vocabulary? The answer seems almost self-evident. In much the same way as Cocteau utilized the mirror in *Le Sang d'un Poète,* he continues to use it in the same manner and for the same purpose. As the entrance and exit to the beyond, as the "door where Death comes and goes," the mirror is an object that reflects the image of those who stand before it. Thus, when plunging into the mirror to seek his lost inspiration, the poet succeeds in penetrating his own self. All that transpires behind the mirror in *Orphée,* to the same extent as in *Le Sang d'un Poète,* is actually happening *within*

47. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays,* p. 188.
48. Gilson, p. 79.

the poet. And, further, the rubber gloves of *Orphée* that facilitate passage through the mirror seem reminiscent of Cocteau's admitted use of opium to facilitate this passage into himself. Hence, Cocteau's repeated use of the mirror seems to signify the outer physical shell of the poet—the shell that the poet must pass through in order to make contact with his interior "angel" and become inspired.

Heurtebise and Orpheus in the "Zone"—a no-man's-land between life and death. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

Behind the mirror, Orphée and Heurtebise then traverse a "Zone" resembling the ruins of a city. Reaching an underworld tribunal at the furthest extent of the "Zone," they are called upon as witnesses to a trial where the Princesse stands as accused of killing Eurydice without orders. Her crime is "initiative" and her motive, love of Orphée. She and Orphée then express their mutual love for each other and Orphée, being a poet, is allowed to reclaim Eurydice on the condition that he never look at her. Heurtebise is allowed to return with them to facilitate their new life together.

The arrangement does not last long, however, and the next morning Orphée catches a glimpse of Eurydice in the rear-view mirror of the fatal Rolls-Royce. She promptly disappears. Simultaneously, Aglaonice and her friends burst into Orphée's home to avenge the death of Cégeste. Orphée is shot and the Bacchantes scatter as the police are held at bay by the two motorcyclists who carry off Orphée's body.

Beyond the Zone, the Princesse awaits impatiently for Orphée and Heurtebise. Embracing her love, Orphée, she then asks him if he will accept any ill treatment she cares to inflict upon him; Orphée immediately replies affirmatively and the Princesse orders Cégeste and Heurtebise to "kill" him.

Orphée awakens in his bed beside Eurydice. She remembers having a bad dream but Orphée feels that he has been inspired.

Beyond the mirror, however, Cégeste sadly watches as the Princesse and Heurtebise, guilty of insubordination, are marched off by the two motorcyclists to face a punishment "unimaginable to man."

Thus dramatically concludes *Orphée*. The Princesse and Heurtebise are punished for having loved Orphée and Eurydice and allowing that love to interfere with their assigned duties. And Orphée and Eurydice "live happily ever after."

Orphée has finally achieved true inspiration, but only after the many successive "deaths" of himself and Eurydice, his wife. Thus, Orphée comes to realize that he had been "tricked" by the transmissions of the radio in the Rolls-Royce and, forsaking this "found" inspiration to retrieve his lost wife, he subsequently experiences true poetic insight. The portrayal of this major theme in *Orphée* recalls one portion of Cocteau's poetic philosophy where he appropriately states:

> My method is simple: not to bother about poetry. It must come of its own accord. Merely whispering its name frightens it away.[49]

That is to say, by merely trying to "find" his inspiration, Orphée loses sight of its true nature, and consequently remains uninspired. As he eventually comes to realize, Orphée must undergo a number of "deaths," he must pass through this "Zone" (within himself) to make contact with the beyond. Inspiration, thus, stands as the outcome of a process in which the poet passes through a number of deaths to finally culminate his art in life—as illustrated by Orphée's "happy ending" where Eurydice and the poet are reunited in this world after their many "deathly" experiences in the beyond. It is only in life that the poet's death-produced inspiration can come to true fruition and become immortal through artistic representation. Hence, the poet's "death" must die to complete the cycle, and Cocteau befittingly concludes his film with Orphée's Death (the Princesse) sacrificing herself so that he may make just such a resurrection to the living. And as the voice of Cocteau affirms during this portion of the film: "The Death of the Poet must sacrifice herself to make him immortal."[50]

49. Cocteau, *Professional Secrets*, p. 199.

Heurtebise and Cégeste are called as witnesses before the tribunal of the "Zone" where the Princesse is accused of killing Eurydice without orders. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

Another interesting item from Cocteau's personalized mythology is found in this third portion of *Orphée* as well. It is this "Zone": a no-man's-Land between life and death, between the reality of the concrete world and the reality of the beyond. As Heurtebise conducts Orphée through this strange realm of Limbo, Orphée asks where they are. Heurtebise replies:

50. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays*, p. 182.

