

## The Orphic ‘fleeting glimpse’ in some of its Remediations

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**Abstract:** The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was revitalized and perpetuated during the first decades of the twentieth century in literature and other arts. Influenced by literature, painting and music, cinema has retold and re-enacted this myth in many variations, from *Destiny* (Lang, 1921) to Cocteau's Orphic trilogy (1930-60). Revisiting the Orphic ‘fleeting glimpse’ in some of its modernist re-mediations and comparing its pictorial and cinematographic expression will provide further insight into its adaptations and transformations and into the technology involved in these processes. The present investigation focuses on the technical reproducibility of the invisible and analyses its pictorial, poetic and cinematographic expression in the cultural exchange between Rodin, Rilke and Cocteau.

**Keywords:** Myth; Orpheus; Media archaeology; Painting; Film

### ESP La «visión fugaz» órfica en algunas de sus remediaciones

**Resumen:** El mito de Orfeo y Eurídice se revitalizó y perpetuó durante las primeras décadas del siglo XX en la literatura y otras artes. Influido por la literatura, la pintura y la música, el cine ha vuelto a contar y representar este mito en muchas variaciones, desde *Destiny* (Lang, 1921) hasta la trilogía órfica de Cocteau (1930-60). Revisar la visión fugaz órfica en algunas de sus re-mediaciones modernistas y comparar su expresión pictórica y cinematográfica proporcionará una mayor comprensión de sus adaptaciones y transformaciones y de la tecnología implicada en estos procesos. La presente investigación se centra en la reproducibilidad técnica de lo invisible y analiza su expresión pictórica, poética y cinematográfica en el intercambio cultural entre Rodin, Rilke y Cocteau.

**Palabras clave:** Mito; Orfeo; Arqueología mediática; Pintura; Cine

**Sumario:** The Orphic Myth. The Medium: Development and Perception. The fatal look in painting. From optical tricks and ‘spirit photography’ to moving pictures. Eurydice and Orpheus according to Fritz Lang. Rodin's, Rilke's and Cocteau's reception of the myth. Conclusion. Works Cited.

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### The Orphic Myth

According to the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice has many variations in geographically dispersed cultures outside Europe.<sup>1</sup> Alluding to the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* Jean-Michel Roessli (2014) points out that for most of the moderns Orpheus belonged to mythology, while the majority of the ancients, with the exception of Aristotle, never doubted that he was a historical figure.

The myth of Orpheus is multifaceted and one of the mythological themes that has enjoyed greatest repercussions in literature and art over the centuries. Consequently, it has become a widely studied subject. In his article “Tendencias recientes en el estudio del Orfismo” (23-24), Bernabé observes an unbridled tendency to see Orphism or Orphic influences behind a very varied and heterogeneous set of religious phenomena during the 19th and early 20th century. Following Wilamowitz-Moellendorff's critical approach,<sup>2</sup> a hypercritical reaction arose during the 1930s, which tended to deny the importance and even the existence of the Orphic movement, especially in archaic and classical times. This produced a considerable scepticism in general

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Thompson (1956 III, 15 (F81.1)).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1931).

opinion, and thus, from the fifties until the mid-seventies, Orphism was considered an obsolete reality, studied with great reticence and using all kinds of caution. As Bernabé (25) points out, archaeology provided new documents of extraordinary significance, which forced many scholars to reconsider their positions. In this context, he mentions a major characteristic of Orphism: the soul-body dualism, with overvaluation of the soul and undervaluation of the body. In a recent publication, Blanco Rodriguez (2016) examines the extent to which Plato's notion of soul can be considered an Orphic element brought to Plato's doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

The present article focuses on one particular aspect of his journey to the land of the dead to bring back his wife, namely on naming and portraying the invisible during the processes of its remediation. Within this framework, some aspects of media archaeology can be useful to gain insight in technical developments that influence and shape human individual and collective imaginary.

Bernabé's comparison of two tales that describe a journey of the human soul to the underworld provides a close analysis of the mythological-religious background:

one of them was included in a Hittite ritual called «The Voyage of the Immortal Human Soul» and the other that was told in the Greek texts written in the Orphic gold leaves. Both tales consider the passage of the soul into the otherworld as a travel to the underground and tell that there are two different places in the otherworld: a grateful field and a negative one characterized by mud and oblivion.<sup>4</sup>

