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Jean Cocteau: Orpheus Narcissus

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JEAN COCTEAU: ORPHEUS NARCISSUS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The Department of French Studies

by
Gordon Elliott Walker
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This essay is dedicated to the memory of June Grace Blevins Walker.

Il n'y a qu'un amour qui compte, c'est le nôtre...

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PREFACE

This essay analyzes three films directed by Jean Cocteau and utilizes DVD editions of these films from the Criterion Collection. While I make every effort to cite dialogue or text from these films in the original French, it is unavoidable that I cite them occasionally in English, due to the original French being replaced by English (particularly in the case of the title cards, for example, in *Le Sang d'un poète*).

For those cases which force me to cite the films in English, I acknowledge that the English subtitles for *Le Sang d'un poète* are by Modern Videofilm, L.A., and those for *Orphée* and *Le Testament d'Orphée* are by Captions Inc., L.A.

The images from the films featured in this essay were captured using VLC technology.

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of thirty years, the poet and filmmaker Jean Cocteau created a singular artistic project he called the Orphic trilogy: *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930), *Orphée* (1950), and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1959). This trilogy is marked by an Orphic pattern of a poet's journey into an underworld to confront death. I will show that Cocteau's invention is to have Orpheus be in love with death, for death to be an attractive and irresistible force to the poet. Simultaneously, Cocteau avails himself of the Narcissus myth, the man in love with his own reflection. Orpheus and Narcissus converge in these films as a synthesis of Cocteau's personal obsessions, which I will identify in his own life. I will reveal that Cocteau's usage of Narcissus results in a queer aesthetic which courses through the trilogy. Through a close textual and visual analysis of these films, I hope to enrich the appreciation and criticism of this major artistic achievement.

JEAN COCTEAU AND THE ORPHIC TRILOGY

In 1964, an interview with the poet and filmmaker Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) was published posthumously in *The Paris Review*. In the 1963 interview, toward the end of his life, Cocteau enunciates some of his thoughts about his own work and its popular and critical reception: “I [have] long said art is a marriage of the conscious and the unconscious”; “The work of every creator is autobiography, even if he does not know it or wish it, even if his work is ‘abstract’”; “Appreciation of art is a moral erection”; and “it seems to me nearly the whole of [my] work can be read as indirect spiritual autobiography,” he says.¹ These pronouncements amount to a hypothesis about his process and his product. Cocteau attends to both the conscious work of art-making and to the unconscious effort therein. The conscious and the unconscious exist in tandem and can only be described in their symbiotic relationship, their “marriage.” Sexuality is an inextricable, indeed, a “moral” element of his art. This sexuality is queer: the sex is masculine and is concerned with masculine beauty (his “appreciation” is an “erection”). Abstraction does not impute illegibility, although even the artist himself is not always aware of the implications of his art. Above all, all work, all art is autobiographical, a reflection of the self, and the totality of an *œuvre* is nothing less than a life itself. Cocteau himself can be read in his work as much as his work can be read for itself.

The most singular and extended project of Cocteau’s *œuvre* is the Orphic trilogy, three films which take the myth of Orpheus as their *point de départ* and never look back (unlike Orpheus himself). These films are *Le Sang d’un poète* (1930), *Orphée* (1950),

¹ “Jean Cocteau, The Art of Fiction No. 34.” Interviewed by William Fifield. *The Paris Review* 32 (Summer-Fall 1964). Web. 22 May 2015.

and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1959). The trilogy took thirty years to complete and a lifetime to achieve. The films represent a sustained inquiry into the nature of art, particularly poetry, and poetry's inescapable hold on Cocteau's life. Poetry was everything for Cocteau, and everything was poetry:

He was the most self-proclaimed of poets, to the extent that he rigorously classified all his great variety of work, his poems, novels, plays, essays, drawings, and films, under the headings of "*poésie, poésie de roman, poésie de théâtre, poésie critique, poésie graphique* and *poésie cinématographique*." (Steegmuller 4)

This last category of *poésie cinématographique* has proven to encompass some of Cocteau's most enduring work. Certainly, his other mytho-poetic film *La Belle et la bête* (1946) remains his most famous work. With its fabulous *décors*, poetic dialogue, and larger-than-life performances, as well as its appeal to both children and adults, that film is Cocteau's most renowned example of his *poésie cinématographique*. But in the figure of Orpheus, Cocteau found the ultimate expression for his poetical sentiments, after imaginatively transforming the ancient singer into a poet, thus permitting Orpheus to stand in for Cocteau in the "indirect spiritual autobiography" that is the trilogy.

For Cocteau, everything he produced was some kind of poetry, which would fall under the classifications listed above: "With regard to Cocteau's poetic philosophy...the artist's definition of "poetry" stands for an "artistic creation," regardless of genre of form and, accordingly, a "poet" is simply a "creator of art"" (Evans 163). A poem – in this case, a cinematic poem – is the poet's product, and he may not be totally aware of its import. "Art is a marriage of the conscious and the unconscious," as Cocteau said, so he is not entirely in control of his creation. He is the conduit of poems, which must be "deciphered" as coded messages from somewhere beyond: "The poet's sole duty is to

act as a communicator of the coded enigmas that originate from deep within himself but which are not his" (Evans 163). This idea is first presented at the beginning of *Le Sang d'un poète* and is later dramatized in *Orphée* as mysterious radio transmissions which resemble poems. The viewer's task is to decode these messages – these poems – to understand and appreciate them. In this essay, I will rely on Cocteau's biography as well as a queer aesthetic to unlock the meaning of these films, just as Cocteau relied on the figure of Orpheus to unlock his own poetry.

The most famous of the legends about Orpheus concerns his marriage to Eurydice, her premature death, and his unprecedented journey to the underworld to retrieve her. This story comes to us primarily from the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid and the *Georgics* of Virgil. Orpheus is a musician in Thrace in ancient Greece, where he sings and plays the lyre to great renown. He is married to Eurydice, who, shortly after their wedding, is bitten by a snake on the ankle, dies, and descends into the underworld. Overcome by his grief and love, Orpheus attempts to follow her there, where he entreats Persephone and Hades to allow Eurydice to return to life. Orpheus sings and plays so movingly that neither can deny him his request. Eurydice is permitted to return to the land of the living with Orpheus, but under a particular condition: that Orpheus not look at her until they reach the surface of the Earth, otherwise she will die again, and permanently. The singer and his bride, still limping from her wound, retreat from the underworld. Just before the surface, Orpheus, seized by love, turns and regards his beloved, his outstretched arms searching for her embrace. Eurydice then dies a second death. Virgil has her castigate her grieving husband, demanding, "What was it, what madness, Orpheus, was it, that has destroyed us, you and me?" (179); in Ovid, she

merely pronounces the word “farewell” (267) then disappears. Orpheus aims to cross the river Styx a second time to fetch her again but is prevented from doing so: he has lost Eurydice forever. In Ovid’s telling, he sits by the river for seven days, bemoaning Hades’ empty promise; in Virgil’s account, he sits for seven months, weeping and singing his story in song. For the rest of his days, Orpheus refuses the love of other women, either to maintain his wedding vow to Eurydice or simply out of incurable grief. In Ovid, in fact, Orpheus turns his affections to young men, essentially initiating homosexual practice in Thrace. Virgil recounts a far more sinister fate: the roaming Bacchantes murder him, tearing him limb from limb, possibly because he spurned their advances or refused to worship these women’s god. The legend of Orpheus has inspired myriad works of art across the centuries, perhaps most famously Gluck’s opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* and Rilke’s *Sonnets to Orpheus*, both of which impact the Orphic trilogy (for example, instrumental sections of Gluck’s score are utilized in the film *Orphée*).

Cocteau had treated the Orpheus myth before he created his three films. He wrote a play called *Orphée* in 1925, which was presented in 1926 at the Théâtre des Arts in Paris. (His film *Orphée* is not an adaptation of this piece, although they share several attributes.) In this play, the poet Orphée and his wife Eurydice live in a mock-Grecian villa where Orphée keeps a horse in the house that mysteriously transmits poetic messages to the bard, one letter at a time. The horse’s latest message is “Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers” (an acrostic composition which produces the word “merde”), to Eurydice’s confusion and consternation. She has a habit of breaking windowpanes in order for her only friend, the glazier Heurtebise, to have to pay a visit to

repair them. One day, while Orphée is away, Eurydice receives a poisoned letter, which kills her. As she is dying, she sends Heurtebise away to find Orphée; she retreats upstairs to expire. On the empty stage, Death and two of her accomplices emerge magically from a large mirror. Death appears as a beautiful young woman with long rubber gloves. Together the three are processing Eurydice's death, which somehow requires an elaborate machine. They finish up and disappear via the mirror, leaving the gloves behind forgetfully, just as Orphée and Heurtebise return to find Eurydice's corpse. Heurtebise, who knows about such things, informs Orphée of what has happened and how he can possibly rectify it. He is to enter the mirror and descend into the underworld, offering to return Death's gloves in exchange for the chance for his wife to live again. Wearing the gloves, Orphée penetrates the mirror and disappears; mere moments later, he returns, followed by Eurydice. The condition for her return is the same as in the myth – he cannot look upon her. Only now, in Cocteau's version, they cross the barrier into the world of the living successfully. The horse's prophecy comes true: Madame Eurydice revient des enfers! However, the arrangement persists beyond their return home: Orphée cannot look upon Eurydice *ever again*. This results in some light comedy as the couple negotiate their new existence, Eurydice attempting to serve lunch, for example, without meeting Orphée's eyes. In a fit of irritation, "il perd l'équilibre," and Orphée sees Eurydice. She disappears immediately (ostensibly through a trap door during a brief blackout). In fact, Orphée claims to have done it "exprès," which injures the heartsick Heurtebise.

The "tragédie" continues ever more outlandishly as the Bacchantes pursue Orphée, eventually decapitating him offstage. Orphée's head, which continues to

speak, plays out scenes with a police inspector and a court clerk as Eurydice emerges again from the mirror to take his “invisible” body back through to the underworld. When the head is asked its name, it responds “Jean Cocteau”; its address, Cocteau’s famed residence, “Rue d’Anjou, 10”; its birthplace, Cocteau’s: Maisons-Laffitte, outside of Paris. Clearly, the author identifies with Orphée and self-identifies before an audience. “Le décor monte au ciel,” state the stage directions, and suddenly Orphée and Eurydice’s home is in heaven. Through the same mirror arrive a fully intact Orphée, Eurydice, and Heurtebise, who is actually an “ange gardien.” Orphée prays before their midday meal to give thanks to God who has saved him as well as to Eurydice, who has killed the horse, which was really a devil in the form of a horse. “Nous vous remercions de m’avoir sauvé parce que j’adorais la poésie et que la poésie c’est vous,” pronounces Orphée, “Ainsi soit-il” (*Orphée* [play] 422). This bizarre rewriting of the Orpheus myth exalts “la poésie” above all else, even above Orphée and Eurydice’s mythic love, even though the poetry emitted by the horse was the words of a devil.

Already in his exploration of Orpheus’ story, Cocteau envisions the hero as a poet, a famous poet, and imagines a modicum of marital strife between Orphée and Eurydice. His Orphée is captive to strange messages coming from strange sources (the horse). There is a beautiful woman who is Death, and her long gloves allow access through the magical mirror, which leads to the underworld. These and other elements will reappear throughout the trilogy, not only in the film *Orphée*. Most importantly, Cocteau sees himself in Orphée, in the decapitated head of the poet – they have the same name, same address, same hometown, same history. Orphée is also a poet, not a musician, so for Cocteau, a poet, his identification with Orpheus is creatively

complete. However, in a classical context, the distinction between a singer and a poet would not have been as rigid as our modern definitions are; Orpheus plays the lyre and sings along with it, creating “lyric” poetry. So he was already a kind of poet – it was not too far a stretch for Cocteau to insist upon this in his play. Imagining himself in mythic terms, Cocteau rewrites not only the legend of Orpheus but his own (self-aggrandizing) legend. This ability to see himself in such enormous proportions will sustain him in the creation of the trilogy. Orpheus is *his* mirror, his means of reflecting back to himself his artistic identity. He gazes upon his own image even as he redraws that image in mythic, eternal dimensions.

Cocteau was a great admirer of the Bohemian-Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (Bernstock 165), whose German-language *Sonnets to Orpheus* appeared in 1922.

Cocteau spoke and read German after being raised by a German nurse. Surely, these fifty-five sonnets informed Cocteau’s vision of Orpheus as a man and as a myth. One sonnet in particular may have inspired his idea of the mirror:

Mirrors, no one has ever yet described
you, figured out what you honestly are.
You are merely a few sieve holes inscribed
on sliced regions of time hopelessly far.

You are the prodigals of the empty chamber
when dusk spreads on the woods enormously...
Like a sixteen-pointed stag the chandelier
strides through your impenetrability.

Sometimes you’re full of paintings. And a few
seem to be brushed right into your background
while others you’ve sent timidly away.

But the most beautiful of them will stay
till bright Narcissus catches and breaks through
to her chaste lips hidden in the beyond. (Rilke 161)

Rilke inserts a motif of mirrors into the myth of Orpheus in only one of his many sonnets, but Cocteau becomes obsessed with them. “No one has ever yet described/you, figured out what you honestly are,” was a challenge to Cocteau. He takes up this task in his play *Orphée* and in the two films, *Le Sang d’un poète* and *Orphée*. The mirror becomes one of his signature motifs. In the play *Orphée*, Heurtebise announces “le secret des secrets” to Orphée: “Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la Mort va et vient. Ne le dites à personne. Du reste, regardez-vous toute votre vie dans une glace et vous verrez la Mort travailler comme des abeilles dans une ruche de verre” (406). In *Le Sang d’un poète*, the titular poet enters and exits a strange other world through a mirror (actually a pool of water). In the film *Orphée*, several characters including Orphée and Heurtebise traverse a tri-partite dressing mirror (in this case, liquid mercury). As Death comes and goes through mirrors, so we see Death working in the mirror – that is, as we regard ourselves in the mirror, we watch ourselves aging, inching ever closer to inevitable mortality. The journey that Orpheus undertakes as he tempts fate and tests death is contained in a single glance in the mirror: unconsciously, we meet Death in the mirror but insist we see Life and eventually, we turn away.

Mirrors do not appear in Ovid’s or Virgil’s tellings of the Orpheus myth. The mirror motif comes to us instead from Narcissus, as Rilke observes. Cocteau’s singular invention is to synthesize these two disparate figures – Orpheus and Narcissus – and their stories into one compelling, poetic narrative. The myth of Narcissus also comes to us via Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the story of a beautiful young man who denies the advances of women and other young men. The nymph Echo falls desperately in love

with him, but when he refuses her, she wastes away in her grief until nothing remains but her voice, which only repeats what Narcissus says – hence, an echo, a verbal mirror. As punishment for spurning so many would-be lovers, the goddess of revenge, Nemesis, leads Narcissus to a clear reflecting pool, where he spies his own image, with which he falls instantly in love. However, this love remains entirely elusive; it can't be kissed or held, “an immaterial hope,/a shadow that he wrongly takes for substance” (Ovid 77). Paralyzed by his overwhelming love, Narcissus wastes away unto death at the side of the reflecting pool, forever transfixed by his own image. In some versions of the myth, he drowns trying to reach his love in the pool. Just as in the last stanza of Rilke's sonnet, Narcissus in fact “breaks through” the pool to enter “the beyond.”

Narcissus falls in love with his mirror image; the pool is a mirror which contains his death as well as the object of his love. At the same time, Cocteau's Orpheus looks at and even enters into a mirror which is the doorway to death, where he must seek his love, Eurydice. For both Narcissus and Cocteau's Orpheus, the mirror is the locus of love and death. Then, with mathematical precision, the two myths converge. Orpheus and Narcissus merge in the mirror, and the poet falls in love with Death.

. . .

Jean Cocteau was born outside of Paris, at Maisons-Laffitte, Yvelines, on July 5, 1889. His father, Georges Cocteau, was a lawyer and amateur artist. When Cocteau was nine years old, his father shot himself in the head with a pistol in his bed and died. His reasons appeared to have been financial worries, which proved unfounded. Decades later, Cocteau alluded to his hypothesis that his father was a closeted homosexual and, unable to repress his true nature, self-annihilated. Cocteau was an

unsuccessful and indifferent student and was expelled from the Lycée Condorcet. At fifteen, he ran away for a year to Marseille, where he undoubtedly had his first sexual experiences with men and with women. (In *Le Livre blanc*, he describes a peep show there starring working-class young men, viewed voyeuristically...through a two-way mirror.)