> Life takes a long time to die. This is the Zone. It consists of the memories of men and the ruins of their habits.[51]

That is to say, the journey of the poet to that "angel" residing deep within him is one which is long and arduous. The poet can not merely close his eyes and instantly effect a communication with the beyond; it must develop slowly and the poet must pass through many "levels" of himself before he finds what he is seeking. The "Zone," then, seems to be Cocteau's manner of illustrating the poet's transit between his normal waking consciousness and that profound "poetic" consciousness deep within him. Such a "Zone" could be likened to that strange semireal world of half-sleep that everyone experiences just before falling into complete slumber. In such a twilight state of mind, various "forgotten" memories spring to life—in much the same way as Cocteau's familiar image of the windowglass vendor (from the play *Orphée,* 1925) is met by Orphée and Heurtebise as they traverse the Zone. Orphée asks:

> Who are all these people wandering about? Are they alive?[52]

And Heurtebise calmly replies: "They think they are."[53]

Cocteau's "Zone," then, seems to represent that state of human consciousness located between life and death. Life in this case, however, would be the spiritual life of the poet—his destination at the far end of the Zone—and death would consist of the normal, unenlightened worldly consciousness of everyday living. It seems also interesting to note that Cocteau's conception of the "Zone" complements very well his definition of the very role of the poet as a sort of go-between, bridging the here and the hereafter for the rest of humanity. Thus, Cocteau unifies a bit the various elements of his poetic vocabulary, and, at the same time, provides his film *Orphée* with one of its most intriguing and meaningful sequences of cinematic imagery.

Also evident within this concluding portion of *Orphée* are many more instances of Cocteau's professed "public identity." One of the most obvious, and thereby meriting the least clarification, is Orphée's death at the hands of his avant-garde rivals, headed by his archenemy Algaonice. Through this tumultuous sequence, Cocteau portrays once again the frenzied hostility of some of some of his literary competitors

51. Ibid., p. 154.
52. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays,* p. 154.
53. Ibid., p. 154.

The Princesse makes her defense to the tribunal—her motive for the crime, love of Orpheus. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

and their unfair and wholly unjustified attacks that "murder" him. It seems highly probable that Cocteau was genuinely hurt by such incursions, particularly when they originated from those whom he honestly liked or felt close to. Various individuals once very close to Cocteau were known, later on in their lives, to level bombastic assaults on him and their now-terminated friendships. Raymond Radiquet was one such example, and Claude Mauriac could be equally considered as another. Each, while young, had befriended Cocteau (Cocteau had been a very close friend of François Mauriac, Claude's father), but they proceeded to speak harshly of him as they grew older and became noted authors in their own right. In any event, the myth of Orphée seems to find its perfect modern counterpart via Cocteau's cinematic adaptation, for it was the former followers of Orphée (as a priest of Dionysus) who, in the end, were the cause of his death.

Another indication of Cocteau's preoccupation with his "judged" poetic identity occurs toward the middle of *Orphée,* where Orphée,

Heurtebise, and the Princesse are put on trial before the Tribunal of the Zone. The prosecution questions Orphée as to his occupation:

First Judge: Profession?
Orpheus: Poet.
(*The Court Clerk stops writing and looks up.*)
Clerk: His file says "writer."
Orpheus: It's almost the same thing.
Second Judge: There is no "almost" here. What do you mean by "poet?"
Orpheus: One who writes without being a writer.[54]

Utilizing a clever play upon words, Orphée-Cocteau justifies himself as a poet: he who writes without being a writer. Such a statement seems to accurately pinpoint the task of a poet, according to Cocteau. To write is not to create poetry that, by its very nature, transcends the mere paper and ink that poetry must take as its form to be communicated to mankind. Thus, Orphée-Cocteau once again defends his identity from that of a mere "writer" who knows nothing of the magical properties of language and who can not raise the human spirit to a union with the beyond as can a true poet.