In his *Metamorphoses* (X, 1-105) Ovid situates the reencounter of Orpheus and Eurydice in a ghastly, joyless ("inamoenus") place among aerial people and simulacra of buried dead («leves populos simulacraque functa sepulcro»). On the other hand, Virgil's *Georgics* (IV, 464-527) define the inhabitants as «insubstantial shadows» and, turning around inadvertently on their way out, Orpheus beholds Eurydice's disappearing shape "like smoke vanishing in thin air". This part of the myth tells the story of a love stronger than death and at the same time of the impossibility of recovering it. The painful feeling of loss becomes the driving force. In his article "Nature et signification du Mythe d'Orphée dans le *De Consolatione Philosophiae* de Boèce",<sup>5</sup> Roessli (1999) observes: «Le voyage d'Orphée dans l'Hadès est guidé par le sentiment mal inspiré de la perte. Au terme d'une série de déceptions sensorielles et spirituelles, il finit par se retrouver seul au seuil de la nuit (III m. 12, 49: *noctis prope terminos*)» (8). It is also important to understand the fatal look's polysemic Latin and perhaps biblical background.<sup>6</sup> In his version of the Orpheus myth, Virgil evokes the Thracian singer's backward glance using the verb 'respicere' (*Georgics* IV, 491). Seneca, Horace and others followed his example (cf. Roessli 20). Depending on the context, the verb, from *re-* ('back; again') + *spicere* ('to observe, to look at'), can have several meanings: to look behind, to look back at or upon, to look to, to look around and having regard for, to consider and to respect.

## The Medium: Development and Perception

It is hardly possible to underestimate the importance of the medium used to convey these sensorial deceptions, or the sublime experience of human encounters with the supernatural, in this case of Orpheus with the insubstantial shadow of his deceased wife. Concepts of media archaeology remind us of this fact, and, focusing on crucial moments in the history of technology, they also document the uncertain paths of human inspiration which are frequently connected to the conception and production of technical artefacts. However, communications media should be considered not only technological devices, but also compensatory machines, sites onto which various types of irrational desires are projected. Based on forerunners, such as Foucault (1969) and Kittler (1986), Parikka (2012) offers insights in how media archaeology connects arts and technology with cultural theory:

The basic question of media archaeology could be seen simply, and in a manner indicated by Foucault, to be: what are the conditions of existence of this thing, of that statement, of these discourses and the multiple media(ted) practices with which we live? Such questions are political, aesthetic, economic, technological, scientific and more – and we should refuse attempts to leave out any of the aspects (Parikka 18).

Media archaeology focuses on a media-technologically informed understanding of the networks in which memory becomes partly an issue of technical media. This research concerning modes of hearing, seeing and sensing is complementary to the assumption of memory as a merely human capacity for remembering, retrieval or trauma, revealing an epistemological rupture (cf. Zielinski, 2008; Elsaesser, 2016).

Carving and painting the invisible, namely the soul, on slate, rock and canvas or projecting it onto a screen has always been a human ambition; its technical realization began with the dawn of mankind. Making death<sup>7</sup> and the soul visible meant gaining control over it. The eye was considered the mirror of the soul; the immaterial shadow its substitute. In *Spectres de Marx* (1993), Derrida points out that the «phantasma», which the Phaedo or the Timaeus do not separate from the «eidola», are «souls of the dead»:

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Blanco Rodriguez (2016, 103-122).

<sup>4</sup> Bernabé (2006, 33).

<sup>5</sup> *De Consolatione Philosophiae* was written by Boethius in the 6th century AD as a dialogue between himself and the allegorical figure of Lady Philosophy.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Genesis 19: Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt after disobeying God's command not to look back at Sodom as she and her family were fleeing the city's destruction. The Hebrew verb used for Lot's wife "looking" back is (*tā e*). According to Hamilton (1995, 49), her looking back at Sodom differs in word usage from Abraham "looking" (*šāqap*) toward Sodom in Genesis 18, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lessing (1769) and Herder (1786).

when they are not hanging around funeral monuments and sepulchers (Phaedo), they are haunting the souls of certain living persons, day and night (Timaeus). Strict and recurrent, this coupling does not let itself be undone. It leads one to think that the survival and the return of the living dead belong to the essence of the idol. To its inessential essence, of course. To what gives body to the idea, but a body with a lower ontological content, a body that is less real than the idea itself. The idol appears or lets itself be determined only against the background of death (184).

An idol is not the solution for Orpheus, haunted by Eurydice's soul, neither is the development of the media that pursue nature to her hiding-places the subject of Derrida's "hauntology".<sup>8</sup>

Andriopoulos (2013, 14) aims at exploring the intersection of the ghostly with various media and discursive fields between 1750 and 1930. As for «phantasmagoria», the medium's deceptive power became an important discursive figure in epistemological discussions about the unreliability of sensory perception and the limits of philosophical knowledge.

Regarding various re-mediations of the myth the focus is on the imagery used to depict the invisible, namely, the fleeting glimpse of what Eurydice represents: a bodiless spirit. This idea seems not to have been much translated into early imagery, in which corporality is very present, but gradually it gains more relevance in the pictorial representations on canvas during the nineteenth century.

The processes of transcodification of mythical elements from oral to literary expression, but also to painting, music, photography and film result in an assemblage effect on the elements of the receiving art.

