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A.S.Hamrah

Jill Mulleady: *Fight-or-Flight*

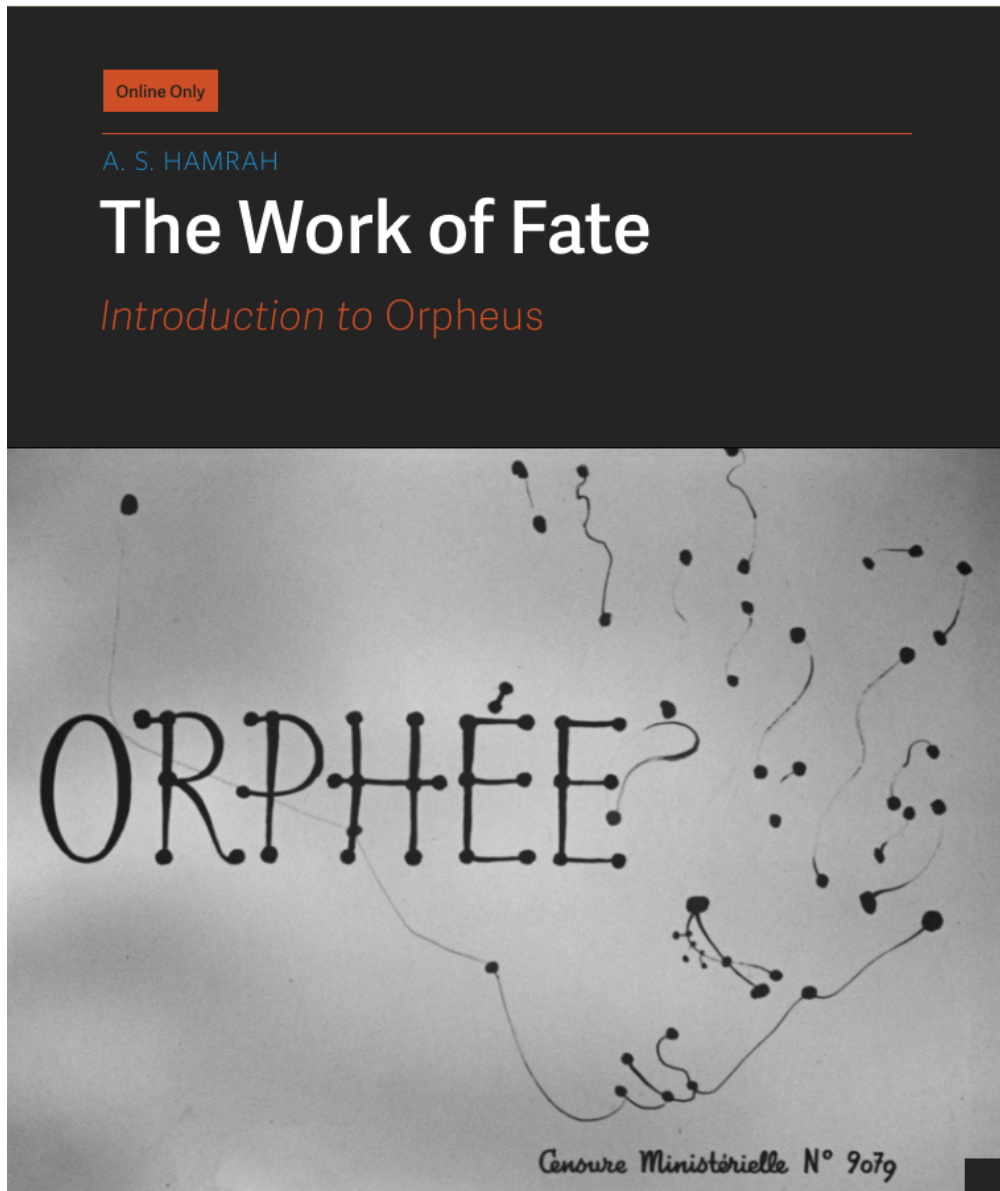
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Online Only

