

Orpheus as Pie-Maker: A Classical Conundrum in American Pop Culture

The brightly macabre TV series *Pushing Daisies* provides a fascinating case study of the influence of classicism on popular contemporary media. Centered on the Pie-maker Ned—a character who can bring the dead back to life, but under specific restrictions—the show’s narrative premise has overt thematic as well as more latent structural similarities to the story of Orpheus. However, one wonders whether the points of contact between the tale of Orpheus and the tale of the Pie-maker are deliberate or whether they are happy coincidences. Interviews, commentaries and statements by the show’s creator and head writer Bryan Fuller yield little to no evidence in support of an intentional Orphic subtext; however, when the hive of intertextuality that is *Pushing Daisies* is examined in detail, honeycombs of potentially intentional allusions emerge.

Using the semiotic systems of C. S. Peirce and Roman Jakobson, I will show how intertextuality works on three primary levels: the trope or analogue, the deliberate homage, and the intentional subtext. Each level builds on the next. To determine whether or not *Pushing Daisies* purposely uses the Orpheus myth as a subtext, one would need to prove that all three levels of intertextuality are explicitly at play. When considered in isolation, the Orphic elements are so masterfully masked and so seamlessly interwoven into the main action of each installment in the series that any unequivocal imputation of Orphism in *Pushing Daisies* is problematic: at least two levels of intertextuality—the trope and the intentional subtext—are clearly at play: the superficial commonality displayed in the limited power of resurrection is underpinned by subtle references to the Orpheus myth in other ancient and contemporary texts, such as Cocteau’s *Orphée*, Lumet’s *The Fugitive Kind* (the film adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ *Orpheus Descending*), and Vergil’s *Georgics*. However, the third level of intertextuality—the deliberate homage—remains difficult to locate. Nevertheless, the aggregate effect of so many provocative allusions provides a strong case for an Orphic subtext and a forum for exploring classicism in contemporary pop culture.

Works Cited

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