According to Pierre Brunel (1992, 73), nothing is less fixed than myth, implying the notion of the flexibility of myth, its emergence, irradiation and the number of its variants. This flexibility is also characteristic for art and the processes of transmediation. José Manuel Losada (2013, 11) claims that myth is skilfully adapted to a new medium, "a medium, one might say, unforeseen, since its natural birth was literary". Moreover, "the flexibility of myth is such that it can be adapted to another art form in the way that seems most appropriate". In her essay on the thanatic landscape as the manifestation of Hermes-Mercurius archetype within the symbolic universe of the painter Gustave Moreau, specifically on his *Orphée sur la tombe d'Eurydice* (1891), Flores-Fernández (2013, 289) offers valuable insights in how the Orphic myth influenced our collective imagery, affirming that the long history of its (pictorial) interpretations form part of the cultural European heritage.

### The fatal look in painting

Since Orpheus' fruitless attempt to recover Eurydice from Hades had been depicted by Giulio Romano (1499-1546) the interest in the death of Eurydice was once again revived in 17th century by Rubens and other painters:



Figure 1. Federico Cervelli, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (ca. 1650-1700)



Figure 2. Giovanni Antonio Burrini, *Orpheus und Eurydike*, GG 5762, Kunsthist. Museum (ca.1695-1705)

While depictions of Eurydice's body in the Parthenon (5th century BC), on an amphora (Canosa, ca. 330 BC) and even in paintings by Rubens (1636/38), F. Cervelli (ca. 1650-1700) and G. A. Burrini (ca.1695-1705) do not show any difference to that of Orpheus, this perception changes significantly in the pictures of the following painters who tried to capture the «fleeting glimpse»: C. G. Kratzenstein-Stub (1806), Carl Goos (1826) and Eduard Kasparides (1896).

<sup>8</sup> Derrida (1994, 10) attempts a definition of ghost, a spectre "as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum". The aspects of repetition and last time make him suggest the term 'hauntology': 'This logic of haunting would not be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being [...] It would harbor within itself, hut like circumscribed places or particular effects, eschatology and teleology themselves. It would comprehend them, but incomprehensibly'.





Figure 3. Christian-Gottlieb Kratzenstein-Stub  
Orpheus and Eurydice - Carlsberg Glyptotek



Figure 4. Carl Goos, Orpheus and Eurydice - KMS276 -  
Statens Museum for Kunst

In the context of several male painters' views one should not forget the approach of Catherine Adelaide Sparkes (1842-1891) in her impressive pictorial rendering of Orpheus and Eurydice:

In Sparkes' interpretation of the orphic scene, the 'fleeting glimpse' has turned into a gaze. Eurydice's fragile shrouded figure is hovering, not touching the ground of the cave that leads to the Underworld. After catching a glimpse of daylight, her ghostly appearance is about to be brought back by several shrouded phantoms whose features, in contrast to Eurydice's, are neither distinct, nor recognizable (Bär 2022, 99).

Other nineteenth century paintings, such as Gustave Moreau's *Orphée sur la tombe d'Eurydice* (1891) which allegorizes the body of Eurydice in the form of a dry tree<sup>9</sup>, do not focus on the scene of the fatal looking back.

However, capturing Orpheus' fleeting glimpse at Eurydice's invisible spirit became a more prominent trope in art when advancing technology and new media permitted it to be caught in different ways.

### From optical tricks and 'spirit photography' to moving pictures

Even in the pre-cinematographic era, there were devices that allowed the projection of 'spirits' and 'ghosts'. Around 125 BC, Heron of Alexandria allegedly managed to make projections on temple altars using a 'ghost mirror' (cf. *Peri automatopoietikes* and *De rerum natura* by Titus Lucretius Carus, 98 - 55 BC). Later, Roger Bacon and Leonardo da Vinci mentioned these optical phenomena in their works; Athanasius Kircher's *Ars Magna Lucis et Umbrae* (1646) established the principles of *Laterna Magica*<sup>10</sup>, which allowed him to frighten spectators with projections of moving images ('*Magica Catroptica*').

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the projection of spirits had turned into popular events and possibly influenced the perception of painters and the imagination of writers. Creative and successful illusionists, such as the occultist Johann Georg Schrepfer (or Schröpfer) in Leipzig (in the 1770s), captured and terrified their audiences with apparitions and ghosts projected onto screens, multi-layered curtains or smoke. Shadow plays (*ombres françaises*, combining puppetry and lighting) were presented to the general public in 1784 by François-Dominique Séraphin, after their success at the royal court. In his medical dissertations Friedrich Schiller had already linked the human soul in the present life to both the spiritual and bodily world; however, in his *Ghost Seer* [*Der Geisterseher: Aus den Papieren des Grafen von O.*, 1787-1789] he describes credulous observers who mistook the ghostly projections of a hidden magic lantern for genuine spirit apparitions. One of the most prominent entertainers who used projections to make a living was Étienne-Gaspard Robert (1763-1837; stage name 'Robertson'), a Belgian aeronaut, physicist, stage magician and influential developer of phantasmagoria.<sup>11</sup> Robertson's "phantasmagories" were highly impressive and popular; his «fantascope», a huge mobile projection box, was capable of producing simultaneously dissolving views and travelling forwards and backwards behind the canvas.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Flores-Fernández (2021), (20), 287-311.