By eighteen, Cocteau was already something of poetic prodigy. In 1908, the theatrical producer Édouard de Max arranged for a *matinée poétique* at the Théâtre Fémina in Paris where the guests allegedly included the great Sarah Bernhardt (Williams 2008, 31). It was a resounding success and led to overnight fame amongst the Paris literati and to Cocteau's first publication of poems, *La Lampe d'Aladin*, in 1909. *Le Prince frivole* appeared the next year, although its title stuck to Cocteau as a somewhat condescending nickname for almost the rest of his career. Still, he soon became acquainted with an entire world of poets, painters, actors, dancers, choreographers, composers, *artistes* all. However, as "just" *le prince frivole*, the young Cocteau was not always taken as seriously as he considered his artistic ambitions should be. One moment stands out in his development of this time. While crossing the Place de la Concorde one evening in 1912, Cocteau heard the voice of the founder of the Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev, who viewed the little prince as little more than that. "*Étonne-moi!*" Diaghilev most famously bellowed, "I'll wait for you to astound me!" (Williams 2008, 49) The challenge was declared. Cocteau would be seeking to *étonner* for the rest of his life.

By 1917, he was doing just that. His first full-length work for the stage was the libretto to the ballet *Parade*, created for the Ballets Russes, which had music by Éric

Satie and *décors* by Pablo Picasso; the dancing was choreographed by Léonide Massine, who appeared in the production as well. Cocteau would continue his association with Picasso throughout his life – he even appears in *Le Testament d'Orphée*. But Cocteau's most important relationships, romantic and platonic, were soon to come. Three men in particular were to exercise an enormous influence on his personal and artistic life: Raymond Radiguet, Jean Marais, and Édouard Dermithe.

Cocteau met the fifteen-year-old Radiguet, a poet in the making, in 1918. It is now generally accepted that Cocteau, at least, was deeply in love with Radiguet; whether that relationship was consummated is open to question. They collaborated extensively, they traveled together, and Cocteau supported Radiguet financially through the writing of his novel (the only one published in his lifetime), the scandalous *Le Diable au corps*, which appeared in 1923 (Steegmuller 305). That same year, Radiguet died suddenly of typhoid fever, which he had contracted on vacation with Cocteau. *Le Diable au corps* deals explicitly with the relationship of a teenage boy with a married, slightly older woman, and as an artifact of Radiguet's life, it has usually been used to insist upon his heterosexuality. What is not in question is the great feeling that Cocteau had for the young man; poems and drawings exist, some rather sexual and romantic, that attest to Cocteau's love for Radiguet. Upon Radiguet's death, Cocteau was so overtaken by grief that he did not attend Radiguet's funeral and soon slipped into opium addiction, which would plague him for the rest of his life. This experience of losing a loved one far too soon, so inexplicably, so fast, would haunt his entire *œuvre*. No other relationship would come close to satisfying Cocteau's idealization of this lost young love.

However, Cocteau did engage in numerous other relationships, mostly homosexual, and often quite openly. He was the known lover of the actor Jean Marais during Marais' rise to fame onstage and onscreen, which was due primarily to Cocteau's intervention. They met in 1937 when Marais auditioned successfully for a chorus part in Cocteau's play *Œdipe-Roi*. Marais ultimately became something of a *matinée* idol, prized for his golden-boy good looks, if not always valued for his skills as a performer. This was perhaps best exemplified by Cocteau's 1943 adaptation of the Tristan and Yseult myth, *L'Éternel Retour*, directed by Jean Dellanoy, which starred Marais and Madeleine Sologne. The film played upon the stars' great beauty as indicative of their mythic stature. Marais's desire for real recognition of his acting talent was how he convinced Cocteau to film *La Belle et la bête* in 1945. By spending half of the film made up unrecognizably as the horrible Beast, as well as by playing another, far different character in the film, the handsome Avenant, Marais achieved a double success: he proved his actor's craft with the two wildly disparate roles, and he overcame his remarkable beauty as the ugly but affecting beast. Marais would go on to star in Cocteau's adaptations of his own novels, *L'Aigle à deux têtes* and *Les Parents terribles*, both released in 1948. As a central figure in Cocteau's creative imagination, his muse, Marais also plays an important role in the Orphic trilogy: indeed, he is Orphée in the film *Orphée* in 1950, and he has a cameo in *Le Testament d'Orphée* nine years later.

This trajectory mirrors Marais' romantic involvement with Cocteau. By the time of *Orphée*, Marais and Cocteau were drifting apart, and Cocteau became infatuated anew with the actor and painter, Édouard Dermithe (also spelled Dermit), thirty-five years younger than he. Dermithe appears in small roles in some of Cocteau's films but

emerges most prominently in *Orphée* and *Le Testament d'Orphée*. In both films, he plays the character of Cégeste, the young poet felled at the height of his fame and power. In a strange twist, the childless Cocteau eventually adopted the adult Dermithe as his son, making him the guardian of his legacy after his death.

. . .

So Cocteau's biography includes his homosexual (and occasional, or purported, heterosexual) relationships, so his "indirect spiritual autobiography" reflects these queer aspects. Cocteau utilizes the myth of Narcissus specifically for his association with homosexuality, as the generator of his queer aesthetic. Narcissus is, of course, a male adoring another male, even as it is himself – love of sameness merges with love of self. Male homosexuality, from a psychoanalytical point of view, was at least at one time strongly correlated with narcissism and discussed as one reading of the Narcissus myth. For Freud, this emerged first in an essay on Leonardo da Vinci in which he links "autoerotism, homosexuality, and narcissism" for the first time (Dean 123). Essentially, the homosexual represses his overwhelming love for his mother and substitutes himself, or versions of himself, in her place, giving rise to an attraction to other individuals who resemble him, which replaces his infantile self-love. This homosexual orientation leads to a bleak end: "We know that narcissism must be pathogenic because of Narcissus's fate, and so, by virtue of the intuitive association between self-love and love of the same, homosexuality takes over this connotation of impending doom" (Dean 123). Partly because homosexuals, in an ideal narcissistic state, do not reproduce, homosexuality is linked with death; Narcissus leaves no legacy but his story. These ideas would persist in Freud's *On Narcissism* in 1914, albeit somewhat more

sympathetically to the homosexual. This is the poetic conception of homosexuality with which Cocteau works, one where same-sex love is a 'zero-sum game' because reproduction is impossible. There is little productive relation with difference between partners; indeed, the attraction is based on their similarity. Lovers cancel each other out, rather than compliment one another. Their love is thus something annulled, sterile, even dead – regardless of personal pleasure. For Cocteau, the mathematics of homosexuality always add up to nil. From this viewpoint, which I certainly do not endorse, except poetically, Cocteau envisions the overlapping of this queer love with its self-evident demise, so that sex and mortality collide, and Orpheus can entertain a romance with Death.

In the creative world, this characterization of a queer Narcissus probably emerged most vividly with the life and work of Oscar Wilde, and indeed, Cocteau himself was inspired by the Irish poet. Cocteau composed poems based on Wilde's *Salomé* as well as two odes which associate Wilde with gay love in *Le Prince frivole*. Most tantalizingly, Cocteau worked on an unpublished and unproduced theatricalization of Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, composed sometime around 1908 in collaboration with Jacques Renaud and entitled *Le Portrait surnaturel de Dorian Gray* (Eells 92). Thematically, for the first time, we find one of Cocteau's inspirations for the mirror, for Wilde's picture of Dorian Gray, though a painting, acts as a sort of moral mirror for the libertine title character. As the immortally beautiful Dorian never ages or changes, his painted portrait does, showing the slow corruption caused by his hedonistic lifestyle. It is all too apparent how this concept worked upon Cocteau: Wilde's picture is literally a living mirror, reflecting the outer and inner character of the

subject. Dorian is also a Narcissus figure, so in love with the beauty of the original painting – that is, in love with an image of himself – that he trades immortality for that beauty. Dorian remains as eternally beautiful as ever as his portrait suffers the blows of crime and age. Disgusted, he eventually attacks the now horrible portrait and in doing so, kills himself. Love of self, narcissistic love, love of male beauty, all commingle in the magical, living portrait which mirrors the actual effects of Dorian's unspeakable crimes. Cocteau imaginatively translates this into an actual mirror and creates one of his signature motifs, while shedding some of the moralizing to which Wilde's novel was subject, which required major revisions for publication. Cocteau's unfinished work on Wilde reconstitutes itself in these Orphic films and others. Perhaps the most verifiable relation between Cocteau's mirror and Wilde's picture actually appears in *La Belle et la bête*: when the morally hideous sisters hold up Belle's magic mirror to gaze at themselves, they instead see to their consternation an ugly old woman and a raffish monkey, the reflections of their actual inner characters.

As the myth of Narcissus thus presents an avenue for Cocteau to explore gayness in his own work, so the myth of Orpheus provides an opportunity to revise and ultimately subvert a famously heterosexual paradigm. It is, after all, the story of one of the great male-female love affairs, one which risks death to maintain itself. However, there remains a queer element to the Orpheus story, in two particular ways. One, plainly, is the fortune of Orpheus himself, who shunned female company for that of younger men after he loses Eurydice. The second, more complicated relationship with homosexuality relates, unsurprisingly, to Narcissus and narcissism. Orpheus the widower, with no offspring and only male lovers, is the homosexual man whose only

end is death (even before, or despite, the violent attack of the Bacchantes).

Homosexual love, unlike heterosexual love, cannot reproduce and leave a physical and genetic legacy. Love of sameness (homosexuality) – again, in this instance, a male adoring another male – is easily related to love of self (narcissism), so Orpheus falls into a narcissistic position as a homosexual man. Indeed, his only real love after Eurydice is his art, a reflection of himself; his male lovers resemble him and reflect his own desires back to him. This theory of homosexuality and narcissism, initially proposed by Freud, infiltrates Cocteau's *œuvre* and marks these Orphic films in particular as decidedly queer. Of course, in our contemporary times, the general and scientific understanding of homosexuality is markedly different: gay women and men are accepted in the wider society, and their orientation is no longer viewed as pathological. However, to fully appreciate Cocteau's work, we must immerse ourselves in his creative milieu. These ideas about homosexuality then have a poetic resonance, which I identify as Cocteau's queer aesthetic, even as they have been decidedly debunked in the past few decades. By historicizing the homosexual elements present in Cocteau's films, we can avoid affirming their essential negativity and appreciate them for their subversive qualities.

Both of these mythic personalities must meet death. For each, death is implicated in their search for love. Orpheus must overcome death to retrieve Eurydice from the underworld. Narcissus's dedication to his love results in his death, whether wasting away next to the pool of water or drowning in it (as we will see in *Le Sang d'un poète*, Cocteau prefers the action of drowning). We must remember that Cocteau himself was rudely confronted by death both early in life (his father's suicide) and in his own quest for true love (the untimely demise of Radiguet). His identification with the

mythic figures of Orpheus and Narcissus relies on their relationships to death – in fact, as we shall see in *Orphée*, these relationships to death sometimes even amount to love.

Love and death, *eros* and *thanatos*, are inextricably intertwined in the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus and offer Cocteau elaborate fodder for his own meditations on these mysteries. He structures these films along Orphic and Narcissistic patterns as journeys into the unknown, through a magic portal (normally the mirror), requiring various accoutrements and guides. We shall see the repetition and development of some of these devices across the Orphic trilogy. These films may be viewed, through the lens of Orpheus, as sustained inquiries into the heterosexual relationships of characters derived from the ancient myth. However, I will argue that Cocteau subverts this legend with a queer subtext characteristic particularly of Narcissus. For audiences at the time, this subtext may or may not have been apparent – in the case of the most famous picture, *Orphée*, probably not. My essay will reveal that a close analysis of the content and structure of these films indeed supports a queer aesthetic, under the sign of Narcissus as much as of Orpheus.

This queer aesthetic is two-fold. Firstly, and more self-evidently, it privileges homoerotic forms and figures, such as the phallic crumbling tower in *Le Sang d'un poète*. To decipher these forms and figures requires a sensitivity to queerness that stems from my personal history as well as from a more general study of erotics in literature and film. Secondly, the queer aesthetic represents a disruption of the traditional, heteronormative paradigm in which most mainstream film is situated. Especially for *Orphée*, the most mainstream of the three films, the queer aesthetic can be located where Cocteau subverts traditional notions of sexuality and gender, for

example, in the character of the Princess, a female who is coded as male. This subversion is pictorial as well, as Cocteau makes visual references that connect the three films to themes of homoerotic ecstasy that he introduces in *Le Sang*.

The visual component of the experience of these films is girded thematically as well by the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus. They are both tales about looking – Orpheus looking back at Eurydice, Narcissus looking at himself – which upend our notions of the gaze, and specifically the erotic gaze. Orpheus's gaze at Eurydice is a look of love, but it actually promises her death. Narcissus's gaze at himself is equally as tender and as perilous, for he will drown in the pool which reflects that gaze. That narcissistic regard, in turn, characterizes the entirety of the trilogy as it becomes clear that it functions as Cocteau's "indirect spiritual autobiography." He trains his often homoerotic gaze on others, and eventually upon himself, in an exercise of extreme but poetic narcissism that supposedly reflects his full self. He utilizes Orpheus and Narcissus for the mythic capital they have to spend: they are stories which are flexible enough to withstand his rewriting and invention.

The site of their convergence is the mirror. While Cocteau's mirror shows quite a bit more than what it merely reverses, its foremost function is the reflection of identity. It refracts the narcissistic gaze, sending back to Cocteau information about himself. This identity is poetic and not literal. Cocteau is analyzing his own identity in order to create a legacy – an identity which endures. For this he reaches out to these mythic characters who have remained in our collective imagination over centuries. He self-identifies with Orpheus and, as we have proposed, his corollary Narcissus in different ways in each film. It can even be said that his self-identification with these figures

deepens as the trilogy progresses. He may or may not be the titular poet of *Le Sang d'un poète*, he is clearly an inspiration for Orphée in *Orphée*, and most obviously, he plays himself (or a version of himself) in *Le Testament d'Orphée*. So his participation in the creation and dissemination of these films increases over time as the project slowly but surely delineates his “spiritual autobiography.” His work is not merely autobiographical, however, as Cocteau operates in such mythic proportions. He rewrites these myths to such an extent that they seem to emerge as much from his own imagination as from antiquity – what Clément Borgal calls his “mythologie personnelle,” populated with figures from his own life and conceived on his own terms, a constellation of lovers and others circling his own poetic stature (198). Ultimately, Cocteau aims for the poetic immortality afforded to Orpheus and Narcissus, to myths in general. While both characters perish (as does Cocteau), their stories persist in verse and in memory – in poetry. Only by meeting death, as do Orpheus and Narcissus, can Cocteau achieve that kind of immortality. Locating love and death in his famed mirror, Cocteau renews the power of these two myths to reflect his own artistic goal – hence the inscription on his tomb: *Je reste avec vous*.

LE SANG D'UN POÈTE

“Every poem is a coat of arms. It must be deciphered,” announces Jean Cocteau at the beginning of his 1930 ciné-poem, *Le Sang d'un poète*. So immediately we understand that this film is a part of Cocteau's “spiritual autobiography,” his “mythologie personnelle”; a “coat of arms” is the symbol for one's house, one's family crest, one's estate, and this “coat of arms” is a “poem,” the ultimate in expression for the renowned poet. Furthermore, this coat of arms must be “deciphered” because the poet will only present its elements, not explain them. Thus the task for the viewer and critic is enunciated from the very debut of the film. What Cocteau does not reveal textually is his reliance upon the Orpheus and Narcissus myths which characterize this film as the first part of the Orphic trilogy. This is one element which must be deciphered; Cocteau's own biography will be another of the keys for unlocking the meaning encoded in this poem of a film. I argue that Cocteau's own homosexual orientation is also contained within *Le Sang*, resulting in the queer aesthetic which colors the whole trilogy. To decipher the ‘meaning’ of various elements of the film will require a sensitive and very close reading of its themes, its images, and its few words, using the framework of the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus as symbolic guides.

The film is insistently, if obtusely, autobiographical. The very first shot of the film is of the director, dressed in antique garb, standing in front of various cameras and lighting instruments in the studio, one arm outstretched, as if welcoming us into his reverie. This image communicates some important information: that the film is a manifestation of Cocteau himself, and that it will envision the meeting of antiquity (his dress) and modernity (the film equipment). Cocteau will employ ancient tropes –

specifically, the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus – to confront his modern dilemma, that of the poet seeking immortality. The title cards continue and reinforce Cocteau's position as the generator of all of what will come – as the director: "Free to choose the faces, the shapes, the gestures, the tones, the acts, the places that please him, he composes with them a realistic documentary of unreal events." "A realistic documentary of unreal events" is Cocteau's apt definition of cinema itself, for no other medium can achieve the degree of verisimilitude or realism that cinema can. Indeed, *Le Sang d'un poète* is notable in cinema history for the finesse of its special effects (the "unreal events"), considered ground-breaking at the time for seeming so real. (They are considerably powerful still today, for the elegance with which they solve various problematic situations in the film.) Finally, Cocteau dedicates the film – "this group of allegories" – to a group of painters who specialized in "insignias and enigmas." So the film may be read allegorically, symbolically, containing such insignias and enigmas, which may never be deciphered, although we will try. It is simultaneously "realistic" and allegorical, an opposition which creates an interesting tension throughout the film as these various "unreal events" beg to be believed.

