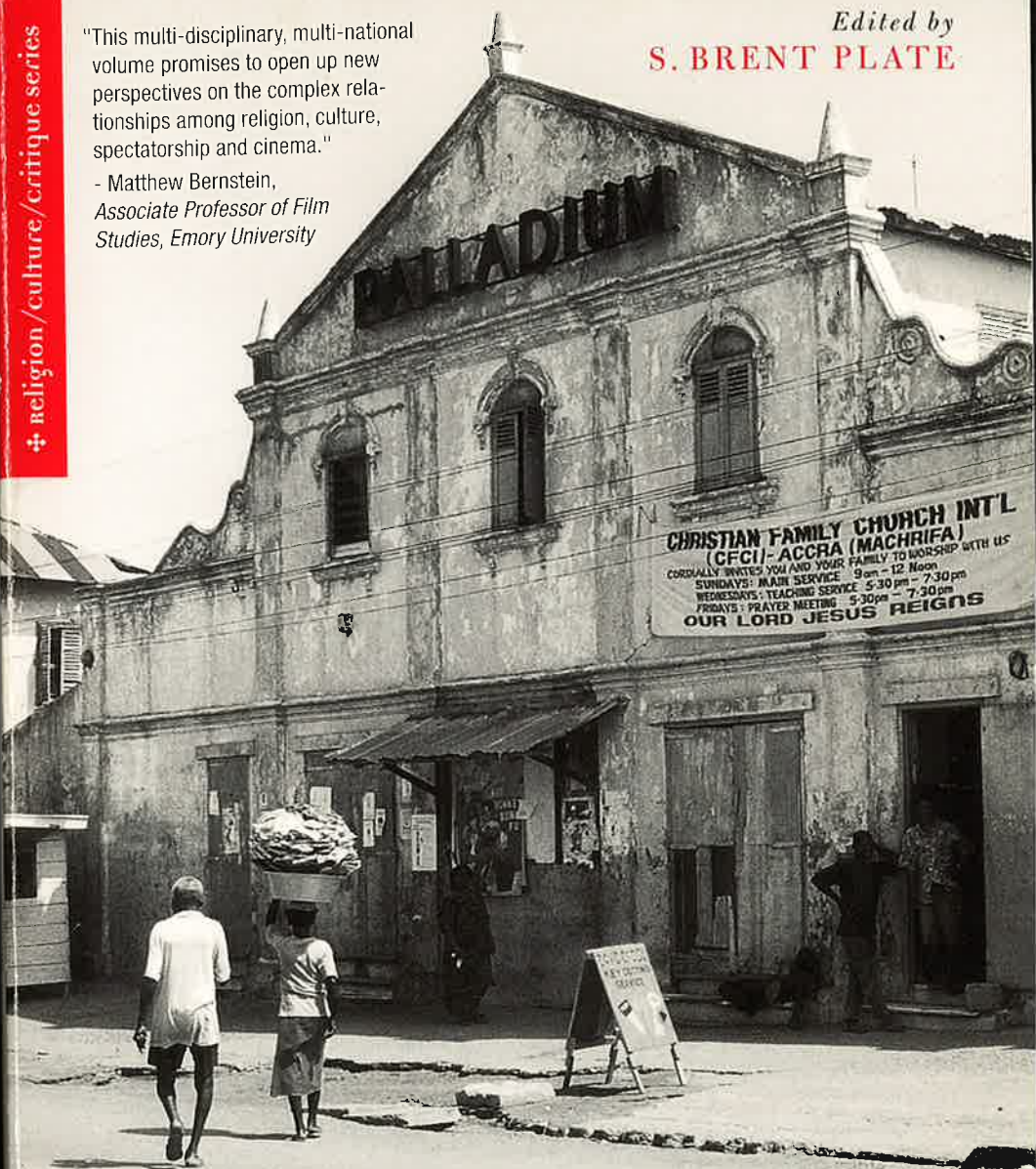


"This multi-disciplinary, multi-national volume promises to open up new perspectives on the complex relationships among religion, culture, spectatorship and cinema."