<sup>10</sup> According to Abbé Furetière's *Dictionnaire Universel* (1727) the 'Lanterne Magique' "... est une petite machine d'Optique, qui fait voir dans l'obscurité sur une mureille blanche plusieurs spectres & monstres si affreux, que celui qui n'en sçait pas le secret, croit que cela se fait par magie. Elle est composée d'un miroir parabolique qui reflechit la lumière d'une bougie, dont la lumière sort par le petit trou ..." (Furetière 1727, III).

<sup>11</sup> Technological progress leads to new linguistic and semantic concepts and words. The expression "Phantasmagorie", meaning "crowd of phantoms", from Greek phantasma "image, phantom, apparition" was redefined by Louis Sébastien Mercier: "Jeu d'optique qui fait voir tous les combats multipliés et fins de l'ombre et de la lumière. Et qui révèle en même temps d'anciennes fourberies de prêtres. Ces fantômes créés à volonté, et mouvans, ces fausses apparences amusent le vulgaire, et font rêver le philosophe" (Mercier 1801, I, 259).

Robertson's innovative retro-projections brought back the dead on smoke and thin, blowing curtains producing an effect of moving images. His repertoire included: «l'enfer de Milton», «la femme invisible», among other apparitions.



Figure 5: Illustration of the *Magasin pittoresque* (1849, 53).

As a reaction to the emergence of the new medium photography, painting moved away from merely mimetic styles while photos became more experimental. From the 1860s onwards, the 'spirit photography' that Joris-Karl Huysmans mentions in his novel *Là-bas* (1891) was practised. Around 1871, William H. Mumler had produced an image of Mary Todd Lincoln and the spirit of Abraham Lincoln. Other photographers had used the same technology before and after to capture an alleged "fleeting glimpse" of deceased persons and thus imply their presence.



Figure 6. Unidentified maker. Tintype. [Woman with a hand on her face with a spirit image of a man in the background], ca. 1865. George Eastman Museum

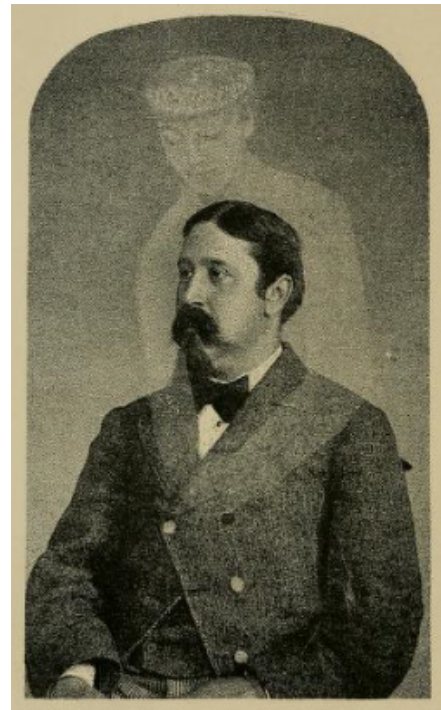


Figure 7: Alleged spirit photograph of the medium Charles Foster (Emma Hardinge Britten, 1884)



What began as a fraud was soon demystified, but it nevertheless demonstrated the artistic potential of these techniques of multiple-exposed and superimposed images for producing spectral forms.

Several methods were described to summon forth the pictorial apparitions. The obvious one of judiciously double-exposing the plate, the second time in the presence of the assembled victims, was often employed. So also was that of utilizing the actinic rays from a background screen painted with fluorescent quinine. This image was first rendered invisible by exposure to sunlight and later, with the unsuspecting subject discreetly posed before it, recorded on a photographic plate (Scharf 1965, 35-36).

A similar technology was also used in the first moving pictures of Georges Méliès (*La Caverne Maudite*, 1898) and G. A. Smith (*The Mesmerist*, *The Ghost* and *The Corsican Brothers*, 1898). Already in 1896 Maxim Gorki, while watching a film, had the experience of entering the “Kingdom of the Shadows”:

Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows. If you only knew how strange it is to be there. It is a world without sound, without colour. Everything there – the earth, the trees, the people, the water and the air – is dipped in monotonous grey. ... It is no life but its shadow. ... And all this in a strange silence where no rumble of wheels is heard, no sound of footsteps or of speech. Not a single note of the intricate symphony that always accompanies the movement of people (cit. in Leyda 1972, 407-409).

Indeed, compared to theatre performances, the new medium was often considered a soulless shadow play. In *The Antichrist* (*Der Antichrist*, 1934) Joseph Roth still uses this metaphor of the shadow for cinematographic production in combination with Hades and the concept of the *Doppelgänger*. And yet, pioneers, such as Georges Méliès, G. A. Smith and cameramen Guido Seeber and Fritz Arno Wagner, had made it possible to show doubles, ghosts and souls in moving pictures.