What events make up this challenging film? Briefly, the film contains four named *épisodes* which are relatively discrete but sometimes bleed into one another. The first *épisode* is entitled "La main blessée, ou les cicatrices du poète." A tower is shown on the brink of collapse. A doorknob is shown turning but not opening. We are in a small room with the titular poet, who is painting what appears to be a self-portrait. When he goes to erase the mouth of his portrait with his hand, there is a transference, and a moving, speaking mouth appears in the poet's palm. Eventually, the poet employs it to

sexual effect, caressing his body with the mouth-hand. When he awakens the next morning, the room suddenly changes – it now contains a beautiful, white, female statue, and a large mirror. It is now the second *épisode*, called “Des murs ont-ils des oreilles?” The poet wipes his mouth-hand on the statue’s mouth and miraculously brings her to life while ridding himself of the mouth in his palm, which is transferred to the statue. The statue now speaks and urges the poet to enter the mirror and explore. The poet acquiesces and enters through the mirror into a world beyond, where he finds himself in the Hôtel des Folies-Dramatiques. He peers through the keyholes of various rooms to see different short scenes. Ultimately he attempts suicide, only to fail and find himself expelled back through the mirror into his own small room. In a rage, he demolishes the statue. The third *épisode* is “La Boule de neige,” which replays an infamous incident of schoolyard barbarism that Cocteau had already described in his novel *Les Enfants terribles*. In the midst of a snowball fight, one imposing student strikes another with the *boule de neige*, which kills him. The final *épisode* is entitled “La Profanation de l’hostie” and takes place in the same setting as the third – in fact, a card table is set up over the body of the dead boy (as he bleeds, so does one *épisode* bleed into another). At this table sits a beautiful woman (who resembles the statue from earlier) playing cards with the poet. A young black man, the boy’s *ange gardien*, emerges and spirits away the dead body. The poet loses at cards and attempts suicide again, only this time to succeed. An audience applauds. The woman turns back into a living statue and slowly exits with a gigantic bull, whose horns in the next shot transform into the spindles of a lyre that the statue carries, along with a globe. The tower is shown completing its

collapse. “Fin!” announces Cocteau. This “group of allegories” takes place during a sometimes agonizingly slow fifty minutes.

While he had previously treated the myth of Orpheus in his play *Orphée*, there is nothing to suggest Narcissus in that work, and *Le Sang d'un poète* may be the first time that Cocteau inserts Narcissus into his Orphic project. As the foundation of the Orphic trilogy, it must be investigated for its Orphic qualities, and yet its Narcissistic qualities are, to my mind, more apparent. (Were it not for Cocteau naming the trilogy Orphic, one could easily call *Le Sang d'un poète* a Narcissistic meditation.) The Orphic pattern presents itself in Cocteau's obsession with death and with the literal journey of the poet into a sort of underworld. As would become his signature, the mirror is the usual portal for such a journey. Why does the poet undertake such a trip? The dialogue immediately preceding his plunge into the mirror is not particularly indicative:

STATUE. – Tu crois que c'est simple de se débarrasser d'une blessure ? De fermer la bouche d'une blessure ?

POÈTE. – Ouvrez-moi !

STATUE. – Il te reste une ressource : entrer dans la glace et puis promener. Je te félicite : tu avais écrit qu'on entrait dans les glaces, et tu ne croyais pas.

POÈTE. – Je...

STATUE. – Essaie...essaie toujours...

Cocteau had indeed written about walking through mirrors (the play *Orphée*) and yet it was never fully possible until now – in a film. The door having disappeared, there is only one way left to leave the room, and that's through the mirror. But what propels the poet to do so? This is the heart of the Orphic mystery that Cocteau has coöpted for his film. In antiquity, it was his love for Eurydice that pushed Orpheus to undertake this journey to the underworld. Here, somewhat similarly, there is a woman who is and is not alive (as a 'living' statue) who presses the Orphic figure onward. She speaks about

a wound (“une blessure”). The wound of a dead lover spurred on Orpheus, and the wound of his mouth-hand incites the poet. This wound has, of course, been his sort-of lover. And Cocteau himself had sustained such a wound: the death of Raymond Radiguet.

The Orphic motif abuts Cocteau’s preoccupation with death, here first seen as the end of his otherworldly journey when he shoots himself with the pistol. This is essentially Orphic: Orpheus would die, that is, go to the underworld, for Eurydice, just as this poet is willing to die. For what? For love of a statue? For closure of his wound? For, as Cocteau intones, “La gloire toujours!” – his bid for immortality? Regardless, true to the Orphic pattern, the poet escapes death and returns alone back into the world from which he came. This is ultimately Orpheus’ triumph over death, visualized by Cocteau as the expulsion of the poet through the magical mirror. And just as Orpheus causes the ultimate destruction of Eurydice, so does the poet intentionally destroy the statue, much as in his play *Orphée*, Orphée claimed to look at Eurydice “exprès”.

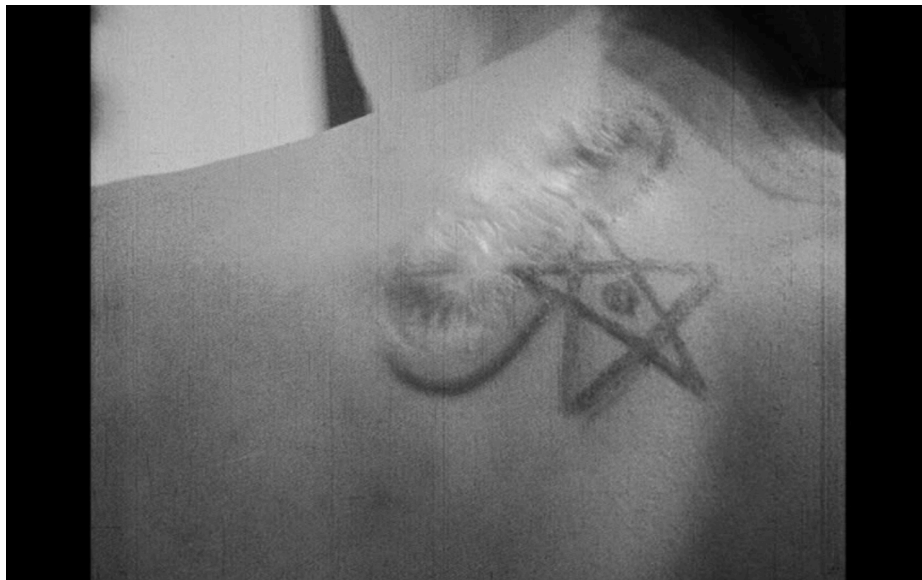
Cocteau’s insistence that *Le Sang d’un poète* belongs to his Orphic trilogy is, in some ways, the main reason that an Orphic pattern can be determined in these *épisodes*. It is really only the second *épisode* which seems purely Orphic. The third and fourth *épisodes* betray the same obsession with death and show the poet’s final demise, just as Orpheus was murdered by the Bacchantes. However, while certain images and themes tie *Le Sang d’un poète* to *Orphée* and *Le Testament d’Orphée*, I posit it that it is the least self-evidently ‘Orphic’ of the three films. The myth of Orpheus must in a sense be ‘applied’ to the film, rather than deduced from it. Furthermore, if anything, *Le Sang d’un poète* reveals more clearly Cocteau’s engagement with the

Narcissus myth and its connotations of homosexuality. These important attributes are able to permeate the rest of the trilogy, complicating the Orphic narrative and lending not a little *soupeçon* of queerness to the ostensibly 'straight' tale of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The Narcissistic narrative is marked, as we have proposed, by a love of self and a love of sameness, by the homosexual element, and (similar to the Orphic narrative) a relationship with death. Narcissus desires that which will destroy him, so love or passion relates uneasily to death; and, as we have seen, for Cocteau at that time, it seemed that death was the only biological end for the homosexual male. The Narcissistic motifs in *Le Sang d'un poète* and their ties to Cocteau's personal life (specifically, his sexual orientation) work within the Orphic pattern to color Cocteau's quest for poetic immortality – for a life after death.

The film begins both explicitly Narcissistic and queer. The first shot is of Cocteau himself, as we have seen, a literal mirror image of him, announcing the intensely personal nature of the project, which more than borders on the narcissistic: the film is ostensibly about the blood of a poet, and Cocteau is a poet – it must be about his blood, his very life. (Indeed, the film could be titled *Le Sang de Jean Cocteau*.) We soon see the tall brick tower apparently beginning to crumble. The phallic overtones of this shot are inescapable and, as we shall see, firmly situate us in a queer milieu. We have already remarked upon the indication of autobiography in the first few shots of the film; now we can definitively say that this autobiography will acknowledge its narcissistic and homosexual elements.

The latter immediately confronts the audience with the sight of the nude torso of the poet. He is a beautiful and graceful young man. His nudity eroticizes him, and Cocteau's appreciation of his male beauty (a male adoring another male) is clearly queer: he lavishes an erotic but also adoring gaze on the poet. The film would have lost this dangerous sexual quality had the poet been fully dressed. Cocteau's narcissistic gaze identifies the poet with himself rather quickly as well. When the poet turns his back, we see the namesake of the *épisode*: *les cicatrices du poète*. He is scarred above his left shoulder, and drawn alongside his scar is the shape of a star (figure 2.1). This star is the mark (the "insignia" or "emblem," as it were) of Jean Cocteau, who always decorated his signature with a small doodle of a star.



2.1 *Les cicatrices du poète*

It is then clear that the poet is a manifestation of Cocteau (indeed, at certain angles the actor playing the poet resembles a younger Cocteau). As it is, we have a character who we can assume to be the poet of the title (even though he has only been named as "the young man"), and yet we watch him drawing images upon a canvas – precisely how

Cocteau, known poet, operates as both a *dessinateur* and, currently, as a *cinéaste*. So the director himself acknowledges his narcissism meta-cinematically; what follows in the first *épisode* is his interior exploration of narcissism and Narcissus. For example, when the poet turns away from his canvas to face the camera, the resemblance between him and his drawing is striking. It may or may not be a self-portrait, but the strong, dark features of the poet invite such a comparison with the heavy markings on the canvas. Again, we can analyze this moment as meta-cinema: Cocteau the poet creating images of a poet, who is Cocteau, creating images of himself. Obviously not a documentary effort which perfectly reflects Cocteau at work, the film is still some sort of mirror onto Cocteau's consciousness – a sort of funhouse mirror that refracts, rather than reflects, and is not necessarily to be trusted. And, as we shall see, it is both breakable and penetrable.

The queer sensibility of Narcissus emerges in this first *épisode* when the poet tries to erase the mouth of the subject of his portrait and finds that mouth instead lodged in his palm. Notably, he has to remove a glove. "Taken out of a portrait where the naked hand had contracted it like leprosy," says the title card, noting the "naked" hand and comparing the mouth to a debilitating and highly contagious disease whose sufferers find themselves shunned from society. That glove was apparently some kind of protection, reminiscent of the gloves worn in the play *Orphée* to enter the mirror; this image and idea of gloves will reappear more centrally in the film *Orphée*. It is important, however, to note the sexual overtones of the transfer of the mouth from the portrait to the poet's hand – the removal of protection, the nakedness of the hand, the idea of contracting a disease, and that disease being leprosy. After all, the homosexual was

still some a sort of social leper in Cocteau's France, if not in his immediate circle; some of André Breton's most vituperative criticism levied at Cocteau was less pro-Surrealism manifesto than blatant homophobia, for example. Otherwise, the mouth-hand is merely a clever metaphor for the poet's art: he speaks, as it were, from his hand, from his writing. As Cocteau insinuates, the mouth-hand becomes sexualized as well.

The sexual nature of the poet's relationship with the mouth-hand becomes all the more clear in the ensuing scene. The poet gives in to his own curiosity and kisses the mouth-hand. They embrace passionately, as if lovers. The Narcissistic pattern now establishes itself even before there is a mirror involved: the poet loves himself, literally. He passes the mouth-hand over his chest sensually, then moves it offscreen toward his genitalia. He is pleasuring himself in a bizarre conception of auto-fellatio. The insinuation of fellating must have been shocking in the 1930's, not only for its alleged depravity but for its obvious homosexual connotations. The Narcissus element and the queer aesthetic work here in tandem for the poet to achieve an implied orgasm. This ecstasy is communicated by a very important shot in the film (figure 2.2) where the poet's head is thrown back but also viewed from behind. His eyes are closed, but painted on his eyelids are another set of wide-open eyes, with the pupils rolling back into his head from pleasure. This positioning of the head, with the shot taken from behind, and the painted eyelids are central motifs of Cocteau's Orphic project (Williams 2006, 42). The thrown-back head denotes *la petite mort*, with all that that expression for sexual orgasm implies; we shall see this confusion of love, sex, and death represented by two other shots in *Orphée* which partially recreate this *mise-en-scène*.



2.2 The poet in ecstasy

The painted eyelids reappear in *Orphée* and *Le Testament d'Orphée* as well. James S. Williams calls them “artificial eyes” whose gaze “fixes but does not see”; what the character actually sees is the inside of his eyelids; that is, his gaze is yet narcissistically fixed upon himself. We recall that both the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus are tales of the dangers of looking, but these painted eyelids actually prevent looking – they force an interior looking, into oneself. In some cases where these painted eyelids are worn in the trilogy, they signify a narcissistic love relationship with the self, where there should be an exterior object of desire, but the viewer’s regard is interrupted by his love of self. In the throes of self-love, the poet attains singular pleasure, all alone. He loves no one but himself and needs no one else to fulfill him.

Aspects of the myth of Narcissus emerge again in the second *épisode*. The most visible is the mirror. Everything magically disappears from the poet’s small room, while a white female statue and a mirror suddenly appear. The mirror has taken the place of the door, so the poet is trapped. As we have seen, the poet must enter into the mirror

and explore and then, perhaps, find a way out. Cocteau fully dramatizes the Narcissus myth as the poet approaches the mirror and 'enters' it. He shoots with his camera from above, with the mirror flat on the floor, allowing the poet to crawl all over it to give the appearance of climbing onto it. Then, Cocteau quickly and briefly replaces the shot with an identical set-up, except that the mirror is now a pool of water into which the poet falls, as if breaking the mirror to enter it (figure 2.3). Finally, the shot immediately following shows the fully intact mirror, as if it had reformed itself after the poet's fall into it. So Cocteau's mirror is actually water, and his Orphic portal into an underworld is actually a Narcissistic prop, the reflecting pool in which the mythical character found, and eventually lost, the object of his love: himself.



2.3 Breaking through the mirror

What we do not have here from the Narcissus myth is the Narcissus figure falling in love with his reflection, although we have seen the poet in self-love. As previously discussed, the Orphic pattern is more prominent in the entrance through the portal of the mirror, but the myth of Narcissus affects this pattern as soon as the mirror breaks,

as soon as it is apparent that the mirror is a pool of water, and the two myths then co-exist. Cocteau, whose poetic term for a mirror was *eau de Narcisse* (Hammond 30), has Orpheus penetrate Narcissus's pool to enter the poetic realm beyond. Because the pool reflects an image of himself, this Orphic-Narcissistic figure imputes queerness as well. All of this on a quest for love, and for death: and this quest is Cocteau's.

“La nécessité pour le poète de traverser des morts successives et de renaître sous une forme plus proche de sa personne est la base du *Sang d'un poète*,” writes Cocteau (*Poésie Critique* I 245). It is necessary for the poet to die, over and over, in order to access a purer version of himself, one who ostensibly will produce the best and most lasting art. So the poet, like Orpheus, must cross the border into the underworld to challenge death; so the poet, like Narcissus, must drown in the pool to seek out his own death. He is seeking some sort of resurrection which will afford him immortality, and which is only possible by suffering innumerable deaths.

