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The Visual Re-Creation of Orpheus

Jean Cocteau's film *Orpheus* (1949) is an adaptation of the Greek mythological figure of the same name. The alteration of the story into the visual medium of cinema is an interesting one. The use of cinematography in the film is creative, and it incorporates the essence of the myth with Cocteau's own allegorical imagery. The symbolism of characters and events accompanied by the use of visual effects create a message that is uniquely significant.

The special effects are the primary contributor to the distinctive features of Cocteau's revision of the literary version. The devices that are incorporated in *Orpheus*, such as running the film backwards (the inversion of time) and using the photographic negative in some environments (inversion of space), function in numerous ways. On the surface, they add a mystique to the diegetic world that connotes the supernatural and uncanny nature of the narrative. In a more subtle way, however, they function psychologically to expose the viewer to the functions and subordinate machinations of the visual medium. In a way that is unique to the cinema, the special effects disrupt the pleasant continuity of the viewer. This disjunction is inherent in the ethereal nature of their circumstances and concomitant with its mythic origin.

The psychological fraction of cinema is the specialty of Jean-Louis Baudry in *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus*. He champions the idea that in order for the ideological infrastructure of a film to be successful, it must abide by certain filmic rules and not remind the viewer that they are simply witness to a representation (rather than a presentation, or a reality). The moral of the Orphic myth,

“Don’t look back,” seems to be a historical analog of Baudry’s thesis. The warning itself applies to both Orpheus and the viewer of the film (“Don’t look at Eurydice”, and “Don’t look at the apparatus”). In this respect, the message of the Orphic myth is similarly the message of Cocteau, from a cinematic standpoint. Thus, it is the particular circumstances of the cinematic medium that multiply the efficacy of *Orpheus*.

For proof of Cocteau’s intention in creating this meaning, his previous film with actor Jean Marais serves as the best example. *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) begins with a note to the viewer to remain focused on the “Once Upon a Time” mentality while watching the movie. This preface is another example of the intentional shift of focus away from the awareness of representation and towards a passive viewing experience. Later in the film, a mirror speaks to the protagonist: “I am your mirror, Belle. Reflect in your heart for me and I will reflect for you.” The suggestion of introspection underlies the aforementioned theme. It is the filmmaker’s goal that the audience filters the visual experience of cinema through themselves instead of analyzing its visual techniques. This serves as another example proving Cocteau’s foresight in the matter of the cinematographic apparatus. Furthermore, it provides insight into the reoccurring theme of mirrors.

As in the original myth, Orpheus must pass through several deaths to meet his destiny. This seems to be the partial inspiration for the use of mirrors in the film. Orpheus is telescoping through his own reality as an image reflected in mirrors. In the diegetic world, when the mirror becomes the gateway for traveling, a relation is drawn between projection and reflection. Just as the mirror reflects reality to a certain degree; the camera creates the same illusion. The way that Orpheus’s ordeal is problematized is the situation

of being reflected so many times that he becomes unaware of what reality is. He becomes concerned with figuring out which reality is truth, he “looks back”, and in doing so he confuses reality even more.

At the conclusion, Orpheus is in the same position that he is in the beginning of the film. In essence, by the very virtue that he has seen all that has taken place, he is in an exceedingly different position. Most of the difference exists in Cocteau’s creation, the poet is doomed to be reflected (In hell, in the mirror, on the screen, ad infinitum). In the aforementioned essay, Baudry quotes Bazin:

“Behind what film gives us to see, it is not the existence of atoms that we are led to seek, but rather the existence of an “outer world” of phenomena, of a soul or of other spiritual principles. It is in this revelation, above all, of a spiritual presence, that I propose that we seek Poetry.”

This quote seems infinitely applicable to Cocteau’s *Orpheus*. The closure that Bazin provides to the conundrum of representationalism, special effects, and visual imagery is to look beyond instead of looking closer. The revision of the Orpheus myth in a visual medium is syncopated with both the “outer world” and poetry through the visual realm.

Baudry, Jean-Louis. "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." *Film Theory and Criticism*. 5th Edition. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford University Press. 1975. pp. 345-355.