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## The Work of Fate

*Introduction to Orpheus*



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The following is *n+1* film critic A. S. Hamrah's introduction to a screening of Jean Cocteau's film *Orpheus* (1950), which he presented last month at the Quad Cinema in New York. The screening was sponsored by the Swiss Institute / Contemporary Art New York in honor of Jill Mulleady's exhibition of paintings and objects, "Fight-or-Flight." Mulleady asked that *Orpheus* be shown in conjunction with her gallery show.

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**ORPHEUS, JEAN COCTEAU'S 1950 FILM**, "an immortal thriller" as it was described in the movie's advertising when it was released, is a film about death and artistic creation, perhaps the best film ever made on those twin subjects. So I'd like to dedicate today's screening to two great artists of the cinema who died this week.

The first is Peter Wollen, who died yesterday. He was a British film critic, film theorist, screenwriter, and director who worked with Laura Mulvey, Tilda Swinton, and Michelangelo Antonioni. He co-wrote Antonioni's 1975 film, *The Passenger*, which starred Jack Nicholson.

Wollen's book *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* was one of the first books in English to discover and explain how semiotics, the study of how signs create meaning in culture, could be applied to film theory and film criticism. It is a groundbreaking book that had an enormous influence on the work of many writers and on my thinking as I was learning about film.

*Orpheus* is a film that deals in the interpretation of signs and meaning. It is one of the few films that deals with that in a direct and palpable way. Others from the same period as *Orpheus* are detective films and film noirs. This decoding is not just subtext nor is it merely somehow inscribed in the film for us to discover using our critical faculties. It is the film's subject matter. That's why *Orpheus* was also called, when it came out, "a detective story from the beyond."

The poet Orpheus, played by Jean Marais, one of Cocteau's lovers, here in a contemporary-to-1950 setting, becomes obsessed with transcribing the random words and numbers he hears on his car radio. He doesn't know it at first, but these are emanations from beyond reality. In other words, they are poetry. Similarly, Peter Wollen understood the cinema as a language that had to be decoded and reconstructed. It had to be made to make sense in a new way for new audiences, for a new generation, as Cocteau has done with this myth, the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Soon after *Orpheus* came out, the great French writer and theorist Roland Barthes described and collected his work as *Mythologies*, because his series of essays took apart contemporary reality to expose the ideologies that control our lives and that we are often not consciously aware of. Wollen followed Barthes in applying this to the cinema, creating a circle with Cocteau, in this case, tonight, at least.

The other person I'd like to dedicate tonight's screening to is Anna Karina, who died last Saturday. Karina will be forever known as the woman who made the early films of Jean-Luc Godard what they are: pinnacles of cinema. As long as people watch movies, the collaboration of Anna Karina and Godard will stand as an example of everything the cinema can be, of all its possibilities. Like Cocteau and Barthes and Wollen, Godard deconstructed the movies, shaping them into new forms. Anna Karina was the first post-movie actress, the first one whose appearance in the films she was in was also self-consciously a comment on filming and cinema itself, as the well-known scene in Godard's *Vivre sa Vie*, from 1962—in which she watches the silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc*—attests most starkly and most obviously.

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According to Richard Roud, Godard cited no other filmmaker in his written film criticism as much as he cited Jean Cocteau. Cocteau's influence is clear and apparent in more than one Godard film, but it is especially pronounced in *Alphaville*, with Anna Karina, from 1965, a black-and-white science-fiction film shot in contemporary Paris, in which Cocteau's voyage into the land of the dead returns to the world of detectives and film noir. It could be said that *Alphaville* is more advanced than *Orpheus*. A computer, for instance, replaces the radio of Cocteau's film. But *Alphaville* is also somehow behind *Orpheus*, too. Godard's love of genre films and American cinema necessitated a return to the earlier forms Cocteau had done away with, because Cocteau was already his own form.