What the poet finds in the otherworldly realm of the Hôtel des Folies-Dramatiques speaks again to the constant mélange of the Orphic and Narcissistic motifs in the film and ends with the poet's ultimate attempt at immortality. He travels along the wall of the hallway of the Hôtel, stopping to peer curiously into each keyhole. The first room's keyhole plays out a short scene which is, in fact, a *mise-en-abîme* of the poet's own journey and, thus, of the film. A Mexican man stands, in full regalia with a sombrero even, in a diorama of a Central American desert, complete with cactus. A small statue of the Virgin Mary stands near him. Four rifles are pointed at him and shoot. The Mexican falls to the ground as the Virgin Mary splinters into pieces after being shot herself. Then, miraculously, after a moment, the scene reverses itself: the Mexican

returns to his standing position, unharmed, as the statue pieces itself back together, all of this accomplished by playing the previous footage in reverse. After a few more moments, this scene will repeat itself, evidently *ad infinitum*. Albeit in miniature, this scene foreshadows what will happen to the character of the poet. The poet will survive an apparently un-survivable gunshot wound while a statue will be smashed and remade. This comprises elements of the 'plot' of *Le Sang d'un poète*, nestled within the larger structure of the film; it reflects the concerns of the whole film in one discrete section. The idea of the *mise-en-abîme* can also be read in the whole of the second *épisode* which shows the figure of the poet peering through keyholes of locked doors. We the audience are also trying to look through a keyhole of a locked door – the door which refuses to open in the opening shots of the film. Just as the poet's journey is a model for our own as audience members, so the Mexican's fate mirrors the poet's, just on a different scale. This is Cocteau's poetry at work, metonymically suggesting the multiple deaths required of the poetic hero ("des morts successives") in order to achieve a state of immortality. Cocteau even compares the cinema to "an event seen through a keyhole," as André Bazin reminds us (92). There is something queer about this pattern of peering, which is voyeurism, something erotic and forbidden about looking without being seen (as if the subject of our own gaze sported the painted eyelids). It reminds one of the two-way mirror peep show that Cocteau attended as an adolescent: voyeurism is naughty. With the repeated scenes through the keyhole, Cocteau is literalizing his metaphor for the cinema, which is this erotic voyeurism. However unconsciously, Cocteau insinuates the necessarily erotic, and for him, queer aesthetic of his cinema:

The Blood of the Poet is a veritable cinema of the senses and at times lushly queer. The assorted effects of disembodied lips bubbling in the palm of the Poet's hand, the visceral contact between human flesh and the cold dingy wall, the close-up of Dargelos wetting his lips in oral satisfaction during the orgiastic riot, the sound of blood oozing out of the mouth of his prey like sexual moaning, the rolling of bare muscles in a male back caked in sweat, together with other elemental images of opium, snow, and slush, are all physically sensuous and erotic. (Williams 2008, 149)

"Lushly queer" is practically an understatement, when the poet is self-fellating alone, *torse nu*, eyes rolling back into his head, to cite just one instance. Cocteau's queer aesthetic correlates with his Narcissistic themes (an interior journey, looking without being seen) and imagery (the mirror as reflecting pool) to lay the foundation of the trilogy.

The other short scenes that the poet views through keyholes correspond to the Orphic and Narcissistic inspirations for the film. Behind the second door in chamber 19 is an Asian opium smoker, reflecting another of Cocteau's personal demons, his intractable addiction to the drug. Behind the fourth door in chamber 23 is the "desperate hermaphrodite" whose queerness can be associated with Narcissus, avatar of self-love. The flexibility of the homosexual to play the dominant or submissive lover, easily conceived of as the male or the female, reveals itself in this divided figure (Cocteau notes as much with a visual gag to introduce the scene: the shot of the hermaphrodite's shoes outside his/her door – one a man's loafer, the other a woman's high-heel.) Even more so, the hermaphrodite's warning that his/her genitalia is a "DANGER DE MORT" plays on both our Orphic and Narcissistic sensibilities because sex and love are once again in conversation with death. This *mélange* of desire and death speaks directly to Cocteau's experience tending to the feverish, dying Radiguet, which undoubtedly haunted him still; the intimacy Cocteau craved with Radiguet,

especially in the latter's last days, also contained a highly contagious "DANGER DE MORT." Finally, the presentation of the hermaphrodite is a classic Cocteau motif with the line drawings complimenting real body parts, along with various insignia surrounding the figure, so that Cocteau's gaze upon this character is narcissistic as well: he is a reflection of Cocteau's own graphic idiosyncrasies.

The terminus of the poet's Orphic journey is his suicide attempt. This action is Orphic because he is willing to die; it is Narcissistic for its connotations with Cocteau's life and other work. Primarily because of the weapon that the poet uses and its declared "mode d'emploi," we think of Cocteau's father, who shot himself in the head. But we also think of *Orphée*'s mysterious acrostic message (in the play) of "MERDE" ("Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers") – which the poet mutters over and over as he retreats from the site of his failed suicide. Something about this failure to die is what leads to the poet's expulsion back through the mirror into the 'real' world. This is the conclusion of the Orphic narrative, the purported triumph over death. It is simultaneously a negation of Narcissus, who should drown in the pool; he now re-emerges having 'traversed' one of those "morts successives," surviving the death that the mirror promised. That death, that promise was the way to immortality that Cocteau seeks. As the poet bleeds out of his self-inflicted wound, Cocteau himself intones, "La gloire toujours!" (figure 2.4) The poet is instantly crowned with antique-seeming dress and a crown of laurels, in Greco-Roman fashion, in another convergence of the ancient and the modern that recalls Cocteau's appearance in the initial shot of the film. Death should by rights confer 'glory forever,' except that this death is but one of several to which the poet must submit.



2.4 *La gloire toujours !*

With Orpheus and Narcissus in opposition, death attempted but not achieved, the Orphic narrative wins out as the poet is expelled back through the mirror. Back in his small room, in a fit of rage, the poet smashes the statue to pieces. This statue can be interpreted as an Eurydice figure, trapped between life and death (as a 'living' statue), because the poet enters the underworld because of her; however, she is also something of a Galatea to the poet's Pygmalion (or a Lot's wife, turned to salt, though it was Orpheus who looked back and not her). This multiplicity of associations distorts the Orphic pattern, but as the conclusion to his Orphic journey, the poet smashing the statue can correspond to Orpheus's destruction of Eurydice, when he turns back and looks at her, condemning her to death forever. As we have seen, in Cocteau's conception of Orpheus (in the play *Orphée*), the Orphic figure purposefully destroys his Eurydice. This is given a violent realism as the poet reduces the statue to dust.

The ending of the second *épisode* is also the ending of the most plainly Orphic journey that appears in the film. However, the tension between the myths of Orpheus

and Narcissus (and between heterosexual and homosexual relations) permeates the third and fourth *épisodes*. The Narcissistic obsession with masculine beauty manifests itself in the camera's gaze upon different males. In "La Boule de neige," the dangerously alluring Dargelos withstands Cocteau's piercing camera and his intently queer naming – "le coq de la classe," playing broadly and gaily upon the obvious cognate. In French, of course, "le coq" assumes a certain narcissism and self-regard, as well as masculine sexual ability, but we cannot discount its English implications from the playful and polylingual Cocteau. In "La Profanation de l'hostie," the near total nudity of the *ange gardien* betrays Cocteau's homoerotic gaze as well, particularly in the shot of reverse photography which highlights the musculature of the young man's legs and back. The stereotypically virile black man sports fairy-like wings, not enormous, strong angel wings, deliberately juxtaposing masculine, sexual strength with supposedly queer delicacy; he saves the young boy by lying on top of him, not a little suggestively. The third *épisode* is narcissistic technically as well, as it presents an allegedly true incident from Cocteau's own life; he meditates upon himself, as it were, as well as upon his own contemporaneous work, the 1929 novel *Les Enfants terribles*, which recounts the same scene of the fatal *boule de neige*.

The myth of Orpheus offers us, as always, the heterosexual paradigm for analysis. This appears, if somewhat mutedly, in the relationship between the poet and the woman with whom he plays cards. To win the game, he must produce for her the ace of hearts, a metaphor for his own heart, his own love for the beautiful woman – the only way for Orpheus to save Eurydice. But the poet steals the ace of hearts from the little boy and plays a card which is untrue, which is not his own. The *ange gardien*

retakes the ace of hearts as he spirits away the corpse of the boy, while the poet's heart beats loudly and visibly in his chest under his garments. When he cannot play the ace of hearts – which is to say that Orpheus's love is not enough – the poet resorts to suicide anew. He shoots himself yet again in the head, and blood flows from a star-shaped wound; Cocteau's personal insignia spurts *le sang d'un poète*. This suicide is both Orphic and Narcissistic. It is Orphic in the sense of meeting death willingly, one of the “morts successives.” It is Narcissistic in that it is self-inflicted, by an individual coded as queer elsewhere in the film. The conversation between these symbolic orders is dynamic, ever-changing, and thus difficult to pin down precisely. Whether one reads the moment as Orphic or Narcissistic, the suicidal action has a clear and immediate effect: the woman turns (back?) into a statue, an inanimate object, a memory of a real woman. Because of Orpheus's failure, Eurydice has died again, moving yet not alive; Echo has fossilized in the paralysis of her love for Narcissus. The statue reappears with long, black gloves which give her the visual illusion of a Venus de Milo (as in the poet's room) and which also recall Death's gloves in the play *Orphée*. Her eyes are painted over with larger-than-life eyes, a repetition of the image of the poet's sexual ecstasy, only here this device doesn't impute ecstasy so much as immobility, due to death. Earlier, they had denoted *la petite mort* of the poet; here we have a characteristic combination by Cocteau of sex and death, *la petite mort* and *la mort*. This silent statue of a woman with painted-on eyes and elegant evening gloves will inspire one of the main characters of the film *Orphée*, the Princess.

The film ends with a final nod toward its Orphic inspiration with a shot of the statue holding Orpheus's famed lyre. So Orpheus's art lives on, even as the poet has

not survived his second suicide: this is the immortality that the poet sought but could not comprehend. Radiguet's sudden death proved a lesson to Cocteau, who continued to publicize and praise Radiguet's work posthumously as the best way to memorialize the young writer. The poet wins not literal immortality but *poetic* immortality – because of his work. One of the final lines of the film is “the mortal tedium of immortality,” which appeals again to the notion of “des morts successives.” Dying again and again, dying to oneself, is a tedious task, but it is necessary in the humiliating quest for everlasting life.

The film closes with the completion of the tower disintegrating. One cannot help but read this image in two ways. Firstly, that the film took place (all fifty minutes of it) in the split-second between the opening shot of the tower and the closing one. This oneiric meditation on poetry, love, sex, and death is but a blip. More incisively, I propose another Narcissistic, queer interpretation of this final image. If their phallic connotations are taken at face value, then these shots of the tower frame the film as the discharge at a moment of full tumescence. The film is a poetic orgasm. Cocteau metaphorically ejaculates for his audience. He subjects himself to “des morts successives” – *des petites morts*. This intensely sexual and sensual reading of the film as a whole relates it to the poet (who is Cocteau) masturbating with the mouth-hand in the first *épisode*, creating a thematic synecdoche of queer ecstasy. As we shall see, this necessarily queer aesthetic marks all three films in the Orphic trilogy. With *Le Sang d'un poète*, Cocteau creates an experience in which sex and death collude in simultaneous combustion. The other two films in the trilogy will return to these themes whose genesis is the encounter between Orpheus and Narcissus, as Cocteau rewrites these myths to structure his own personal alternate reality: his cinema.

ORPHÉE

“Étonnez-nous!” advises the Monsieur du Café to Orphée in the opening scene of Cocteau’s film, *Orphée*. His advice repeats Diaghilev’s 1912 admonition to the young Cocteau, “Étonne-moi!” (Williams 2008, 49) Certainly Cocteau had spent the intervening years astonishing various publics – literary, theatrical, and cinematic. He had achieved some of his greatest successes with that last audience, especially his blockbuster hit, *La Belle et la bête* (1946). By then he was well-known as a *cinéaste* and particularly for operating as both *scénariste* and *réalisateur*. In 1948 alone, he opened not one but two films adapted from his own previous plays: *L’Aigle à deux têtes* and *Les Parents terribles*. Both starred his lover and muse, Jean Marais, or “Jeannot.” Their relationship was well-known and openly lived within the elite circles that Cocteau traveled. During the 1940s, their individual celebrity functioned symbiotically – Cocteau’s most successful films starred Marais, and those remain Marais’s best and best-known roles. Their greatest collaboration was to be *Orphée*.

Orphée is the centerpiece of Cocteau’s Orphic trilogy. Cocteau frequently called it the full orchestration of a theme “clumsily played as if with one finger” in *Le Sang d’un poète* (Carvalho 120). It is not solely a continuation of the meditation that is *Le Sang d’un poète* but is also an expansion and a rewriting. Especially technically, Cocteau was now prepared to create a film with far more finesse than had been available to him twenty years earlier. So the film *Orphée* takes some of the same inspiration as *Le Sang*, which in this study we will investigate for its manipulation of the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus. As we have seen, these two mythological personae lend themselves easily to the interpretation of Cocteau’s work, including offering us heterosexual and

homosexual paradigms to frame relationships within the films. In some ways similar to *Le Sang d'un poète*, *Orphée* follows the Orphic pattern, a journey to the underworld to confront death, while the figure of Narcissus and his associations infiltrate the work in its images, less in its plot. The same collision of love, sex, desire, death, and of course, poetry characterizes the climax of *Orphée* and joins it definitively to the other two films in the trilogy, all within Cocteau's queer aesthetic.

Orphée the film is not an adaptation of *Orphée* the play, nor is it a particularly straightforward adaptation of the actual myth (see Chapter 1). The deviations from the myth become increasingly important as the film proceeds, but it begins with what we all know of Orpheus. "On connaît la légende d'Orphée," intones Cocteau in voiceover after the opening credits of the film, as he briefly recounts the ancient story. But already Cocteau changes a crucial detail of the myth. According to legend, Orpheus is forbidden to look at Eurydice just until they reach the surface of the earth, after which he would be free to lay eyes on her. However, according to Cocteau (as in his earlier play), *Orphée* is not permitted to look at Eurydice *ever again*, even if they make it back from *les enfers*. This immediately heightens the dramatic stakes of the story because, should Eurydice live again, she would live in constant danger of death at any moment. This also prepares us for one of Cocteau's greatest departures from antiquity – that Eurydice *does* come back from the dead and lives once more. As the horse from the 1925 play foretells, Madame Eurydice revient des enfers. The effect on the Orphic pattern of the film is dramaturgical as well as thematic. The original myth is essentially a one-act play, with an inciting incident (the death of Eurydice), various complications, and a climax (her second death after Orpheus turns around and looks at her), with a

short *dénouement*. By extending Eurydice's existence – she does return to earth and lives, for a spell, before dying the second time – Cocteau stretches the dramatic fabric of the tale to create what more resembles a two-act play. Let us remember that his play *Orphée* was performed in “un acte et une intervalle,” meaning one act divided in two, so actually two separate acts. In the film *Orphée*, the return from the underworld the first time forms the climactic sequence of the first act, with Orphée and Eurydice's new existence at home making up the new second act, and her second death under the eye of Orphée acting as the inciting incident of the second half. Orphée's final journey to the underworld leads to the ultimate climax. Aware that the original myth offered less actual dramatic material than dramatic inspiration, Cocteau cleverly enlarges the story to fit the format of a feature film. This is insistently Jean Cocteau's version of the Orpheus myth.

And so the Narcissus element re-emerges quite quickly, because just as Cocteau welcomed us into the film of *Le Sang*, demonstrating the autobiographical nature of the project, so too does he immediately take ownership of *Orphée*, with title cards written and drawn by his own hand and voiceover narration supplied by him. Cocteau is narcissistically turning his gaze again upon himself, into himself, utilizing the notions of Orpheus and Narcissus. As he assumes the role of *auteur*, we are free to accept his deviations from the ancient myth, starting with the obviously anachronistic setting. “Où se passe notre histoire, et à quelle époque? C'est le privilège des légendes d'être sans âge. Comme il vous plaira...” finishes Cocteau. Cocteau asks these questions to inform the audience right away that this is not necessarily the Orpheus myth that they know, but his personal version of it. A legend can be moved around in time and space

and not lose any of its power; in fact, it may even gain some. Ever the showman, Cocteau ends with the “comme il vous plaira” to graciously usher us into his fantasy. It is the verbal equivalent of the first shot of *Le Sang*: Cocteau welcoming us with his arm outstretched.

Just as that first shot in *Le Sang* communicated the meeting of antiquity and contemporaneity, so too will *Orphée* operate simultaneously in both temporalities (“sans âge”). We know this from the very first scene because we are obviously not in Thrace in Greece, which exists no more, but we are somewhere in a town or small city in France (the exterior city scenes were shot in various locations in Paris, but Cocteau does not specify Paris as the setting of the story). The characters speak modern-day French, not ancient Greek. The first shot of *Orphée* nods again to the legend – it shows a young man playing a stringed instrument and singing, à la Orpheus – while firmly situating us in this modern milieu (he plays a guitar, not a lyre). The clothing (especially the women’s dress); a sleek, black, brand-new Rolls-Royce; telephones and radios: all indicate the late 1940’s or early 1950’s. Already Cocteau changes the original story by re-setting it in time and space.

What follows is an Orpheus “sans âge” for every particular age. As with the young man in *Le Sang*, Orphée is a poet, no longer the Thracian singer, and a rather renowned poet at that. He takes a drink at the Café des Poètes where a younger, hipper poet, Jacques Cégeste, starts a drunken brawl. Cégeste is gravely injured by two passing motorcyclists, and a Princess who is his patron demands that Orphée leave the scene of the crime with them in order to serve as a witness to the accident. The three leave in the jet-black Rolls-Royce chauffeured by the Princess’s aide, Heurtebise.

Orphée discovers that Cégeste is actually dead. The Rolls conveys them across a railroad track to a mysterious chalet where the Princess, who it turns out is Death, resurrects Cégeste and makes him her servant. The astounded Orphée is left behind as the Princess, Cégeste, and Heurtebise exit the room by penetrating a large mirror. Unable to follow them, Orphée collapses against the mirror. He awakens, evidently the next day, lying face down in the sand near a reflecting pool. Eventually, he finds the Rolls, with Heurtebise ready to drive him home.