### Eurydice and Orpheus according to Fritz Lang

One of the most prominent examples is certainly *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*, 1921; aka *Les Trois Lumières*). Produced by Erich Pommer for the Decla-Bioscop AG, this film was directed by Fritz Lang. Shortly after his mother's death he had written the screenplay together with his wife, Thea von Harbou. Cameraman Wagner, who was also responsible for the camerawork in Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), would later join forces with Lang in three other productions: *Spies* (*Spione*, 1928), *M* (1931) and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1932). *Destiny* premiered on 6 October of 1921 in Berlin. Although its plot may be loosely based on the Indian story of Savitri and Satyavan which is found in *Vana Parva* (*The Book of the Forest*) of the *Mahabharata* and on the director's own childhood experience,<sup>12</sup> the orphic theme of recovering the lover from the realm of Death is always present, although with inverted roles: it's the girl who tries to negotiate the life of her deceased lover with a personified, male figuration of death. Lang's film presents a vision of souls entering the Underworld passing through a high, divisive wall. These almost transparent souls are created via superimposition as the French publicity poster shows:

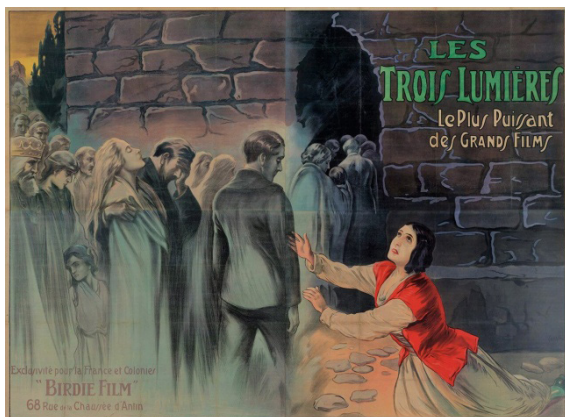


Figure 8: French release Poster of *Les Trois Lumières* (1922)



Figure 9: Still of *Destiny* (final sequence)

In the final sequence Lang uses double exposure to show the soul leaving the dead body of the beloved who could not be saved by the faithful girl.

However, *Destiny* allegorically illustrates the struggle between Eros and Thanatos, which is also verbally expressed by an inter-title: “love” can be “strong as death”. In an attempt to prove Lang's indebtedness to expressionist-romantic philosophy, film-critic Paul M. Jensen detects a “certain mysticism” and “psychological profoundness”:

<sup>12</sup> “He recalled envisioning the approach of “the dark stranger” in a wide-brimmed hat, illumined by the moonlight streaming in through a half-open window. “I slept and dreamed—or was I awake?” He glimpsed “the tear-stained face of my adored mother,” as she slipped from view. He raised himself up weakly, to be led away by Death. Helping hands grabbed him, pushed him down, saved him. The horror of the dream-experience combined with “a kind of mystical ecstasy which gave me, boy though I still was, the complete understanding of the ecstasy which made martyrs and saints embrace Death”. Lang recovered, “but the love of Death, compounded of horror and affection,” he said, “stayed with me and became a part of my films” (McGilligan 2013, 70-71).

Generally, *Der müde Tod* minimises the techniques of editing in favour of photography and set decoration, although the latter are emphasised and abstracted only when called for by the plot. [...] Though the special effects are elementary, they are pleasantly performed and well-integrated into the plot (Jensen 1969, 27).

Indeed, already in June of 1922, after the film's premier in France, the *Cinémagazine* had praised its remarkable, nearly perfect technique which produced scenes with a "seizing effect".<sup>13</sup>

### Rodin's, Rilke's and Cocteau's reception of the myth

The productive reception of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in modernism and certainly in expressionist literature and art is evident.<sup>14</sup> Already before the turn of the century, Auguste Rodin had created a sculpture in marble (modelled probably before 1887, carved 1893) that shows the couple like sleepwalkers on their way from the Underworld.



Figure 10. Auguste Rodin, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, Metropolitan Museum of Art

The myth's transnational impact is documented in Apollinaire's identification with the mythical Orphic figure and its attraction and influence on painters, such as Giorgio de Chirico, Raoul Dufy, Robert Delaunay and Paul Klee. In 1912 and 1913 Apollinaire used the term «Orphism» to designate the revolutionary poetry and painting that he considered to be a later form of Cubism. His approach aimed at supplanting the practice of expressive lyricism and mimeticism by the works of Orphic artists with new structures and sublime meaning.

In Portugal this idea of Orphism marked a paradigmatic magazine (*Orpheu*, 1915) and a whole generation of Modernists («Geração d'Orpheu»). However, Roessli (2016) reminds us of its presence already in the Portuguese Poetry of the Renaissance.