A final indication of Cocteau's sensitivity to his critics occurs in the final closing moments of *Orphée*. The Princesse, having "sacrificed" herself for Orphée, and Heurtebise, having fallen in love with Eurydice, are both led off to face their superiors, to receive their respective punishments. Orphée and Eurydice are reunited in life, where Orphée finds himself strangely inspired. Concurrent with his new-found inspiration, Orphée also experiences an attitude change with regard to his wife; he now seems deeply in love with her and affords to her his utmost attention and affection. Asking Eurydice as to the health of the yet-to-be-born child, Eurydice replies:

Eurydice:
He's kicking me. He punches me, too.
Orpheus:
He will be as unbearable as his father.
Eurydice:
You, unbearable?
(*They kiss, laughing.*)
Orpheus:
Many people find me unbearable.
Eurydice:
You shouldn't complain, you are adored!

54. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays*, pp. 158–89.

Orpheus, having regained Eurydice (Marie Dea) but may not look at her, struggles to keep his part of the bargain—but the situation is to be short-lived. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

Orpheus:
And hated. . . .
Eurydice:
That's just a form of love.[55]

Reminiscent of the opening scene, in the Café aux Poètes, where Orphée speaks of his being both loved and hated, this final passage once again touches upon the same theme. Such repeated references by Cocteau to the many facets of his public identity, using Orphée as his mouthpiece, seems to confirm the assertion that Cocteau was consciously striving to communicate this portion of himself, as well as many others, through his film *Orphée*.

There are a multitude of other very important themes within the

55. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays*, p. 186.

film *Orphée,* each representing to one degree or another the personality or beliefs of Cocteau. The contrast between Orphée's "love" for Eurydice (a woman) and his "love" for the Princesse (his Death and Muse), for example, could be discussed at length in terms of Cocteau's personal inclinations toward love. Heurtebise, for example, could be analyzed in terms of Cocteau's previously noted vocabulary of "angels." The element of time and its deformation in the film *Orphée,* for example, could be traced to the similar transformations of Time in *Le Sang d'un Poète,* and assumptions could accordingly be drawn concerning Cocteau's fascination with the elements of space and time and how he felt that the cinematograph is artistically superior to any other art form because of its capability to alter these two elements.

But one particular theme seems to outweigh all others, and seems

Shot to death in revenge for the slaying of Cégeste, Orpheus once more finds the Princesse awaiting him in the "Zone." They declare their ill-fated love for one another before she sends him back to life with Eurydice for a final time. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

furthermore, to go hand in hand with Cocteau's meaningful portrayal of the poet's many deaths and his resulting poetic inspiration in *Orphée.* This is the theme of the inalterable destiny of the poet versus his capacities of free will: the will of the gods versus the desires of man. Very similar to the predominant "message" of *Le Sang d'un Poète,* Cocteau seems to once again typecast the poet as one whose fate is determined and who is destined for fame, like it or not. The poet is but an instrument toward the manifestation of Poetry that lives in the guise of the poet's creations. The poet is at the "orders of his night" and assumes the role of intermediary between man and the beyond. The poet's personal wants, needs, and cravings must be considered secondary to his primary function as an oracle, a chronicler of the mysteries of the unknown. When asked by Eurydice to rest himself, Orphée replies:

> Orpheus' Voice: My books won't write themselves, you know.
> Eurydice's Voice: Your books do write themselves.
> Orpheus: I help them. . . .[56]

To "help" his poetry achieve earthly portrayal is the poet's task, and his very identity is contained within that framework.