Meanwhile, Orphée's wife, Eurydice, worries about his whereabouts and believes he has left her. She is comforted by the Police Commissioner and her friend Aglaonice, the head of the local League of Women and owner of the Bacchantes nightclub. Upon Orphée's return, he retires to sleep while Heurtebise stores the incriminating Rolls out of sight in the garage. Heurtebise shares a short scene with Eurydice where it is clear that he is developing some feelings toward Orphée's neglected wife. The radio of the Rolls broadcasts strange, cryptic messages which entrance Orphée and which he copies down, thinking them poems. And that night, the Princess, who is not only death personified but also specifically Orphée's Death, visits him in his room to watch him sleep.

This first section of the film introduces us to Cocteau's Orphic and Narcissistic obsessions. The idea of Narcissus and his reflection is immediately portrayed. As Cégeste enters the Café des Poètes, he crosses paths with Orphée, and for a brief moment, the two appear to mirror one another (figure 3.1). The shot equates them: they stand at roughly the same height, they are both poets, and both are fair and fair-haired. Cégeste reflects a younger version of Orphée, an image of who he once was,

before celebrity and bourgeois comfort dulled his poetry and his reputation amongst the literati. Marais and Dermithe also mirror each other as Cocteau's former and current lovers in this moment, dramatizing the first's replacement by the second. Does Cocteau imply that Marais felt as threatened by Dermithe as Orphée feels threatened by Cégeste – by his looks, by his youth, by his talent?



3.1 Orphée and Cégeste

Cégeste's snort at Orphée indicates his disdain; as if wearing the painted-over eyelids, he refuses to see himself in the mirror that is Orphée, unlike Orphée himself, who recognizes himself in the younger poet. Orphée is all too aware that he was Cégeste, fifteen years ago. Notably, these characters meet in a doorway, a portal, as Narcissus's mirror will prove to be.

Just as the Narcissistic image announces itself (even without a mirror), so, too, does the Orphic pattern emerge in this first section. Even before Eurydice's death, Orphée takes a journey into the beyond. As Heurtebise drives them across the railroad track (a River Styx?), there is literally a change in the air, as almost imperceptibly,

Cocteau replaces the cyclorama playing the forward-motion of the vehicle through the landscape with a negative photograph of it, changing blacks to whites and vice versa (visible through the front windshield). This plays uneasily and perhaps subconsciously on our awareness, signifying a new, different, and potentially menacing *environs*. Orphée has made the journey to some other world unlike his own: the outline of the Orphic pattern has been established.

Once inside the chalet, Orphée tries to follow the other characters as they exit through the mirror, but unlike the poet in *Le Sang*, he is unable to pierce the glass (figure 3.2) because he lacks the proper accoutrements and guide.



3.2 Orphée unable to pierce the glass

Ultimately, Heurtebise will act as this guide. This character's unusual name originates in 1925 Cocteau poem called "L'Ange Heurtebise," although Cocteau disavowed the idea that the Heurtebise of the film was any sort of *ange gardien* as the poem would make it seem (Williams 2006, 12). (The name Cégeste appears in the same poem, as another *ange*, but the film's character is no angel either.) Heurtebise is not Death

personified, like the Princess, but he is dead, a suicide from gassing himself, as he tells the strangely unperplexed Eurydice. A denizen of that world behind mirrors, he is no longer the glazier of the play *Orphée* but a simple chauffeur – albeit one who can appear and disappear at will. Just as in the play *Orphée*, Heurtebise will reveal “le secret des secrets” which allows Orphée to make his Orphic journey to the beyond.

The Narcissistic pattern appears in this section as well, primarily as several striking images. We already have the idea of penetrable mirrors, *les eaux de Narcisse*, which harkens back to the second *épisode* of *Le Sang*. Now Cocteau offers a new perspective: from *inside* the mirror. This has the perhaps unintended effect of placing the audience in this underworld, which Cocteau calls *la Zone*, before our hero can enter it himself. *La Zone*, “c’est une frange de la vie. Un no man’s land entre la vie et la mort. On n’y est tout à fait mort, ni tout à fait vivant,” writes Cocteau in the preface to his screenplay (xi). Positioning us behind the mirror has certain implications. Our gaze turns voyeuristic; the two-way mirror allows us to see Orphée without his knowledge or consent. One is reminded of the voyeuristic two-way mirror gay peep show that Cocteau patronized in Marseille as an adolescent. That voyeurism is naughty and reoccurs as part of Cocteau’s queer aesthetic. This, in fact, mimics the cinema experience. When Orphée bangs on the solid surface of the mirror, trying to escape the chalet, it could very well be Marais, trying to break out of the screen. Watching him, we are in *la Zone* – are we also not entirely dead, not entirely alive? Cocteau, with his camera, is situated along with us in *la Zone*, where, after *Le Sang*, he will seek out his own death and resurrection. By allowing us access to this underworld without Orphée, Cocteau destabilizes our identification with the hero, who, outside the mirror, is no

longer a stand-in for the audience but the object of its voyeuristic, cinematic gaze. Indeed, Heurtebise is the guide to follow, not Orphée. We experience the Orphic narrative ourselves – the journey beyond, to confront death – before Orphée does.

Notably, when we watch Orphée from inside the mirror, we see his actual self; no Narcissus-like image is recorded, because the two-way mirror is transparent. When Orphée collapses against the glass (seen from behind him), we first see his Narcissus-like reflection. Then, in the very next shot, Cocteau films Marais in the classic Narcissus pose. The shot cannot be read any other way. We see Orphée on the edge of a pool (figure 3.3), lying close to his own pristine reflection. He is simultaneously Orpheus as well as Narcissus, the beautiful man, asleep, appearing dead at first, yet almost kissing his perfect mirror image, as he lays by the side of the pool.



3.3 Narcissus at the pool

He seems to be in love with his reflection, an Orpheus Narcissus; he is, in fact, in love with himself. As we shall see, Orphée's self-involvement and narcissism distract him from his wife's untimely death, as Orpheus was distracted by his song in the myth. The

shot is another *mise-en-abîme*, this time of the Narcissus myth (the male adoring another male): there is Marais adoring his image, then Cocteau adoring Marais, adoring his image. Cocteau's camera betrays its erotic gaze – which “carries a dangerous, sodomitical charge” (Williams 2006, 170) – by filming Marais lying face down; his body is sexually available from behind while the shot literally doubles, and concentrates, the elegance of his visage. Knowing Cocteau and Marais's relationship, this sleeping pose of the handsome (and queer) *matinée* idol makes the camera's gaze incredibly intimate. Cocteau's queer aesthetic is crystallized in the Narcissistic image of his muse because it reveals the extent of his idealization of his masculine beauty. The shot is brief but profound.

As we have seen with this shot, the myth of Narcissus qualifies Cocteau's participation in the film. Not unlike *Le Sang*, it is a narcissistic exercise. In a letter, he wrote that *Orphée* is “much less a film than it is myself – a kind of projection of things that are important to me” (quoted in Evans 105). Even his vocabulary – “a kind of projection” – is cinematic. The birth of poetry and the poet's quest for death and immortality were deeply serious matters for the filmmaker. It is Cocteau's voice, for example, which intones the radio messages that so fascinate *Orphée* and which become poems. With *Orphée* in the Rolls-Royce, Cocteau dramatizes the moment of inspiration (and may even be satirizing the ‘automatic writing’ so popular with the Breton-led Surrealists). If that inspiration seems rote, per Cocteau's delivery, or unoriginal, initiated outside of *Orphée*, it properly reflects Cocteau's belief that “art is a marriage of the conscious and the unconscious,” that the artist isn't always aware of the source of his art or in control of its development. *Orphée* tries to copy down exactly

what he hears on the radio because “the poet’s sole duty is to act as a communicator of the coded enigmas that originate from deep within himself but which are not his” (Evans 163). The fact that all of these transmissions – except one – were written by Cocteau for the screenplay renders this activity Narcissistic; if Cocteau identifies with Orphée, then he is shown to be obsessed with his very own poetry.

Cocteau does identify narcissistically with Orphée in the sense that the contours of the role match those of his own life. At the beginning of the film, the character suffers some of the same indignities as Cocteau did – the famous poet, now a bit *démodé*, unable to speak to the younger generation and failing his own reputation: he’s producing no new work as of late. (Indeed, we never hear an example of Orphée’s own poetry.) He has fallen out of fashion, as Cocteau the poet felt, his inspiration all dried up. Previously, Cocteau had self-identified as Orphée in his play *Orphée* and cast a young actor who resembled him in the poet’s role in *Le Sang*, both representations of himself. In the film *Orphée*, he casts his lover and muse as the hero. He entrusts the success of this role to his most intimate companion, which allows him to project himself upon his protagonist. The autobiographical importance of the character of Orphée is clear. Orphée is a version of Cocteau, and the journey to *la Zone* and back that he will undertake in the film is invented for Cocteau himself to travel spiritually and metaphorically.

Having been introduced to all the main characters in the first section of the film, associating Orphée with Cocteau, we can also identify the other figures with people from Cocteau’s life. In fact, knowing what we know of Cocteau’s romantic and sexual history – including the replacement of Marais by Dermithe in his affections – we can

envision an entire matrix of dramatic relationships which corollate Cocteau's life with his film. Cocteau and Marais, now toward the squabbling end of their coupled relationship, can correspond to Orphée and Eurydice. However, Raymond Radiguet is also present in the figure of Eurydice, whom Orphée (*dit* Cocteau) loses so abruptly and seeks out in *la Zone*. We can recognize Cocteau and Radiguet's rapport in the Princess who supports the literary prodigy, Cégeste. Above all, the burgeoning but impermissible love between the Princess and Orphée is a metaphor for homosexual love as Cocteau understood it, in his time. Once again, these two lovers cancel each other out, because the Princess is Orphée's Death. He literally cannot survive her. What's more, we shall see how the Princess is, in fact, forbidden to pursue her love for Orphée. Their love is taboo, in this world and the next, not unlike gay relationships in the conformist, closeted 1950's. Like the unreciprocated love that Cocteau bore for Radiguet, or his queer love that he found with Marais and then, Dermithe, Orphée and the Princess's relationship will ultimately prove an impossibility.

As Orphée falls in love with the Princess, and she with him, Cocteau's greatest Orphic invention reveals itself, with Narcissistic overtones. The Princess is Death; more specifically, she is "la mort d'Orphée," the ultimate *femme fatale*. "Elle est une des innombrables fonctionnaires de la mort," writes Cocteau in his screenplay's preface (ix). These "fonctionnaires" are charged with surveilling their victims (figure 3.4), not unlike an *ange gardien*, until the moment of death, which is ordered by a greater Death, a shadowy authority which exists somewhere beyond *la Zone*. The Princess is ordained *la mort d'Orphée*, but against all interdictions, she falls in love with him, and he with her. Orphée falls in love with Death.



3.4 *La mort d'Orphée vint dans sa chambre*

Orphée is drawn irresistibly toward his own death. So is Narcissus. Narcissus's death lies beyond his reflection in the pool in which he will drown, so his desire also holds his demise. The reflecting pool of the Narcissus myth becomes the mirror in *Orphée*, just as in *Le Sang* the mirror was actually a pool of water. The myths begin to overlap and bleed into one another: when Orphée collapses against the mirror, his reflection is Narcissus. The two figures resemble one another until they are indistinguishable. The mirror, the Orphic portal, the Narcissistic pool all merge into the site of this double identity. In the second section of the film, Cocteau will activate this site where desire and death beckon.

Orphée is discovered in the Rolls, listening intently to its bizarre transmissions. One of these is a line of Apollinaire: "L'oiseau chante avec ses doigts," whatever that means – to us, the radio spouts nonsense; to the poet, poetry. From Apollinaire, Cocteau must have inherited the idea or at least the name of *la Zone*. *La Zone* is a very

important component to the Orphic pattern which structures the film. It is a sort of purgatory, a kind of *enfers*, in between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Apparently, per Heurtebise, all mirrors lead to *la Zone*. “Zone” is also the title of the first and perhaps the most famous poem from Apollinaire’s 1913 collection, *Alcool/s*. As the speaker addresses himself, the poem’s first line reads, “À la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien”; it continues, “Tu en as assez de vivre dans l’antiquité grecque et romaine,” signaling one potential motivation for Cocteau’s re-setting of the Orpheus myth in modern times. Instead of constructing elaborate sets to serve as the “fantastical” *Zone*, Cocteau chose instead to film on location in the bombed-out ruins of the Saint-Cyr military barracks and training facility outside of Paris (Williams 2006, 110, 124). These locations had been undisturbed since the war. They lend *la Zone* “a superior realism” – almost more real than real – as legitimate artifacts of the conflict and Occupation, rooting the setting in “post-war actuality.” Even the word “Zone” recalls the wartime nomenclature of “Zone Occupée” and “Zone Libre,” while the radio’s messages remind one of the coded transmissions of the *Résistance* (Williams 2006, 123-125). *La Zone* is thus firmly based in recent history; World War II was a literal hell from which many did not return. The war-torn territory offers itself up as a poetic, modern manifestation of *les enfers* – barely a metaphor, it is (was) Hell. Calling it “un no man’s land” in his preface, Cocteau even extends its association with a real-life conflict to World War I, when that term was invented to describe the area between the frontlines and the trenches. The tribunal before which Orphée finds himself recalls nothing so much as secret wartime courts with vague but menacing authority; Cocteau may also have been influenced by the Nuremberg trials. As a dream-space populated by allegorical characters that is

superimposed on these physical ruins, *La Zone* is a thoroughly realistic milieu where thoroughly unrealistic things happen – as in *Le Sang*’s “realistic documentary of unreal events” – into which Orphée may venture on his desperate search for Eurydice. Or, as we will see, for his own death.

Back in the Rolls, Orphée is joined by Eurydice and Heurtebise, which irritates him because they interrupt his poetic obsessions. Orphée is wanted for questioning about Cégeste’s death, so he and Heurtebise set off to clear his name at the police station. Instead, Orphée spies the Princess and attempts to follow her through the town, to no avail – she keeps appearing and disappearing magically. Orphée returns home with Heurtebise, who keeps Eurydice company while Orphée returns to listen in the Rolls. Eurydice leaves on her bicycle to see old friends in the League of Women and, like Cégeste, is hit by the Princess’s passing motorcyclists. Heurtebise carries her to her bedroom, where the Princess and Cégeste emerge from the dressing mirror. As in the play, Cégeste operates a kind of machine, this time a transmitter into which he intones poetic phrases. These phrases are the ones being broadcast through the Rolls, all in order to distract Orphée from Eurydice’s death. Poetry *causes* her death, because it distracts Orphée from possibly rescuing her. With her rubber surgical gloves, the Princess resurrects Eurydice who recognizes her as “ma mort.” (The astonishing effect of the suddenly upright Cégeste and Eurydice at the moment of their resurrections is descended from the special effect of the Beast’s transformation in *La Belle et la bête*.) Heurtebise tries to warn Orphée, but the Princess disappears into the mirror with Eurydice and Cégeste in tow before Orphée tears himself away from the radio. Eurydice’s corpse remains on the bed.

Heurtebise attempts to comfort the distressed Orphée. He reveals to him “le secret des secrets” – the same exchange that Heurtebise and Orphée have in the earlier play: “Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la mort va et vient...” He offers to take Orphée back to Eurydice in order to reclaim her. After putting on the rubber gloves that the Princess has forgotten, Orphée pierces the façade of the mirror and enters it, followed by Heurtebise, who directs him through the otherworldly *Zone* and back through another mirror into the room at the chalet, where three judges now sit awaiting them. These three interrogate our main characters and find that the Princess is in love with Orphée, and Heurtebise with Eurydice. Meanwhile, apart from the others, Orphée and the Princess declare their love for one another and swear to find a way to be together again. The tribunal then judges the Princess guilty of “initiative” without orders and Heurtebise with aiding her. To remove her as an obstacle to Orphée’s affections, the Princess killed Eurydice without the orders or the permission to do so. To remedy this crime, Eurydice will be returned to life, along with her husband. The judges then prescribe the infamous condition, that Orphée never look upon Eurydice ever again. Heurtebise offers to accompany them home to ensure Eurydice’s survival as they adjust to their new circumstances.

They return home where a curious letter awaits Orphée – it is written in reverse and must be read in the mirror: “VOUS ÊTES UN VOLEUR ET UN ASSASSIN RENDEZ-VOUS SUR VOTRE TOMBE” – referring to the missing, and presumed dead, Cégeste. Incredibly irritated by the new interdiction in his own home, what with Eurydice hiding under the table and Heurtebise warning him against mirrors, Orphée retreats to the Rolls. That night, as Orphée sleeps downstairs on the sofa to avoid

Eurydice, she tries to startle him awake so that he will look at her and end their newly miserable existence, but a brief electrical outage renders her invisible to him in the darkness, and she is saved. Orphée continues to spend all of his time in the Rolls as the second section of the film ends (a taxidermied horse's head over the garage entrance subtly connects the car to the talking horse in the earlier play, both of which emit poetic messages).