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Associate Professor of Film Studies, Emory University

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Representing Religion in World Cinema

FILMMAKING, MYTHMAKING, CULTURE MAKING



Chapter Three

Orpheus on Screen: Open and Closed Forms

Linda C. Ehrlich

In his *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes wrote: "Myth doesn't deny things; on the contrary its function is to talk about them. It purifies them, gives them a natural and eternal justification."¹ The cinema—itself a spinner of myths—offers us adaptations of the myth of Orpheus through such distinctive cinematic interpretations as Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), Marcel Camus's *Orfeu negro* (*Black Orpheus*, 1958), Carlos Diegues's *Orfeu* (2000), and Sidney Lumet's *The Fugitive Kind* (1960), based on the Tennessee Williams play *Orpheus Descending*. Through these adaptations, Orpheus—that harmonizer of opposites and trickster of death—travels through the centuries and across borders. Since the actual recitation of a myth can be considered important, even necessary, to its vitality, we can imagine the cinematic adaptations of the story of Orpheus as a modern means of this recitation.

In our examination of cinematic adaptations of the Orpheus myth, we can extend our gaze to other films that display a *katabasis* narrative pattern (from the Greek word *katabasis* meaning "a going down, a descent").² In this category, we can find such works as Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953) from Japan, Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) from the United States, and Carlos Saura's *El amor brujo* (*Love the Magician*, 1986) from Spain, all structured around a pattern of the protagonist's descent into an unknown world, his or her contact with death (often embodied in human form), and subsequent return to the phenomenological world. The sacral quality of the experience is revealed as much through the protagonists' return as through their encounters with otherworldly elements. In films like *Ugetsu*, *Orfeu Negro*, and *El amor brujo*, contradictions between the mythopoeic time and the current time are reconciled in the evocative panning shots of the landscapes at the films' closings.

The endings of the Orpheus films mentioned above could be considered examples of the “open-discourse film,” one of the four possible strategies for narrative film endings outlined by Richard Neupert in his book *The End: Narrative Closure and the Cinema*.³ The open-discourse film is described as that rare film in which the story is resolved but the narrative discourse avoids strict closure. The open-discourse category corresponds with the following view of mythology set forth by Barthes: “In general, myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for signification.”⁴ In exploring the possible religious elements of films like *Ugetsu*, *Orfeu negro*, *Vertigo*, and *El amor brujo*, I will concentrate on images of dance and fire, and on the open nature of the films’ endings. Perhaps the original myth’s ambiguous ending allowed directors to feel free in their decisions to bring their films to this kind of “unfinished” ending.

The Myth of Orpheus

Before looking at specific adaptations, it would be good to reacquaint ourselves with the outline of the story of Orpheus. In antiquity, the character of Orpheus fit into the ancient Greek view of the hero as an intermediary between man and the gods, thus never completely immortal. In the myth, Orpheus is the son of a Muse (probably Calliope) and either the Thracian river god Oiagros or—in some accounts—the god Apollo. When Orpheus’s wife, the dryad Eurydice, is killed by a snakebite, the great singer takes his musical instrument, a lyre, and enters the underworld in search of her. His beautiful music calms Cerebos, the fierce three-headed dog who guards the underworld, and helps persuade Pluto to allow Eurydice to return. Unable to resist the temptation to look back at her before reaching the open air (and thus disobeying the divine injunction of Pluto’s wife Persephone), Orpheus loses Eurydice a second time. (In this, Orpheus is responding to the doubt that Pluto might have tricked him, since—unknown to Orpheus—Eurydice had been instructed not to speak until she reached the rim of Hades.)

At this point, there are several major differences in the ending of the myth. Some claim that Orpheus becomes the victim of Thracian women known as the Maenads who tear him apart in a Bacchic frenzy, and that it was Dionysos who sent those women to punish Orpheus for worshipping Apollo. Many claim that his head and lyre were thrown into the river Hebros; his head was subsequently buried in the shrine of Dionysos on the island of Lesbos (where it served as a speaker of oracles for a while), and his lyre was placed in the temple of Apollo. Others say that Zeus tossed

Orpheus's lyre in the heavens (where Orpheus and Eurydice were reunited) as a constellation, while yet others claim that the Muses gathered his limbs together and put them to rest in a tomb at the foot of Mount Olympus.