In Germany the transmediation of the orphic myth and the "fleeting glimpse" continued in Ivan Goll's *New Orpheus* (*Der neue Orpheus. Eine Dithyrambe*), published in 1918, and Oskar Kokoschka's play *Orpheus und Eurydike*, written in 1918 which only premiered in 1921. Like Kokoschka's play, Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (*Sonette an Orpheus*), written in 1922, were inspired by a real sense of loss, namely the death of Wera Ouckama Knoop (1900–1919), one of his daughter's playmates. Literary sources for the sonnets are primarily Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and to a lesser extent Virgil's *Georgics*. In 1923, the poet informed the young girl's mother that her ghost was commanding and impelling him to write. In a "savage creative storm" that lasted three weeks in February of 1922, he had completed the *Sonnets to Orpheus* and put the final touches to the *Duineser Elegies* (*Duineser Elegien*) emphasizing their complementary character.<sup>15</sup> Although he claimed that the entire cycle was inspired by Wera, her presence in the Sonnets as an individual is not very obvious. Eurydice is only mentioned once and some verses in Sonnet 23b (Rilke 1955, I, 766) remind us of the connection between time, (not) looking back and ephemeral existence:

Call me to those of your hours,  
that resist you ceaselessly:  
pleadingly near, like the face of dogs,  
but always turned away,

when you finally think you've grasped it.  
That which is so withdrawn is most yours.

<sup>13</sup> "La technique de l'œuvre, tout à fait remarquable, touche presque à la perfection. Certaines scènes sont d'un effet saisissant, telle celle où l'on voit la jeune fille monter l'escalier lumineux trouant le grand mur noir" (*Cinémagazine*, no. 25, 23 de Juin, 1922, p. 438).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Göhler (2012) and Bernstock (1991).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Rilke's letters to Countess Margot Sizzo Noris-Crouy (12 April 1923), to Gertrud Ouckama Knoop (20 April 1923) and to Witold Hulewicz (13 November 1925) in Rilke (1937). The following translations are all mine with the valuable help of Howard Gaskill.

The contemplative gaze in search of lost time, of an irrecoverable past, is characteristic for Rilke's Orphic figure (Rilke I, 752): "glimpses of life, forever lost". What remained of the fleeting glimpse is a general observation in Sonnet 27b (Rilke I, 769): "Ah, the spectre of the ephemeral / wafts through the naively susceptible / as if it were a puff of smoke". Constitution, reconstitution and even doubling of the image are essential in Rilke's symbolism, expressed, for example in Sonnet 9a (Rilke I, 736): "reflection in the pond"; "in the dual region". In the second part of the *Sonnets* the poet explores the other side of the mirror, revealing its Narcissistic essence (Rilke I, 752):

Mirrors: no one ever knowingly described  
what your nature is.  
You, like interstices of time filled with  
nothing but holes of sieves.

You, squanderers still of the empty hall -  
wide as the woods, when twilight falls ....  
And the chandelier pierces your impassability  
like a sixteen-point antler.

Sometimes you're full of paintings.  
Some seem to have gone straight *into* you -  
others, your shyness dismissed.

However, the loveliest will linger, till  
on the other side the clear calm Narcissus  
has penetrated her withheld cheeks.

Rilke's associations of mirroring might have inspired Jean Cocteau's various cinema adaptations of the myth that perpetuated Ovid's and Virgil's literary heritage in the twentieth century. In fact, Cocteau appreciated Rilke's fifty-five sonnets to Orpheus<sup>16</sup> and happily received a sign of reciprocal recognition by the German poet. In a letter to Charles Dédeyan, dated 3 Feb, 1963, Cocteau remembers that the Rilke knew of his play *Orphée* which Max Reinhardt had put on stage in Berlin in 1925. He quotes from Rilke's telegram which he had received in 1926: "Tell Jean Cocteau that I only love him who returns from the myth, haloed, as from the seashore".<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Rilke had started to translate Cocteau's play shortly before his death in December of the same year.

Cocteau's trilogy *Le Sang d'un Poète* (1930), *Orphée* (1950) and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1960) reenacts the myth for the screen. Cocteau preferred mirrors and shadows instead of double exposure and superimposition for his portrayal of the soul. In *Le Sang d'un Poète* the superimposed drowned mouth in the hand of the poet is only one of several technical aspects to depict the supernatural. There are projections of shadows as in expressionist films, repetition and rewinding of sequences, slow-motion and the negative shot of the black angel. Contrary to Cocteau's intentions statues that come alive and masks suggest a symbolic meaning.<sup>18</sup> Especially the mirror gained prominence in various scenes, reminding us of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). As the poet throws himself into the glass, «the mirror has been substituted by a tank of water, the setting is upside-down, the chair nailed on the left. This is all shot from above. The actor plunges. A quick cut back to the room as it was ends the illusion» (Cocteau 1968, 21).

In *Le Sang d'un Poète* the inside of the mirror leads to the Hotel des Folies-Dramatiques where the poet / voyeur keeps peeping through keyholes of the doors of his supposed unconscious. This Faustian trip, inspired by scenarios of paintings, is ironically commented on by Cocteau's voice before the mirror expels the protagonist: "Mirrors should reflect a bit more before sending back images" (Cocteau 1968, 36).