This section of the film shows the proper Orphic journey that our hero undertakes while fully activating Cocteau's Narcissistic notions. The mirror's potentiality as a portal to an underworld, to *la Zone*, is finally fully dramatized and depicted onscreen. As Orphée puts on the ceremonial gloves to enter the mirror hands-first, Heurtebise informs him, "Avec ces gants, vous traverserez les miroirs comme de l'eau!" The reference to water confirms that the mirror is yet another Narcissistic pool, while Heurtebise's word choice ("traverserez") echoes Cocteau's sentiment about *Le Sang* ("La nécessité pour le poète de traverser des morts successives..."). The poet in *Le Sang* fell into his mirror, though, chest-first, without wearing gloves, splashing simply into a pool of water. Orphée must enter the mirror hands-first with gloves on for a very important technical reason: this 'mirror' is made of liquid mercury, which is poisonous. The effect is very cleverly executed. The only shot we see of anything penetrating the mirror is of Marais's hands, up to his wrists, which are gloved for protection from the mercury (figure 3.5). Because Heurtebise has been so insistent upon the gloves, our attention – and the camera – are focused entirely on Orphée's hands. Watching those hands penetrate the mercury, however briefly, is suggestive enough to generate the

illusion that Orphée and Heurtebise actually enter the mirror. Combined with an above shot which shows the two walking 'into' the mirror, the illusion is simple but complete.



3.5 Hands in the mirror

The mercury was chosen because it reflects, as the mirror does, without being translucent (Evans 107); its opacity gives it the semblance of hardness as well. Mercury also has a poetic resonance: Marais literally risks his health dipping into the poisonous substance, all while he portrays a character who enters it to confront death. Actor and role merge in the moment. This pool of mercury is as deadly as Narcissus's reflecting pool in which he drowns. All in all, with the addition of the tuning-fork sound effect, the shot is astonishing. It is also the greatest combination of Orphic and Narcissistic motifs in the trilogy as the Narcissistic pool is shown becoming the Orphic portal. Cocteau will show us this only once (and, indeed, the shot took an entire day to get right).

Elsewhere, mirrors prove as grave and as alluring as the one which Orphée and Heurtebise enter. To enter the mirror with the captive Eurydice and her aide Cégeste,

the Princess had angrily smashed it to bits; later, we saw it reform itself perfectly (in reverse footage). The first night at the chalet, a small makeup mirror had broken into pieces as the Princess looked into it, while the radio droned on: “Les miroirs feraient bien de réfléchir davantage.” Something about the Princess’s power destabilizes the mirror and transforms it into the Orphic portal into *la Zone*. (As a counter-example, the lesser Heurtebise has no such power: he simply appears and disappears into thin air.) ‘Mirrors would do well to reflect more’ is a cute *jeu de mots* with the word *réfléchir* and is a shortened version of a line from *Le Sang*, “Les miroirs feraient bien de réfléchir davantage avant de renvoyer les images.” What are we to make of this mysterious intonation? Most obviously, that mirrors should think more before sending us back our reflections. They should consider that which they are reflecting. They should have a life of their own, their own agency, apart from the mere ability to show images – they should act, like the supernatural portrait of Dorian Gray, as a picture of more than the surface of things. They should expose the inner as well as the outer. Indeed, the voyage into the mirror and the realm beyond can be interpreted as an interior voyage into oneself: “All that transpires behind the mirror in *Orphée*, to the same extent in *Le Sang d’un poète*, is actually happening *within* the poet” (Evans 118). This underlines again the notion of the poet dying to himself over and over in order to reach a more perfect form; the mirror is the portal for these important journeys and yet, as it reflects, it is also the barometer with which to measure the poet’s progress on his way toward death and immortality.

Cocteau’s *Orphée* enters the mirror to confront death – or rather, to meet again with his own Death, whom he loves. This idea of being in love with death is highly

melancholic. It is, in fact, an unusual dramatization of a suicide. Orphée is in love with the Princess, whom he desires to rejoin in *la Zone*; the figure of the Princess, therefore, is a manifestation of irresistible suicidal tendencies. There is no indication necessarily that Cocteau himself was suicidal, although he could tend toward despair and self-medicated with opium after tragic events like Radiguet's death. His experience with opium may have influenced his notion of "des morts successives," given his repeated detoxifications and subsequent 'rebirths' (Evans 127). The Princess as a figure of death can even be located in a person from Cocteau's life, the Princess Nathalie Paley, a Russian aristocrat and *émigrée*. In the 1930's, Cocteau alleged publicly that the two carried on an affair which was to result in a child. When there was none, Cocteau claimed that she had aborted the fetus, although there is little besides Cocteau's own admission to verify this information (Sprigge and Kihm 113). Cocteau, then, had supposedly been in love with an arbiter of death, a princess who he believed terminated a life, and with it, his one chance at paternity. (Cocteau eventually lost his virility as an effect of his opium use.) This relationship is rewritten in the passionate embrace of Orphée and the deathly Princess. It is also a literal thematic pun on *la petite mort* – the little and the big deaths conflated, orgasm and dying equivocated. This confusion of *la petite mort* and *la mort* will characterize the finale of *Orphée*.

The mirror is also dangerous. It is where death is located, per Heurtebise ("vous verrez la mort travailler comme les abeilles dans une ruche de verre"). Narcissus, after all, drowns in his mirror. Marais, rather bravely in my opinion, stuck his hands into a 'mirror' which was actually a vat of mercury! After their return from *la Zone*, a mirror decodes the harassing letter that Orphée receives and predicts his demise ("RENDEZ-

VOUS SUR VOTRE TOMBE”). Heurtebise warns Orphée away from all mirrors, afraid that he will catch a glance of Eurydice and send her *aux enfers* for good. (Although evidently an image of Eurydice, which Orphée sees in a magazine, is allowed.) The full danger posed by the mirror will instigate the final act of the film.

In this third section of the film, the famous second death of Eurydice occurs. Of course, Cocteau has rewritten it to fit his own “mythologie personnelle.” So instead of directly laying eyes on her, Orphée accidentally spies Eurydice in the *rétroviseur* of the Rolls, and she immediately disappears. The mirror has proved “fatal.” Not even her corpse remains this time. Simultaneously, the League of Women and their supporters – modern-day Bacchantes – are pounding Orphée’s gate with rocks, demanding to know what has happened to their Cégeste. Orphée welcomes the violence, claiming “la vie me sculpte...laissez-la finir son travail!”; this image of a marble bust of Orphée responds directly to Cocteau’s warning at the end of the second *épisode* of *Le Sang*: “À casser les statues, on risque d’en devenir une soi-même.” In a brawl with the invading horde, Orphée loses and is shot with his own pistol. Orphée is loaded into the Rolls, a shot which finishes at an angle behind him, his head slumped back, his eyes rolling back in his head, “les yeux fixes” – he is dead, but also in the same precise pose as the young poet in orgasmic ecstasy in *Le Sang* (figure 3.6), again a clear overlapping of desire and death. His eyes resemble the painted eyelids which *Le Sang*’s poet wore and which Cocteau himself will wear in death in *Le Testament*. By recreating the *mise-en-scène* of the narcissistic orgasm in *Le Sang*, Orphée’s death is intimately connected with Cocteau’s queer aesthetic. Orphée precipitates (and welcomes) his own death

with his self-same pistol, just like *Le Sang*'s queer poet who attempts suicide (and eventually succeeds), just as Narcissus is the cause of his own death.



3.6 Orphée dead in the Rolls-Royce

This kind of suicidal death is necessarily Narcissistic and, thus, queer because it reveals an irresistible tendency toward interiority, to the point of collapse: “For [Cocteau], the greatest danger to any genuine artist or poet comes from within: an attraction to the self that may sometimes result, ironically, in suicide – a kind of private martyrdom for one’s own alienation” (Sweet 25), the sort of death which Cocteau is attempting to ‘traverse’ to achieve immortality.

This death, this *Mort-du-Poète* (Borgal 180), as personified by the Princess, replaces Eurydice in Orphée’s search for his true love. In the bedroom where Eurydice’s corpse still remains, Heurtebise attempts to verify Orphée’s intentions. “Est-ce la mort que vous désirez rejoindre ou Eurydice?...” he asks Orphée, twice. “Les deux...” Orphée responds. He is seeking his sanctioned love (Eurydice) *and* his true love (his death), so love or sex or desire commingles with death and destruction. But

he is fooling no one: it is clear that he prefers the Princess to Eurydice, and, indeed, once he reenters *la Zone* and the room of judgment in the chalet, Orphée goes immediately to the Princess. Left alone together as the tribunal deliberates, the Princess explains that she has disobeyed orders, acting with inappropriate “initiative.” Orphée promises, “J’irai jusqu’à celui qui donne ces ordres”; he will confront Death to liberate the figure of his own death, instead of Eurydice who, per the myth, he should retrieve.

The love between the Princess and Orphée can be considered in light of Cocteau’s queer aesthetic. As he is a figure in love with his own death, Orphée resembles Narcissus, whose beloved reflection was his death. Love of self develops into to a queer love of sameness, but the object of that love is also the cause of one’s mortality. This is the danger that narcissism posed to Cocteau. Per the psychoanalytic research of the time, while his narcissism gave birth to his homosexual orientation – a source of his own aesthetics, loves, and poetry – it also predicted a lonely, childless death. Homosexuality, because it was narcissistic, was essentially self-destructive: it was never to exceed its selfish, self-centered origins.

Cocteau takes this interior relationship and extrapolates it to represent two actual characters, Orphée and the Princess, a narcissistic love affair with the single self that he divides into two halves. The queer component to this love relationship could not be openly dramatized in 1950: “if Orpheus’ attraction to dark mirrors is the sign of Cocteau’s own homosexuality, the fifties plot necessarily masks it by personifying death as a beautiful woman” (Sweet 27). The Princess had to be female because her relationship with Orphée in this relatively mainstream film had to keep the onscreen

paradigm of heterosexuality intact. As incarnated by Maria Casarès, a deeply severe actress who also played onstage, mostly in classical tragedies, the Princess is an imposing character, a female coded in many ways as male. She is the most prominent example of how Cocteau's queer aesthetic subverts traditional notions of gender. She is one of the *jolies laides*, unlike the more stereotypically pretty Eurydice. The Princess behaves with masculine authority and betrays little sensual warmth, 'femininity,' or 'feminine' weakness. "Tu me brûles comme de la glace," Orphée tells her when they are reunited in *la Zone*. She acts without orders and commands others easily, like the newly dead Cégeste and Eurydice, as would a man, and as we might expect of the personification of Death. She is judged guilty of "initiative" unbecoming of her station and, perhaps, of her sex. She is one of Cocteau's "formidable, phallic" women (Williams 2006, 157) who are as male as female. Her most employed prop is a suggestive cigarette. She is the only main character who smokes in the film, which calls attention to her cigarette, and if she is coded as male, her manipulation of it is not only sexual but queer: it is a phallic object which gives oral pleasure to a masculine character. (This idea recalls the poet's masturbation-cum-fellatio with the mouth-hand in *Le Sang*, albeit in reverse.) The queer aesthetic which predicates Casarès's performance as Orphée's Death signifies that the Princess's relationship with him can be read as a heterosexual simulacrum of a homosexual one. As we have seen, because two gay men cannot reproduce, their relationship ends with death. They cancel each other out. Played by the mostly openly gay Marais and in love with this strange Princess, a character who is practically as male as female (not unlike *Le Sang*'s hermaphrodite), Cocteau's Orphée emerges as a queer individual engaged in a futile

love relationship with death. *La mort* and *la petite mort* are again working in tandem. The impossibility of this queer love recalls the relationship between Cocteau and Radiguet, lost so early.

Cocteau had meditated on this figure of death for some time. In *La Difficulté d'être* (1947), he writes about refusing to leave a loved one's side after he or she had died. He literally remained in the room, aside the deathbed:

Si je n'étais triste d'abandonner les personnes que j'aime et qui peuvent encore espérer quelque chose de mon aide, j'attendrais curieusement que me touche et rapetisse l'ombre portée qui précède la mort...En quoi aurait-on si grande peur d'une personne avec laquelle on cohabite, étroitement mêlée à notre substance? (144)

This “ombre” becomes “une personne avec laquelle on cohabite,” in an intimate relationship not unlike a love affair. This is why the tribunal demands if the Princess is guilty of entering Orphée's room and watching him sleep. As his death, she is too close, for it has not yet been ordained that he should die. Then, when she steals Eurydice from life, she has acted without orders, to remove this obstacle to her love. The Princess alters the Orphic pattern because she inserts herself between Orphée and, in the myth, Hades, or the greater Death. Orpheus was to charm Hades and Persephone, but here his task is rewritten, as he falls in love with the Princess in *la Zone*. According to Cocteau, she had been there all along – “une personne avec laquelle on cohabite”: she watched him sleep, at his most vulnerable. She acted wrongly in killing Eurydice and Cégeste both, because she is only Orphée's Death – even as these two victims recognize her as “ma mort.” For this she is guilty of acting with “initiative.” Perhaps this is how Cocteau envisioned death acting upon Radiguet, with untoward initiative. To imagine this scenario, the figure of Death removed the

obstacle to Cocteau that was Radiguet. Death creeps into every gay relationship because said relationship always contains the seeds of its own end, as the myth of Narcissus instructs (per Freud). Cocteau penetrates the portal in search of his lost love and finds himself drowning in his own reflection, which cannot help but show his inevitable aging and demise.

The Princess will act with a similar measure of “initiative” in the finale of the film. We return to *la Zone* where she and Cégeste await Orphée and Heurtebise. “Ce n’est plus le même voyage...Heurtebise conduit Orphée où il ne devait pas le conduire,” says Cocteau in voiceover. The two are seen climbing awkwardly and strangely across a crumbling wall of *la Zone*: this is the same visual effect achieved in the *Hôtel des Folies-Dramatiques* in *Le Sang*. At this point, it is now clear that Orphée is undertaking a journey which is deeply related to the poet’s journey to the underworld in the earlier film. As always, we can also infer that this journey is also Cocteau’s. This passage to *la Zone* promises an encounter with death which Cocteau hypothesizes will lead to his resurrection and immortality, and Orphée will represent him.

Orphée and Heurtebise arrive where the Princess and Cégeste attend them. Orphée and his Death embrace: “J’ai trouvé le moyen de te rejoindre,” says Orphée: death by his own weapon, which he had welcomed (“Laissez [la vie] finir son travail!”). After promises of eternal freedom and devotion, though, the Princess demands something more. As Orphée protests, Heurtebise and Cégeste restrain him until he is unconscious. Then, in a long and curious sequence, we watch Heurtebise redirect Orphée back to his own world of the living, in an apparent reversal of all that has happened. They arrive in Orphée’s bedroom, where Eurydice awakens from a nap, with

just a slight headache. The two are reunited, evidently with no knowledge of all of their otherworldly adventures, and touched with tenderness for one another. “Il n’y a qu’un amour qui compte, c’est le nôtre...” Orphée tells Eurydice. The film returns to *la Zone* for its final moments, where the Princess and Heurtebise are arrested, leaving Cégeste all alone – where we will find him again, nine years later, in *Le Testament*.

This final sequence of *Orphée* is the apex of Cocteau’s Orphic and Narcissistic obsessions. Of course, the pattern of the voyage is Orphic: the League of Women are clearly the murderous Bacchantes, at whose hands Orphée is killed. He returns to *la Zone* just as Orpheus enters the underworld in the myth, only Orphée isn’t looking for Eurydice. He makes no mention of her and is entirely taken by the Princess. Orphée will also be returned to his world, but this time without the forbiddance to never look upon his wife, indeed, without even the memory of all that has transpired. The Orphic pattern here is subverted, even reversed, or erased. These characters end up back where we found them, in fact, even more as we would imagine them – as the devoted lovers of myth. In showing their reunion, Cocteau acquiesces to the fundamental structure of the myth and restores these two to their ancient obligations at its debut, that is, as partners in a particular heterosexual love relationship which inspires song, or poetry.

The process by which this happens is driven by the Princess. It is almost blatantly queer. This queerness originates, as we have seen, in role reversal and gender subversion. The Princess demands that Orphée submit to certain conditions, which echo marriage vows, except that the Princess plays the male role:

ORPHÉE. – Je t’aime.

LA PRINCESSE. – Je t’aime. Tu m’obéiras ?

ORPHÉE. – Je t'obéirai.

LA PRINCESSE. – Quoi que je te demande ?

ORPHÉE. – Quoi que tu me demandes.

LA PRINCESSE. – Même si je te condamnerais, si je te torturais ?

ORPHÉE. – Je t'appartiens et je ne te quitterai plus.

(The notion of *obéissance* reappears in *Le Testament*.) What follows is Cocteau's customary conflation of love and sex with death, *la petite mort* and the real one, as Heurtebise and Cégeste 'kill' the already-dead Orphée. We have "la mort infligée à un mort" (Williams 2006, 127), a reverse death, as it were, wherein one dies in the world of the dead to return to the world of the living. This death is marked by sexual and sensual overtones which reveal Cocteau's queer aesthetic. Orphée is held and grasped by two men, not by his purported female lover (who is elsewhere coded as masculine anyway). Heurtebise stands behind him, with the anal access that we saw in Orphée's Narcissus pose; Cégeste lowers himself to a position customary for fellatio. The two restrain him unto unconsciousness. The dialogue is highly suggestive:

LA PRINCESSE. – Vous approchez ! Vous arrivez ! Je le vois !