In antiquity, Orpheus became the center of an ascetic cult that grew in conjunction with the cult of Dionysus. There is no extant classical play of the myth, but the Roman version—the one that stresses an unhappy ending—was seen in the writings of Virgil (*The Georgics*) and Ovid (*Metamorphosis*). In some medieval allegorical works, Orpheus was identified with Christ, while, in the Renaissance (with its retrospective gaze at the classical period), Orpheus was seen as the archetypal poet whose singing ushered in cosmic harmony. During this period, he also became the patron saint of opera, notably Claudio Monteverdi's *La favola di Orpheo* (1607) and Christoph Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). Comedy entered into the Orpheus myth with light operas like Jacques Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858) with its notorious can-can finale.

While the Romantics stressed Orpheus's esoteric, magical aspect, in the twentieth century the mythic figure increasingly came to represent the flawed artist. Psychosexual themes came to the forefront, either in the sense of woman as obstacle to the artist, or in the need of the artist to fuse masculine and feminine aspects in order to achieve creativity. In this sense, in the modern period, Orpheus has been viewed as a powerful symbol of metamorphosis. Judith Bernstock stresses how artists like Delaunay, Zadkine, and Klee saw in Orpheus a humanitarian spirit who had to flee from harsher aspects of this world to find harmony in Nature:

The anguish of Orpheus is that of modern man divided against himself, but unified by his art, his song. Orpheus embodies the opposition and union of Apollonian and Dionysian, intellect and instinct, passive and aggressive, the craving for truth and its substitution by illusion.⁵

In her extensive study of literary references to Orpheus, Elizabeth Sewall divides the Orpheus story into three parts: (1) explications of his musical skill, (2) the journey into the underworld, and (3) the aftermath of this journey. She notes that “the myth of Orpheus is a statement, question, and method, at one and the same time.”⁶

Cinematic Adaptations

As symbols that can be read and contemplated, but never definitively deciphered, myth points toward a primordial language, and films based on myths are attempts at translation. As we turn now to look at specific

adaptations of the draws on the Orpheus myth, it is important to keep in mind that each one is the result of the historical and cultural milieu in which the film was made. As film scholar Dudley Andrew reminds: "Adaptation is a peculiar form of discourse but not an unthinkable one. Let us use it not to fight battles over the essence of the media or the inviolability of individual art works. Let us use it as we use all cultural practices: to understand the world from which it comes and the one toward which it points."⁷

Turning to the specific filmic adaptations, we find how Cocteau's Orpheus draws on French memories of the horrors of World War II as he turns Orpheus into a handsome poet whose overarching ambition hardens him to the damage he is inflicting on others. In *Orfeu negro*, the spirit of Carnival and exorcistic ceremonies enters as Orpheus becomes a flirtatious tram conductor and a singer of ballads that inspire children. (Diegues's *Orfeu*, from the same general cultural background, is an updated rap singer and skillful peacemaker.) In *Ugetsu*, Mizoguchi turns to the rhythms and profundities of the *nō* theatre as he transforms the Orpheus figure into an unschooled rural potter whose creations deepen in quality over time, after considerable hardships and many missteps. In *Vertigo*, Jimmy Stewart's Orpheus-like character obsessively tries to recreate the woman he loved (and believed lost to death), extending Hollywood's meditations on human mortality. In *El amor brujo*, the Orpheus figure, expressed primarily through his role as a flamenco dancer, becomes an important force in the revival of Spanish traditional artistic forms.

We are accustomed to think of the journey as a movement forward, if not always upward, past obstacles toward the completion of a goal. In contrast, the journey downward seems to imply defeat, regression. With these cinematic versions, however, the descent into the world of the dead instigates the forward movement. It is impossible to think of one without the other. In these cinematic adaptations of the Orpheus myth, dance and song offer a space for transcendence, and movement through fire offers a space for purification.