In *Orphée*, optical illusions also play a crucial role and are even explicitly referred to in dialogues.<sup>19</sup> Death in the shape of a Princess enters through the mirror and through the liquid mirror, reminding of the river Styx, she leads the souls to a dreamlike zone – a descent into the abyss of the unknown self. The premonition of Gluck's music from the radio seems to announce a self-fulfilling prophesy. For the sequence of Cégèste coming back to life and for several other scenes involving Orpheus and Eurydice the film is rewound and

<sup>16</sup> Cocteau spoke and read German after being raised by a German nurse. The first French translation of 15 sonnets by Maurice Betz only appeared in 1927: *Petite stèle pour Rainer Maria Rilke* [Texte imprimé]: suivi de *Quinze sonnets à Orphée avec un portrait de Rilke par Baladine* [Klossowska] et un autographe du poète. Strasbourg: J. Heissler.

<sup>17</sup> «Dites à Jean Cocteau que je l'aime lui seul qui revient du mythe, hâlé comme du bord de la mer» (Une lettre inédite de Jean Cocteau on JSTOR).

<sup>18</sup> "The Blood of a Poet draws nothing from either dreams or symbols. As far as the former are concerned, it initiates their mechanism, and by letting the mind relax, as in sleep, it lets memories entwine, move and express themselves freely. As for the latter, it rejects them, and substitutes acts, or allegories of these acts, that the spectator can make symbols of it if he wishes" (Preface, 1946, in Cocteau 1968, 4).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Heurtebise's comments about death and the mirror: "Mirrors are the doors through which Death comes and goes. Besides, look at yourself in the mirror throughout your life and you will see Death at work like bees in a glass hive" (Cocteau 1972, 150); "... all that is false" (151); "It's not a question of understanding; it's a question of believing" (153); "Beware of mirrors" (168); "Your wife's photo isn't your wife" (171).



inserted. This technique of rewinding introduces the new theme of going back in time in order to make things undone. In his work on Cocteau's films of orphic identity Arthur B. Evans observes:

One can not help but feel that Cocteau's many technical "gimmicks," particularly noticeable in such films as *Orphée*, *La Belle et la Bête*, and *Le Testament d'Orphée*, are a direct outgrowth of this need for new methods of portrayal, to communicate the incommunicable. Such gimmicks as Cocteau's use of a vat of mercury to film Death's passage through a mirror in *Orphée*, for example, stand as hallmarks of modern cinematographic innovation and imagination (Evans 1977, 50).

Indeed, Cocteau only applied few spectral superimpositions, for example, when the female personification of Death (Princess) appears and Heurtebise disappears through the mirror. Once these techniques had become rather banal, he imagined an unusual and expensive device for the gate to the underworld – a vat of about eight hundred weight of mercury for the filming of sequences featuring a mirror into which Orpheus dips his hands. As Cocteau recalls,

[...] the mercury itself was dirty. It had to be polished with chamois leather, like a silver dish. No sooner had one got that soft heavy surface clean than the impurities rose again and floated on top like oil stains. I thought I might be able to do without Jean Marais by putting the gloves on somebody else of his size. But when I tried I saw that hands were like a person, and we would have to have the actor himself. So he was sent for, and we spent the entire day, from seven in the morning till six in the evening, on that one shot.<sup>20</sup>

Eurydice's image, or empty shape returns from the other side of the mirror, only to be annihilated by Orphée's fatal 20<sup>th</sup> century look through the rear-view mirror of a car: "*His eyes fall on the rear-view mirror. He sees Eurydice. She vanishes*" (Cocteau 1972, 175).

*Le Testament d'Orphée* is Cocteau's orphic legacy which begins with a reaffirmation in his own voice of his intended cinematographic realism, revealing his 'soul':

It is the film-maker's privilege to be able to allow a large number of people to dream the same dream together, and to show us, moreover, the optical illusions of unreality with the rigor of realism. In short, it is an admirable vehicle for poetry. My film is nothing other than a striptease show, consisting of removing my body bit by bit and revealing my soul quite naked. For there is a considerable public interested in the world of shadows, starved for the more-real-than-reality, which one day will become the sign of our times (Cocteau 1968, 83).

Instead of mirrors that lead to the other world fade in and fade out shots are used to make persons appear and disappear in any spot. An ironical comment of self-mockery explains the abandoning of the symbol-charged device: "Mirrors reflect too much. They reverse images pretentiously and think they are profound" (Cocteau 1968, 124). Indeed, Cocteau even arranges a brief encounter with his double without using the "doppelgänger-shot",<sup>21</sup> or any other superimposed image indicating a supernatural occurrence.