Jill Mulleady's show at the Swiss Institute is indebted to Cocteau in subtle ways, with its large painting of a male figure strapped down in Cocteau-esque landscape with ruins in the background, like the ruins you will see in *Orpheus*. Mulleady's use of an ATM in an otherwise empty bank vault can be seen as referring to Cocteau's zone of the dead, and her large wood-block prints of a rat looming over a cityscape recall Cocteau's debt to German expressionist cinema, one of his only influences still traceable in *Orpheus*.

*Orpheus*, like the German films of the silent era, relies on what in Hollywood are called practical effects for all its special effects. Unlike today's digital cinema, the cinema of Jean Cocteau is a low-tech art form that proves how everything imagined can be done in front of the camera, without computer-generated imagery. All cinematic problems have a solution in reality and in imagination. Everything can be created in front of the camera. This is Lesson Number One in filmmaking, too often forgotten.

For Cocteau, such solutions are death-defying, like poetry is. The simple act of recording them on film does that. It saves those solutions for posterity and for other artists and viewers. Sometimes their flatness, which Cocteau learned as a painter, illustrator, and scenic designer, things at one time he had been more known for than writing and directing films, calls attention to itself in the space of his film frames, such as the wide-open eyes painted on the closed eyelids of the actors you will see in *Orpheus*. These effects, again, go beyond animation, they obviate animation. They are achieved on set with the simplest of means. Without trying to, because they didn't exist yet, they show how high-tech digital effects are redundant.

There is much talk of death in *Orpheus*. Cocteau famously said that the cinema is the only art form that records death at work. In every shot a director and cinematographer make of an actor, that actor has aged, no matter how short the duration of the shot, or where it is placed in a film. A shot may appear in a film outside the chronology in which it was made, but it still records moments of aging, "death at work," even when a shot made later is placed next to a shot made earlier.

A new *Up* film came out recently, *63 Up*, one of a series of British documentaries that follow a group of ordinary people by catching *up* with them every seven years to see what time has done to them, how their lives have progressed, or not, to see how they have aged as they approach their inevitable ends. I confess that these celebrated documentaries bore me to death. They are an example of Cocteau's axiom made banal. I would rather watch *Orpheus*. The *Up* films make death *into* work, instead of showing it *at* work, almost invisibly.

Most of the people in *Orpheus* are now dead. Except for Juliette Gréco, the great chanteuse of 1950s bohemian Paris, here seen as Eurydice's somewhat threatening feminist best friend, who like Maria Casares's "Death of Orpheus" character also usually dresses all in black. She is now 92 years old.

Fate has spared her and allowed her to live to a very old age. Cocteau said something about that, and about the possibilities inherent in cinema. "Realism in unreality is a constant pitfall," he said. "People always tell me that this is possible, that that is impossible. But do we understand anything about the workings of fate?"

*Orpheus* is a film of mirrors and windows. For Cocteau the answer to the question of whether the cinema is a window through which we observe others or a mirror in which we observe ourselves is that it is both and neither. It is more than a combination of both. It is a portal, and so in *Orpheus* mirrors show us ourselves and then take us elsewhere. One of the radio transmissions in the film is cut off because there is dialogue over it. It says, in full, "Mirrors would do well to reflect a little more before sending us back images of ourselves." That is because, as one character says in *Orpheus*, "if you look in the mirror every day, you will see death working away like bees in a glass hive." The cinema, like certain illicit drugs, in certain rare cases, allows us to see that, to understand that, to feel it and observe it by turns intensely and dispassionately.

Everything in *Orpheus* is true like that and everything in it is about today. The film remains contemporary. The first line we hear in the film is narration in Cocteau's own voice: "The story of Orpheus is well-known," he says. It's so well-known, in fact, that I don't want to spoil it by saying anything more about it. Thank you for coming tonight to see it.