Orpheus: Cinematic (and Operatic) Evocations

A number of cinematic productions have featured ancient pagan concepts of death and the afterlife, e.g. *The Mummy* (1932); *Gladiator* (2000). Within this sub-corpus, those involving Orpheus have a particular signature that began developing in the Renaissance. Poliziano's *Fabula di Orfeo* (c. 1480) synthesized the Vergilian and Ovidian accounts into a pastoral drama. (Segal, 1989) Two early seventeenth century operas, the Rinuccini/Peri *Euridice* (1600) and the Striggio/Monteverdi *L'Orfeo* (1607), accommodated Baroque court patronage by refitting the tragic story with a *deus ex machina*-engendered happy ending. In a political denouement, the Parisian Buti/Rossi *Orfeo* (1647) pleased the French court by comparing Orpheus' lyre to the royal *fleur-de-lis*. Considered together with the popular Halévy/Offenbach operetta, *Orphée aux enfers* (1858), which features an unhappily married Orpheus and Eurydice, the cumulative effect of such high-profile dramatized adaptations of the Orpheus myth was to transform its original tragic outcome and expand its dramaturgical potential with updated artistic, philosophical, and political themes.

The early decades of the twentieth century contributed a dense cluster of equally innovative Orpheus operatic productions leading to Jean Cocteau's one-act *tragédie, Orphée* (1926), revised in 1950 as the first film featuring Orpheus. In his 1973 essay *Du Cinématographe*, Cocteau revealed his artistic reason for selecting Orpheus as his protagonist: (Cocteau, 1992)

> Nobody can believe in a famous poet whose name has been invented by a writer. I had to find a mythical bard, the bard of bards, the Bard of Thrace. And his story is so enchanting that it would be crazy to look for another. It provides the background on which I embroider. … It is by the impossibility

> of doing the same thing twice and by the new blood that is infused into the old frame that the poet is judged.

Cocteau's *Orphée* would immediately establish a high standard for filmmakers inserting or alluding to Orpheus. Although Cocteau, too, gave the story a happy ending, the Orpheus myth was not a subject to be trivialized. It symbolized premature death and the tantalizing hope that heroically unshakable devotion might restore one's beloved to life.

This paper will briefly survey *Orphée*'s dramatic predecessors and the most relevant features of Cocteau's film, e.g. modernizing the setting of the story, the personification of Death and the bureaucratic netherworld tribunal, and the identification of a mirror as the portal to the underworld, and then differentiate the cluster of films that emerged in the post-*Beetlejuice* (1988) era, e.g. *Field of Dreams* (1989), *Always* (1989), *Flatliners* (1990), *Ghost* (1990), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), and even *Gladiator* (2000), all of which employed a variety of filmic and computer techniques and narrative strategies to bring the dead and the living together in the same two-dimensional frame, many of which allude to some aspect of classical antiquity, but none of which (excluding Carlos Diegues' *Orfeu* [1999]) belong to the Orphic tradition. (Hartigan, 1994)

The greatest attention and time will be devoted to examining more recent films like Christopher Hampton's *Imagining Argentina* (2003), which synthesizes Orphic elements, the operatic tradition, and the tragedy of the 1970s/1980s Argentinian *desaparecidos*, and the Academy Award-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), which engendered a disagreement between director Danny Boyle and screenwriter Simon Beaufoy over whether the insertion of the Orpheus myth would represent Western cultural imperialism in an otherwise Indian film. (Kaminsky, 2008)In contrast, *The City of Your Final Destination* (2009), *Rabbit Hole* (2010), *Remember Me* (2010), and *The Book of Life* (2014) each contained poignant allusions to Orpheus

and Eurydice that focused less on the political applications of the myth than on its more traditional romantic, literary, and eschatological aspects.

James Ivory's *The City of Your Final Destination* includes a complex allusion to the Calzabigi/Gluck *Orfeo ed Eurudice* and Vergil's *Georgics* 4, a unique cinematic reworking of the same passage employed by Poliziano. In *Rabbit Hole* a speculative form of scientific eschatology is called upon to dissipate the pain and after-effects of a contemporary domestic tragedy while indirectly resolving Orpheus' unsuccessful *katabasis*. In *Remember Me* the tragic male protagonist reads part of the Orpheus story from d'Aulaire's illustrated *Greek Myths* (101) to his young sister in celebration of Orpheus' musical triumph. And in the computer-animated *The Book of Life*, Jorge Gutierrez both integrates the Orpheus myth into Mexican culture and conflates the Greek myths of Theseus and Orpheus by having his protagonist negotiate a labyrinth and then win a netherworld bullfight by playing guitar and singing a song of love and forgiveness.

Bibliography

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