After *Le Sang d'un Poète* cinematography had been criticized as fragile compared to a sacred and lasting medium, like a painting or a book. Already in the early 1930s Cocteau had disagreed that it was "pretentious to express the power of one's soul by such ephemeral and delicate means" (Cocteau 1968, 61). In *Le Testament d'Orphée* he completes the redemption of the bodiless medium: "A film is a petrifying source of thought. A film revives dead acts – A film allows one to give semblance of reality to unreality" (Cocteau 1968, 104). Cocteau's modernistic approach implied the crossing of genres and the mixing of media; film turned into an extension of image-making rather than narrative: first celebrated as a fin-de-siècle poet, his verses recited by Sarah Bernhardt in packed theatres on the Champs-Élysées, he introduced the avant-garde into French cinema, prefiguring the 1950s *Nouvelle Vague*. His open-ended, self-doubting art meandered between words, pictures, performances. Despite Cocteau's renewed claims of realism without symbols and messages in *Orphée* (Cocteau 1968, 188), film became his medium *par excellence* to revisit himself in the Orphic theme and reveal his 'soul'.

At the same time, in 1965, Edgar Morin established a complex correlation between technology (photography and film), shadow, reflection in the mirror, and imagination ("*un analogon, un eidolon à qui ne manquerait que le mouvement*"): "... la photographie couvre tout le champ anthropologique qui part du souvenir pour aboutir au fantôme parce qu'elle réalise la conjonction des qualités à la fois parentes et différentes de l'image mentale, du reflet, de l'ombre" (Morin 1965, 31).

This anthropological dimension had already been investigated at the end of the 19th century in studies carried out by James Frazer which proved an intimate relationship between the image itself and the soul in so-called 'primitive cultures'. In the chapter 'The Perils of the Soul' of his work *The Golden Bough*, Frazer points out some negative aspects: "... if the portrait is the soul, or at least a vital part of the person portrayed, whoever possesses the portrait will be able to exercise a fatal influence over the original of it" (Frazer 1993, 193).

However, technology might also be able to influence the human work of mourning by perpetuating, or materializing the fleeting glimpse.

<sup>20</sup> Evans (1977, 107), *apud* Geduld, Harry (1967). *Filmmakers on Filmmaking*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, p. 151.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Bär (2006, 93).

## Conclusion

Revisiting one of the central imagery elements of the myth in some of its remediations, we should bear in mind that Orpheus' fleeting glimpse can have several meanings: to look behind, to look back at or upon, to look to, to look around and having regard for, to consider and to respect.

But what about Eurydice's look? Doesn't her insubstantial shadow anticipate coming back to life and exchanges with Orpheus that unspeakable look? It too became visible in the various media we discussed. Shall we interpret her as an allegorical figure in the context of fading memory?<sup>22</sup> In that case we should also remember the old quarrel (palaia diaphora) between philosophia (the love of wisdom) and poetikê (creative art), which Socrates comments in Plato's *Republic*. According to Statkiewicz (2003, 253):

The love of wisdom is, for Socrates, the longing for the reality of Ideas, and creative art is the love of shadows and simulacra. He epitomizes the latter by the reflections in the mirror (katoptron), which thus stand for what is unwise and foolish in the world. A mirror suggests – better than any other device, better than painting, which is also analyzed in the tenth book of the *Republic* – the superficiality and the mechanical reproduction of images. Unlike philosophy (Platonic dialectic), art is unable to break the surface of “specular” appearances (phainomena) and to lead to the true reality of the things in themselves, the “invisible Ideas”.

Following Socrates, the artists deny the existence of the real things behind the phenomena – deny the depth of the mirror. In the 20th century, Theodor W. Adorno describes the convergence process of music and painting based on the concept of ‘spatialisation of time’ (“Verräumlichung der Zeit” (Adorno 1978, 16, 629). Through the transformation of the medium time in a material (paint on canvas, celluloid, etc.) its spatialisation takes place. This also applies to the fleeting glimpse. For Adorno the musical principle (also associated with Orpheus) is the art of time, the painterly principle is spatial art. And yet, he points out that one is inherent in the other, claiming that even what hangs on the wall as absolutely spatial can only be perceived in temporal continuity.<sup>23</sup> While in the picture everything is simultaneous, temporal continuity happens successively. Although Adorno does not mention the moving picture in this context, the pictorial presence of Eurydice annihilates to a certain extent her loss in temporal continuity, restoring her and with her the exchange of fleeting glimpses in painting, spirit photography, in moving pictures, holograms and even avatars.

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<sup>22</sup> Memory, specifically Mnemosyne, the goddess and river of memory, plays a crucial role in Orphic initiation, as it is believed to preserve the soul's knowledge of past lives, preventing it from being erased by Lethe, the river of oblivion. In Orphism, the waters of Mnemosyne's spring were sought to remember past lives and prevent reincarnation.

<sup>23</sup> “... daß auch, was als absolut Räumliches an der Wand hängt, nur in zeitlicher Kontinuität wahrgenommen werden kann” (Adorno 1978, 16, 633).

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