HEURTEBISE. – J'arrive...

LA PRINCESSE. – Un dernier effort, Heurtebise. Faites-le ! Faites-le ! Y êtes-vous ? Répondez-moi. Y êtes-vous ?... Y êtes-vous ?

HEURTEBISE. – J'y suis.

Filming this "mock, gay Pieta" (Williams 2006, 174) – and the Christ allusion is not incidental, as this is a 'passion' – Cocteau's camera moves behind the characters as he himself announces, "La mort d'un poète doit se sacrifier pour le rendre immortel." The camera stops with a shot of Orphée's head thrown back, viewed from behind, again in precisely the same pose as the poet in sexual ecstasy in *Le Sang* (figure 3.7). So Cocteau insinuates that this "mort infligée à un mort" is also a *petite mort*, that this process of reverse death and eventual resurrection is analagous to sexual communion.



3.7 *La mort infligée à un mort*

This orgasmic death is also a sacrifice, for the Princess is giving up Orphée for forever. She is sacrificing her love in this homosexual spectacle – “Orphée’s torture and execution where the violence of sexuality is contorted into an erotics of sacrifice” (Williams 2006, 130) – in order for the poet to return to his mythic life. He is ‘traversing’ yet another of these “morts successives” on his way to poetic immortality.

When this reverse death is accomplished, we then see Heurtebise conducting Orphée back through *la Zone* into his bedroom, as if rewinding the film strip. Finally, the Princess demands that her gloves be returned. If all of this has been some sort of sexual allegory, the gloves end up as a metaphor for contraception, necessary protection in this erotic process, just like the glove which should have protected the poet’s hand from leprosy in *Le Sang*: in effect, the tight rubber gloves resemble a condom which the lover removes after climax. (Well before the advent of HIV/AIDS, the homosexual man employed condoms to protect himself from other venereal diseases, such as syphilis.) The film’s climax has thus been coded as a veritable sexual

encounter and orgasm for Orphée, not unlike Cocteau's metaphorical ejaculation in the first film, the moment of discharge as the phallic tower collapsed. What's more, the sexuality that infiltrates each work imputes queerness, placing the films squarely under the sign of Narcissus as much as they fall under Orpheus as well.

As in *Le Sang*, Narcissus is expelled from the pool and Orphée returned to the world of the living, through the mirror, only this time to an ostensibly happy ending, with no memory of what has come before. But how happy exactly are Orphée and Eurydice? After the Princess's self-sacrifice, a change has occurred in Orphée and Eurydice's relationship. The mutual love proscribed by the ancient myth has been restored to them. Contrasted with the punishment awaiting the Princess and Heurtebise, Orphée and Eurydice's newfound contentment seems unearned and false. They are forever indebted to the Princess and yet totally unaware. "Orphée's return to Eurydice is rather a simulacrum of conjugal bourgeois happiness which...comes at a hefty price, that of amnesia and ignorance" (Williams 2006, 113) and ends with the seemingly pat avowal of mutual affection. They remember nothing of their death-defying adventures – they might as well have been nightmares, as Eurydice complains of "des cauchemars épouvantables." Is this Cocteau's bending to the expectations of a 'happy ending' to a 'mainstream' film? Not with the Princess's bitter tears in the film's *dénouement*. What's more, Orphée's "amnesia and ignorance" fail Cocteau's dictum. The poet's task is to die over and over to reach a purer state of artistic production, but Orphée (unlike the poet in *Le Sang*) is unconscious of this process, and we hear no new poems from him. I posit that the one poet who is aware of the journey taken, its costs, and its rewards, is Cocteau.

“La mort d’un poète doit se sacrifier pour le rendre immortel” is Cocteau’s summation of the entire film. The Princess must sacrifice herself to arrest and prosecution by liberating Orphée from *la Zone* in order for him to return to that work which affords him immortality – his poetry – even if he has no knowledge or memory of this. “Mes livres ne peuvent pas s’écrire tout seuls,” Orphée tells Eurydice, “Je les aide!”

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. (Evans 120)

This “artistic representation” is actually a metaphor for Cocteau’s film-poem, his *poésie cinématographique*. These films are his poetic legacy, that which survives him after his death. Like the poet in *Le Sang*, like Radiguet, Cocteau seeks to attain not literal but *poetic* immortality. He dramatizes this through the allegory of his personal Orphée, who is, in fact, resurrected and lives again, who experiences that literal immortality which will allow him to write more poetry. In order for the myth to persist, Orphée and Eurydice must be reunited so that their love can attain its mythic proportions. “Il n’y a qu’un amour qui compte, c’est le nôtre...” Orphée says. Cocteau implies that their ancient love, even transported to this modern-day setting, is what resonates across the centuries and compels audiences still. It also defines these characters for all time, granting them the immortality that Cocteau himself pursues.

The Princess and Heurtebise get a raw deal in the end. “Il fallait les remettre dans leur eau sale,” Heurtebise says, attempting to reassure her. (This reference to water is a last nod to the Narcissistic motif.) We will meet them again, along with

Cégeste, in the final film of the trilogy, *Le Testament d'Orphée*, where Cocteau will ultimately submit *himself* to the “morts successives” which the poet must endure in order to access that ultimate poetic immortality. These deaths will be eroticized, as we have seen, from a distinctly queer perspective.

LE TESTAMENT D'ORPHÉE

Indeed, the entirety of *Le Testament d'Orphée* can be considered as much an erotic spectacle as a spiritual journey. “Mon film n’est pas autre chose qu’une séance de strip-tease,” says Cocteau, who plays the poet, “consistant à ôter peu à peu mon âme toute nue.” This “film d’adieu,” as he calls it near its end, is a sometimes confusing, sometimes tedious affair which presents various characters and themes from Cocteau’s *œuvre* as he himself wanders in a journey through time and space. We are back in the world of *Le Sang d’un poète*, where the various acts and events in the film must be deciphered for their deeper meaning, which the filmmaker will merely present, not explain – and don’t ask him to: as it is, the subtitle of the film is *Ne me demandez pas pourquoi*. Little is identifiable on its own: the film must be appreciated in light of *Le Sang* and *Orphée*. The Orphic and Narcissistic patterns that we traced in the earlier films are present in *Le Testament*, so the film will operate under the signs of these two mythological characters, although less explicitly than before. The characteristic combination of sex, love, death, and poetry – the defining feature of Cocteau’s queer aesthetic – structures the climax of the film.

As the title communicates, the real journey of the film is Orphic. It is not without dangers. On the road alone, Cocteau passes a man with the head of a horse, a version of the talking horse in his play *Orphée*. The two pass each other without speaking, then turn to look back at one another. When the man-horse removes his horse’s head, he is an attractive, darkly handsome young man. There is something very sexual about his presence – turning and looking back, what he and Cocteau are actually doing is cruising each other, a potentially rewarding but also potentially dangerous situation in the

closeted, heteronormative world. This is the queer subtext which must be discovered by the sensitive viewer and which pervades this final film of the trilogy. And as we have seen, the queer aesthetic is deeply related to Cocteau's obsession with death, so this man-horse conveys, too, a sense of foreboding. "Cet homme-cheval m'avait déplu," Cocteau says in voiceover. "Je devinais qu'il m'attirait dans un piège, et j'aurais mieux fait de ne pas le suivre."

The word *piège* appears later as well, when Cocteau and Cégeste, who reappears to act as his guide, enter territory marked "PROPRIÉTÉ PRIVÉE – PIÈGE." This idea of the *piège* stems directly from *Le Sang* and has implications for the trilogy as a whole. In *Le Sang*, there reads a title card which ends "...ou comment j'ai été pris au piège par mon propre film. Jean Cocteau" (with a star). This enigmatic statement precedes the scene where the poet is trapped in the room and must leave only through the mirror. Cocteau is thus deeply aware of *pièges*, of getting into them and getting out of them. The entirety of *Le Sang* was evidently some sort of trap, which required the poet's suffering and death to exit. So *Le Testament* will trap Cocteau in a world of flowers, doubles, his own characters and works, that he cannot escape until he submits to an Orphic death and rebirth.

This is a dangerous proposition: one of the paintings that Cocteau uncovers in the greenhouse is of Orpheus decapitated, his lyre no longer sounding (Orphée's fate in the 1925 play). The Orphic death seems a distinct possibility for the poet. Similarly, the *homme-cheval* was simultaneously desirable and threatening when he is, in fact, a harbinger of death. From the relationships between the three films, we can surmise that in the 'plot' of *Le Testament*, such that there is one, Cocteau the poet is seeking out his

own death, which will afford him and his work immortality. This is the Orphic journey which inspires the various events in the film; the Narcissistic motif reappears in two short but important scenes. Actually, it permeates the entire film, because *Le Testament* itself is an overwhelmingly narcissistic exercise. If *Orphée* had been “a kind of projection of things that are important” (quoted in Evans 105) to Cocteau, then *Le Testament* cuts even closer. He calls it an “auto-portrait”:

“*Le Testament* n’est autre qu’une tentative d’auto-portrait, auto-portrait qui s’attache à la ressemblance profonde et néglige cette ressemblance extérieure qui nous documente fort mal sur un artiste qu’on nous montre dans l’exercice de ses habitudes. Dans ce film j’ai inventé une suite d’actes imaginaires qui s’enchaînent selon le mécanisme du rêve et répondent à ce réalisme irréel, à ce plus vrai que le vrai, qui seront un jour le signe de notre époque.” (quoted in Williams 2006, 98)

“La ressemblance profonde” as opposed to “cette ressemblance extérieure” nods to Cocteau’s mirror, or rather, to the idea that Cocteau no longer needs it. “No literal mirrors feature in the film since the different elements listed all serve as figurative mirrors of Cocteau’s life and corpus,” (Williams 2006, 94); one could say that the whole film is one eighty-minute-long mirror of Cocteau. It reflects not only himself but his work, so we will meet Cégeste, the Princess, and Heurtebise again, for example – and even Cocteau’s *doppelgänger*. But the mirror has limits to its power. When asked if he requires a mirror to disappear, as in *Orphée*, Cégeste dismisses them: “Les miroirs réfléchissent trop. Ils renversent prétentieusement les images et se croient profonds.” Of course, this responds directly to Cocteau’s earlier notion, that “les miroirs feraient bien de réfléchir davantage avant de renvoyer les images,” and, in fact, even rewrites it: mirrors now reflect too much, instead of not enough, and yet still think themselves profound. Cocteau is responding to criticism that his work is pretentious by

relinquishing one of his signature motifs. The mirror is now an empty symbol, its capability exhausted by the first two films. We lose an important component of the Narcissus imagery, but, as Cocteau suggests, we perhaps gain a better perspective on the poet for all that is interior, not exterior (“la ressemblance profonde”). Still, Cocteau can’t avoid the irony that he himself appears in the film, playing a version of himself, the film-strip itself a reflection, a literal mirror, of his person. It is “less a film than a man transformed into a film” (Adair 13), except that, as Cégeste informs Cocteau, “Ce n’est plus un film. C’est la vie.”

This is Cocteau’s deliberate confusion of the film’s reality with his own life. We are often at a loss to say precisely which is which. For example, Cocteau and Cégeste are interrogated by the Princess and Heurtebise in a scene which recalls the tribunal of *Orphée*. Cégeste offers that he is a painter as well as the “fils adoptif” of the poet. This is both true and untrue: Édouard Dermithe was a painter and Cocteau’s adopted son, but not Cégeste, who is a fictional character. Is Dermithe speaking as himself, or as Cégeste? Is he, like Cocteau, also simply playing a version of himself that happens to be named Cégeste? This calls to mind the decapitated head of Orphée in the play *Orphée* who claims his name is “Jean Cocteau.” The actor (or director) and the character merge until they are indistinguishable. Perhaps this is how Cocteau felt even in life, toward Dermithe, that he was a kind of Cégeste in real life, or that the barrier between the real and the unreal was that permeable or variable. This, at any rate, is the world of *Le Testament*: “ce réalisme iréel,” “ce plus vrai que le vrai.”

As the summation of Cocteau’s Orphic project, indeed of his entire career, *Le Testament* is precisely that: a testament, a testimonial, “a statement of belief or credo”

(Williams 2006, 95) but also a sort of artistic will which gives a central importance to Dermithe, who was to protect Cocteau's legacy after his death in 1963. As Cégeste, Dermithe reprises his role from *Orphée* and acts as a Virgil-like guide for Cocteau throughout *Le Testament*. He first appears in a short, wordless *prélude* which reviews the end of *Orphée*, leaving him all alone in *la Zone*. His next appearance in the film relates directly back to *Le Sang* as well as to *Orphée* and rewrites the Narcissus myth. Cocteau throws torn-up scraps of a photograph of Cégeste into the sea, and then, miraculously, Cégeste emerges from the ocean, sailing through the air and onto the cliff where Cocteau awaits him. This is Narcissus expelled from the pool as the poet in *Le Sang* was sent back through the mirror, that *eau de Narcisse*. The effect was achieved by reversing a shot of Dermithe jumping backwards into the ocean.

Throughout the film, Cocteau avails himself of this technique of reverse footage. This practice has Orphic implications; namely, by rewinding the film, Cocteau reverses what has come before, not unlike the final journey that Orphée takes under Heurtebise's eye in the film *Orphée*, which left Orphée with no memory of his time in *la Zone* or his earlier death. As the Princess says to Heurtebise, "Remontez le temps. Il faut que ce qui a été ne soit plus." Cocteau erases time and events and leaves a *tabula rasa* for his characters upon which they may reconstruct themselves ("Il n'y a qu'un amour qui compte, c'est le nôtre"). His technical usage of reverse motion filmography accomplishes something similar: at one point, Cocteau desperately tears a hibiscus to pieces, then later, he somehow pieces it back together – a shot created by playing, in reverse, a shot of Cocteau slowly ripping it apart. The flower is then as good as new, and all that more powerful a symbol for containing, for the audience, a hidden history of

destruction. Cégeste's expulsion from the Narcissistic water, then, should deliver him anew to Cocteau – but it doesn't. He eventually reprimands Cocteau, "Vous m'avez laissé seul dans la Zone où les vivants ne sont pas vivants, où les morts ne sont pas morts," he says angrily. What follows is incomprehensible...because Cocteau plays that last sentence in reverse motion, garbling Cégeste's words and rewinding his sentence. Cocteau is trying to undo what has been done, just like Orpheus. Sometimes this can be accomplished with reversing the film-strip, but on his own Orphic journey, he will find that he has to suffer death to erase and rewrite the past.

He is rewriting his own writing, his own films. The long scene where the Princess and Heurtebise judge Cocteau is essentially a rewriting of the scene in *Orphée* where they were judged by the tribunal. In fact, that was their sentence: to be the judges of others. This scene contains some important components of the trilogy as a whole. In it, the Princess and Heurtebise ask Cocteau questions about himself and his vocation. "Qu'entendez-vous par *film*?" asks the Princess. "Un film est une source pétrifiante de la pensée. Un film ressuscite des actes morts. Un film permet de donner l'apparence de la réalité à l'irréel," responds Cocteau. His answer reminds us of *Le Sang*'s "realistic documentary of unreal events," as well as of *Orphée*'s scenes of resurrection. "Qu'entendez-vous par *poète*?" she continues. "Le poète, en composant des poèmes, use une langue ni vivante ni morte que peu de personnes parlent et que peu de personnes entendent," says Cocteau. A professor is summoned to testify, and he says of Cocteau, "Il est un poète, c'est à dire il est indispensable, bien que je ne sache pas à quoi..." What are poets good for? What are films good for? After the disappointing commercial run of *Orphée*, Cocteau had difficulty finding the money and the support to

make another big-budget film. In his responses to these open-ended questions, he seems to assert his importance as an artist, even when or if few people ‘get’ his art. He is indispensable, even if the professor doesn’t know quite what for. These are enigmatic and narcissistic statements, befitting the nature of the project. This is our Orpheus Narcissus.

The Princess and Heurtebise hand down their sentence: the poet must live. Once again, the Orphic element emerges. Cocteau has met death (the Princess) and lived to tell about it. In fact, the film begins with this Orphic pattern, in scenes with the professor. Cocteau the poet is some sort of time-traveler and is searching for the way back home, to his proper *époque*. He is first dressed in eighteenth-century garb, like *Le Sang*’s young man. The metaphysics of these scenes become a little muddled, but essentially he is searching across *époques* for some magical bullets which travel faster than the speed of light, and the professor is the one who is to shoot him with these bullets. He first startles the professor as a youngster, played by Jean-Pierre Léaud (Léaud was the child star of François Truffaut’s *Les 400 Coups*, the international profits from which Truffaut donated to Cocteau for the production of *Le Testament* [Clergue 18]). “J’avais oublié mes gants,” Cocteau explains, as the forgotten glove motif from the play *Orphée* repeats itself. Referring to another of his works, Cocteau is preparing us for the self-referentiality and self-admiration of this narcissistic project. In another time period, Cocteau finds the bullets when the decrepit older professor drops them from his wheelchair. Once again, Orpheus is in love with Death: in voiceover, Cocteau says of the box of bullets, “Je la caressais amoureusement.” Finally, he arrives at the right time, when the professor is middle-aged and in the midst of his scientific career.