Perhaps the most remarkable and significant illustration of this particular theme within *Orphée* is the actual denouement of the entire film, when the Princesse "kills" Orphée, bringing him back to life, and heroically prepares to face her inevitable and terrible punishment for this crime. In effect, the Princesse, who is Orphée's Death, sacrifices her love for him, in favor of poetry and life. Such a climactic outcome of the poet's numerous "deaths" and visits to the underworld draws to mind a parallel circumstance experienced on a number of occasions by Cocteau. That is to say, each time that Cocteau, with or without the help of opium, "died" and journeyed to that realm of the beyond within himself, he was forced to reluctantly return to "life." Having found his inspiration, he was forced to reassume his normal waking consciousness in order to adequately portray his visions. By whom or what was he forced to make such a return? By the *Poetry* that was within him; by his "night" that demanded his services; by his inspiration itself that would not heed its host's personal inclinations or desires and was concerned only with its own incarnation through an art form. Perhaps Cocteau, like Orphée, would have preferred to remain forever in the domain of the beyond with his "love,"

56. Cocteau, *Three Screenplays,* p. 186.

but his destiny was not of that order. He would "die" many times, and each time he would return, be "resurrected" from the dead, be "reborn," to perform his worldly tasks in the name of his Muse. This particular cycle, as a very predominant theme of Cocteau's film *Orphée,* is once again a reflection of Cocteau's many-faceted "Orphic identity" and stands as a major illustration of how he projected this complex poetic identity through his works. Through *Orphée,* in the same manner as in *Le Sang d'un Poète,* Cocteau poses the problem of the poet's quest. And, in response to this problem, Cocteau echoes once again the same answers.

Awaking as from a dream, Orpheus and Eurydice discuss their new-found love and poetic inspiration—they can remember nothing of their experiences. (COURTESY OF THE HAMMOND FILM LIBRARY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF N.Y., CORTLAND.)

Cocteau's cinematic masterpiece of *Orphée,* then, is a film highly autobiographical in nature and reflects many of Cocteau's personal and poetic beliefs. As noted within the introduction of this chapter, Cocteau claims that, through *Orphée,* he "orchestrates" the same

themes that he had "played clumsily" in *Le Sang d'un Poète* twenty years earlier. And, as seems evident through the investigations of *Orphée* presented within this chapter, those themes seem to almost invariably touch upon what one might term Cocteau's *Orphic identity.* But the cycle is not yet complete, and it is not until the year of 1959 that Cocteau would bring to culmination his prolonged cinematic self-portrait, terminating his three-part film legacy with his personalized epitaph of *Le Testament d'Orphée.*

D. Le Testament d'Orphée (1960)

In 1959, Jean Cocteau began to film what was to become his final cinematographic work, his last personalized film-poem, *Le Testament d'Orphée.* As the title suggests, this film, which so aptly completes his explorations of self begun in *Le Sang d'un Poète* and continued in *Orphée,* symbolizes the final few brush strokes toward an elaborate and enigmatic inner portrait of the author and must be considered, as he himself would explain, a lasting epitaph of his entire life, works, and self-examinations as a poet. Befittingly, Cocteau plays the leading role himself—a modern-day Orpheus, signaling an Orphic farewell to his "Tenth Muse" and embroidering once again into the fabric of that myth a poetic recapitulation of the "phoenixology" of a poet's true identity in the face of his creations, his judges, and his own self. As its subtitle *Le Testament* carries the warning, "Don't Ask Me Why," and Cocteau explains this choice as follows:

> This film is not, in the true sense of the word, a film, but rather it offered to me the only way in which I could portray objectively, sensitively and, I will say myself, in a familiar manner those things which I carry within me without really understanding them. . . .
>
> It's subtitle, "Don't Ask Me Why," signifies that I would be incapable of saying why I led, from one end to the other, an adventure which corresponds to none of the imperatives of the cinematograph.
>
> The only thing which I may state in confidence is that the cinematograph, through the possibilities which it offers in tampering with time and vanquishing its own narrow limits, is the only language suitable for bringing my night into the daylight and putting it on a table in the full sun.[57]

57. Roger Pillaudin, *Jean Cocteau Tourne Son Dernier Film* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1960), p. 9.

JEAN COCTEAU and His Films of Orphic Identity

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