“J’aimerais comprendre...” begins the professor, and we would, too. “Professeur,” Cocteau interrupts him, “vous êtes sans doute la seule personne au monde capable de ne pas chercher à comprendre et capable aussi de comprendre l’incompréhensible.” Cocteau could just as easily be speaking to the audience – *Ne me demandez pas pourquoi*. He has to be killed by one of these bullets to return to his proper time and place: “C’est le seul moyen de rentrer chez moi.” The professor obliges him and shoots. The eighteenth-century Cocteau falls as the modern-day Cocteau immediately arises anew. Cocteau prepared us for this transformation in *Le Sang*, calling it “la nécessité pour le poète de traverser des morts successives et de renaître sous une forme plus proche de sa personne...” Here he survives one ‘death’ and, indeed, emerges closer to who he actually is – the Cocteau of 1959. Like Orpheus, he has met and triumphed over death. As we shall see, the film is bookended by episodes of these “morts successives.”

Identifying the Orphic and Narcissistic elements helps unlock the deeper meaning, when the film itself is so obstinately obtuse. Even Cocteau himself wants to understand, but Cégeste admonishes him: “Vous cherchez trop à comprendre. C’est un grave défaut.” “J’ai déjà entendu cette phrase,” says Cocteau. Cégeste responds, “Vous l’avez écrite.” Indeed he had. The Princess had said it to Orphée in *Orphée*. This is Cocteau’s own narcissism at work, admiring his talent and finesse as Narcissus adored his own image. If the first Orphic entry could have been titled *Le Sang de Jean Cocteau*, this last one could simply be called *Jean Cocteau*, or even *J.C.* – and Cocteau does not fail to recognize that his initials are also those of *Jésus Christ*. In fact, the film had initially been entitled *La Résurrection d’une fleur* (Evans 138). This flower, a

(briefly) red hibiscus, becomes increasingly associated with the poet to the point where, in the closing voiceover, Cocteau says that is his “vedette” – meaning not only the star of the film, but also a reimagining of his own *étoile* insignia, the star which decorates his signature. It is also joined in one frame imagistically with Cocteau’s blood, both of which turn red in the only instance of color in the black-and-white film, deftly illustrating the continuum of the trilogy from *Le Sang* to *Le Testament*. And, of course, in some versions of the myth, Narcissus is transformed into the flower which bears his name. It is perhaps a little disappointing, given our analysis, that Cocteau did not employ a Narcissus flower (a daffodil or jonquil) as his personal symbol and prop in the film. But *Le Testament* eschews such easy correspondences.

The flower is nevertheless related to the Narcissistic theme. In one scene, Cocteau sets the hibiscus in a flowerpot and prepares to paint it. Then, in reverse motion, he un-erases his previous effort, which ends up a self-portrait (figure 4.1). He is disappointed.



4.1 *Un peintre peint toujours son propre portrait*

“Ne vous obstinez pas,” Cégeste tells him. “Un peintre peint toujours son propre portrait. Cette fleur, vous n’arriverez jamais à la peindre.” In trying to draw the flower, Cocteau ends up drawing himself; so in trying to make a film about Orpheus, he finishes with a film about himself. In a fit, he tears up the flower and stamps the pieces into the ground, muttering “Merde!” over and over (as did the poet in *Le Sang* after his suicide failed). Is Cocteau self-destructive (his opium addiction aside)? He destroys the subject of his contemplation, which is narcissistically linked to his own self. By ripping up his own symbol, Cocteau destabilizes himself, the beginning of a process which will lead to his death and spiritual rebirth.

One thing the hibiscus does have that a narcissus does not is a very prominent, indeed, phallic stamen, so that even the flower is queered in this Orphic-Narcissistic *mélange*. Cocteau’s queer aesthetic emanates, as before, from the figure of Narcissus and his own orientation and can even be connected to his special effects and various techniques, like the reverse footage. The queer aesthetic is trying to demolish the ‘mainstream,’ nominally heterosexual world that most films inhabit, so Cocteau disrupts this paradigm with his magical effects and rewind film. For example, the shot of him piecing the flower back together: the magic of this moment, which turns contemplative, as well as the extended length of the shot both upend our ‘normal’ expectations. Cocteau ends this process by delicately fingering the phallic stamen back into the center of the hibiscus, betraying its queer associations.

The other major Narcissistic scene takes place in what is called the “Rue Obscure.” An identical version of Cocteau passes the ‘real’ Cocteau and Cégeste in the street, without stopping and without acknowledgment. “Il a fait semblant de ne pas me

voir!” claims the original Cocteau. “Il me hait!” The literal reflection of the poet, a walking mirror, Cocteau seeing himself, is Narcissistic. The fact that the ‘other’ Cocteau does not see him, or pretends not to see him, is correct because one’s reflection does not possess the literal capability to look back at the looker. But the Narcissus story is here subverted. For one, the relationship between the two figures is not one of love or infatuation but is presumed to be hate. Cocteau feels that his reflection detests him. There is no indication that Cocteau loves his other iteration, as Narcissus does – except, of course, that this doubling occurs in the first place, which testifies to Cocteau’s own ego.

Coming toward the end of the film and just before the final Orphic sequence, this moment of Narcissism is telling: Cocteau recognizes that there is another version of himself out there, with its own agency and reputation, that both is and is not himself. “Il n’a aucune raison de vous aimer,” Cégeste tells him, “On l’a suffisamment insulté...à votre place.” The private, personal Cocteau of the film acknowledges his famous public persona, which is both real and unreal, which he can see but which can’t see him. This is Narcissus’s epiphany that the image he adores is his own, with the simultaneous revelation that he will never reach it, never fully accomplish the love that he feels for it: “an immaterial hope,/a shadow that he wrongly takes for substance” (Ovid 77). This is the limit of Narcissism. This is the outer limit of Cocteau’s self-obsessions – when they take on a life of their own, no longer tethered to their creator. The differences between the ‘real’ and the ‘other’ Cocteaus are practically not apparent; these two bleed into one another and are indistinguishable in the so-called “Rue Obscure.” His reflection has self-actualized, become his own person; Cocteau’s own narcissism (in the very

narcissistic exercise that is this film) has now slipped beyond his grasp. “Je le tuerai!” claims the ‘real’ Cocteau, so Narcissistic suicide is insinuated again, like the poet in *Le Sang*.

The two Cocteaues speak as well to his comments about the “marriage of the conscious and the unconscious.” The ‘real’ Cocteau is, of course, the conscious one; his reflection, unencumbered, is the unconscious one. He recognizes in the “Rue Obscure” that he operates in two different registers, that he may even contain two very different artists who work in tandem without realizing it. His comments toward this figure – “Il me hait!” – are but projections of feelings about his inner self. Cocteau reveals himself to be a divided figure, public and private, unconscious and conscious, who feels unable to reconcile these two halves. All he can do is describe his ‘other’ in an attempt to contain him in this film, in this trilogy, this “indirect spiritual autobiography.” Again, he is Narcissus at the pool, unable to reach his own reflection, able only to appreciate it.

As the film continues, the Orphic journey takes shape, but it is missing one crucial element: Eurydice. Notably, she does not appear in the film, and this poet played by Cocteau is not necessarily searching for her equivalent. Toward the end of the film, Cocteau continues to repeat the phrase, “C’est elle!” but is he speaking of Eurydice? Once, it turns out to be Yseult, sailing toward her fatal love affair with Tristan. Another time, nothing is there. I contend that he knows all along that he will end up in the temple of the goddess Minerve, and this is the “elle” to which he refers. This goddess is another of these “formidable, phallic” women (Williams 2006, 157) who is coded as a male: she carries the masculine instruments of war, a spear and a shield.

Cocteau intends to offer her his flower. This will be the terminus of his Orphic journey, and the climax of the film.

Cégeste leaves Cocteau alone (as Cocteau had left Cégeste alone in *la Zone*) for this ultimate sequence of death and rebirth, but he first ensures that Cocteau will obey his orders: “J’obéi,” Cocteau says, echoing Orphée who promised to obey the Princess before his torturous reverse death in *la Zone*. Cocteau enters a grand series of caves, seeking out Minerve’s temple. An elegant host tells him to wait, so Cocteau waits – interminably. The host appears several times to beg him to continue to wait. The end of *Le Sang* comes to mind: “L’ennui mortel de l’immortalité.” Finally, Cocteau is admitted to the temple space. The host intones, “Ici laissez toute espérance,” referring to Dante’s *Inferno* (whose composition was purportedly begun in those very caves, centuries before [Sweet 32]). Minerve is presented standing, immobile, atop some great rocks, spear in hand, and flanked by two of the *hommes-chevaux*, one of which Cocteau had passed on the road earlier. She sports the painted eyelids which have previously decorated the poet and the statue in *Le Sang* and the Princess in *Orphée*. Cocteau offers up his hibiscus flower meekly; Minerve turns her head very slowly to see it (although, of course, she can’t actually see it because of the eyelids); she then turns back away, which Cocteau takes as a refusal. “Je m’excuse...je m’excuse...” he says, backing away. As Cocteau walks away, once his back is turned, Minerve springs to life and launches her spear toward him, and it impales him from behind (figure 4.2). Cocteau falls, muttering “Quelle horreur!” He dies. A group of gypsies (including Pablo Picasso) looks on, as the two *hommes-chevaux* transport Cocteau to a dais draped in fabric. The gypsies gather around to mourn him.



4.2 Cocteau impaled by Minerve

Cocteau's mouth emits smoke, while his eyes are covered with the same painted eyelids. "Faites semblant de pleurer," Cocteau says in voiceover, "puisque les poètes ne font que semblant d'être morts." Then, miraculously, Cocteau rises fully intact, with no gaping wound, and walks slowly away. His resurrection is dramatized with the same special effect that resurrected Cégeste and Eurydice in *Orphée*.

The goddess Minerve has an antecedent in Cocteau's *œuvre*: the magical statue of Diane who stands among the Beast's treasure, the source of his power, in *La Belle et la bête*. When Avenant and Belle's brother Ludovic break in to steal the treasure, Diane comes alive and spears Avenant in the back, which transforms him into the Beast and kills him (while simultaneously, the Beast is transformed into the Prince Charmant, also played by Jean Marais). Similarly, in *Le Testament*, Cocteau is wounded by a goddess and undergoes a transformation. If we can say from *Orphée* that death for Cocteau is a kind of gay intercourse, then his death in *Le Testament* should correspond. Indeed, it does: the spear in Cocteau's back is a metaphor for anal

penetration. The perpetrator of this queer violence is a woman coded as male, like the Princess in *Orphée*.

The Orphic overtones of the scene are clear enough, but it must also be decoded for its queer, Narcissistic content. For all that this is a narcissistic exercise for Cocteau, it is a queer one as well. Autobiographically we can read the smoke coming from his mouth as opium, as if his various attempts at detoxification allowed him several metaphorical deaths and rebirths. The painted eyelids, as in *Le Sang*, impute narcissistic sexual ecstasy, a self-loving and queer orgasm. Following the formulations of *Le Sang* and *Orphée*, we see again the confusion of *la mort* with *la petite mort*. This second one is necessarily queer, following the contours of Cocteau's life and loves. For example, earlier in the film, his lover Dermithe, playing Cégeste, had placed a skull, a death mask on his face. In love with him, Cocteau, as Orphée, is in love with Death. When he finds death at the hands of Minerve, it is an orgasmic gay experience that reveals a new being in himself.

We have the final of Cocteau's "morts successives" that he suffers to bring himself back closer to himself and to achieve poetic immortality. Back out on the road, alone, a mythical Sphinx shadows him (he is actually played by Dermithe). Cocteau passes Œdipe, blinded and led by Antigone. Œdipe is played by Jean Marais, his former lover and muse. Cocteau still has his eyes covered, so neither of the men see one another, passing like ships in the night: "On désire rencontrer Œdipe, le Sphinx, mais c'est souvent sans les connaître," he says in voiceover. Cocteau is stopped by two policemen who demand to see his papers. Cégeste appears and spirits him away;

the policeman drops Cocteau's papers in amazement, which turn into the hibiscus upon hitting the ground (a special effect repeated after *La Belle et la bête*).

The final Orphic element of the film is the phoenix motif. "N'êtes-vous pas expert en phénixologie?" Cégeste asks Cocteau when they first are reunited. "C'est la science qui permet de mourir une grande nombre de fois pour un être." This is an Orphic art, for Orpheus met and triumphed over death. Of course, this science is precisely Cocteau's specialty (Sprigge and Kihm 239), what with his multiple attempts at opium detoxification, a certain kind of 'death' and 'rebirth'. Like the proverbial phoenix rising out of the ashes, Cocteau rises from his death to live again. Of course, so did Jesus Christ; when Cégeste spirits Cocteau away at the end, Cocteau disappears with his arms outstretched in the pose of a man crucified. "Après tout, la terre n'est pas votre patrie," says Cégeste. It was always resurrection that Cocteau was after, not simply death. With his films, which survive him, he has achieved the poetic immortality which he so ardently sought.

ORPHEUS NARCISSUS

I would even argue that, in the “Rue Obscure,” Cocteau dramatizes the meeting of Orpheus and Narcissus – they are both Cocteau. One, the ‘real’ Cocteau, is Orphic, aware of his reflection, aware of the journey he’s taking, conscious of the death task ahead. The ‘other’ Cocteau is his pure, Narcissistic reflection, unaware of his originator. While they were contained in the singular figures of the poet and Orphée in the earlier films, in his final film, Cocteau separates them and sends them on their individual ways. He acquiesces ultimately to the Orphic pattern, but by then it has already been subverted by the queer aesthetic derived from Narcissus.

The relationship between Orpheus and Narcissus has been delineated by some other thinkers. For example, several critics of Cocteau cite the psychoanalyst Herbert Marcuse:

The Orphic Eros transforms being: he masters cruelty and death through liberation. His language is *song*, and his work is *play*. Narcissus’ life is that of *beauty*, and his existence is *contemplation*. These images refer to the *aesthetic dimension* as the one in which their reality principle must be sought and validated (171).

Eros here is the Freudian concept, corresponding to the ‘life drive’ or ‘sex drive.’ This *eros* is opposed by the ‘death drive,’ as described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure*

Principle:

We have fixed our attention not on the living matter, but on the forces active in it, and have been led to distinguish two kinds of instincts: those the purpose of which is to guide life towards death, and the others, the sexual instincts, which perpetually strive for, and bring about, the renewal of life (57).

I posit that we can locate Orpheus and Narcissus in these “instincts.” Orpheus is the ‘death drive,’ forever propelled on his journey toward death. Narcissus is the ‘sex drive,’ always in love with his own image. Indeed, according to Freud, when the sexual

instincts work too strongly on a person's Ego, the result is narcissism (66). When the death instincts work too strongly upon the Ego, the result is self-destruction. This distinction between the death instincts and the sexual instincts is complicated by their simultaneous action. At any moment, both sets of instincts are working on a person's psyche. As we have seen, Cocteau contains both of them and contends with each of them at the same time in his films.

Orpheus indeed masters death and is liberated into immortality – poetic immortality afforded to the work he leaves behind him (the hibiscus left by the disappearing Cocteau, the poems of *Orphée*). Cocteau envisions in these films *how* “the Orphic Eros transforms being” – we never view the Orpheus who sings and plays: this is what is promised at the end of *Orphée*, but not shown. And while Marcuse imagines a contemplative, immobile existence for Narcissus, Cocteau takes his cue from Rilke and activates this figure to drown in his own reflection, to search for what's beyond the surface. This voyage into the beyond, simultaneously Orphic and Narcissistic for Cocteau, structures the trilogy and provides its thrust.

It is fitting that Cocteau ends with the flower. Even though it's a hibiscus, the flower still represents the end of Narcissus, who was transformed into a flower. “Je n'aime pas cette fleur morte,” Cocteau tells Cégeste. Cégeste responds, “On ne ressuscite pas toujours ce qu'on aime.” Cocteau could never bring back his love, Radiguet. His attempts at *phénixologie* are all self-directed, especially in the final film. His Orpheus in *Le Testament* is searching for himself, not for Eurydice, and not unlike Narcissus. A queer Orpheus may always end up a Narcissus.

I have attempted in this essay to reveal the queer aesthetic which characterizes Cocteau's Orphic trilogy, while also trying to enunciate the Orphic and Narcissistic origins of this aesthetic. Orpheus Narcissus is the synthesis of these two figures. He exists at the intersection of desire and death, where *la petite mort* prepares us for the veritable one.



5.1 Cocteau's "Young Orpheus"

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