Cocteau's Orpheus

In 1926, Cocteau (poet, novelist, playwright) wrote a play, *Orphée*, followed by his Orphic film trilogy (*Le sang d'un poete* [Blood of a Poet, 1930], *Orphée* [1950], and *Le testament d'Orphée* [Testament of Orpheus, 1959]).⁸ Cocteau's Orpheus (Jean Marais) is a self-obsessed poet, aware of the possibility of failure ("My life has passed its peak") who turns away from his family and the familiar in an obsessive search for increased fame. When this Orpheus hears another's poems filtering through his car radio, he remains outside of the home, his ear glued to those evocative words of an

unknown author. Later, it will be exactly this car's rearview mirror that reveals to him the image of the (resurrected) Eurydice (Marie Déa), thus sending her back to the underworld.

For this Orpheus, the underworld becomes the world beneath Paris, a world of concrete surfaces and harsh shadows. In his *Cineaste* tribute to the director, Morty Schiff writes: "Early on in the film, the poet hero, an expression of perpetual terror on his face, passes through a mirror to reach the forebodingly secret recesses of his creative imagination."⁹ Death (Maria Casarès), personified as a beautiful woman, also enters and exits the world through a seemingly liquid mirror that allows us to see the lack of set borders between reality and dream. As if to show the relative powerlessness of all the main figures, Cocteau frequently captures them through high-angle shots, as when Death enters Orpheus's bedroom to gaze on him while he sleeps. Death's assistant, Heurtebise, leads Orpheus through a "no-man's land" made up of memories and the ruins of beliefs, just as the Paris of this 1950 film contains traces of a Nazi invasion, with its bland judges and black-clad motorcyclists who roam the street.

Orpheus's eventual return to his family is described by Eurydice as "a recovery from a nightmare." In Cocteau's interpretation, forbidden love becomes not the love of Orpheus for his deceased wife but rather the forbidden love of Death and her messenger for the two humans. At the close of the (now mundane) human tale, Cocteau leaves Death and Heurtebise progressing through the shadows of the underworld to an uncertain fate. The song of the poet is renewed, freed from the automatic writings inspired by death.

Orfeu negro (1958)

Orfeu negro (*Black Orpheus*, 1958), directed by Marcel Camus, was adapted from Vinicius de Moraes's play *Orfeu Negro da Conceição: Tragedia Carioca* (1956), but it was not well received in Brazil.¹⁰ It is reported that the playwright was so unhappy with the film that he asked for his name to be taken off the screenplay. As Jared Banks concludes in his article in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, "*Orfeu Negro* is a film of great vivacity and technical genius, but it fails to adapt some of the darkest elements of the play and instead balances between the fabula from the play and what may be called a documentary of samba, *macumba*, and the slums of Rio de Janeiro."¹¹

Orfeu negro was one of the first films to draw the world's attention to the richness of the Brazilian film industry, although technically it is a coproduction that falls outside the more innovative indigenous film industry known as the Cinema Novo. *Orfeu negro* won the Golden Palm for Best

Film at the Cannes Film Festival (winning over two more experimental films, Truffaut's *Les 400 coups* [400 Blows] and Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*), the New York Critics Circle Award, and the Best Foreign Film at the 1960 Academy Awards. The haunting music, composed by Luis Bonfá and Antonio Carlos Jobim has established a worldwide reputation of its own, almost independent of the film.

Camus's film begins when Orpheus (performed by soccer player Breno Mello), a streetcar conductor, sees Euridice (played by former Katherine Dunham dancer Marpessa Dawn). Euridice has fled to Rio to escape a mysterious man she believes is trying to kill her. Euridice stays with her cousin in one of the *favela* in the Morro area of Rio and innocently attracts Orpheus's attention away from his more flamboyant fiancé, Mira (Lourdes de Oliveira). After the mysterious man succeeds in killing Euridice, Orpheus searches for her in this film's representations of hell, the thirteenth floor of the Missing Persons' Bureau and the morgue in Rio. He also attends a *candomblé* ceremony where he turns and sees his young lover's voice emerging from a gray-haired woman, calling out the young man's name.¹²

In her extensive, and firsthand, study of the samba, Barbara Browning notes that a quality of "emptiness" is essential for a successful *candomblé* ceremony, which is, in essence, "a request for the granting of meaningfulness . . . it is not meant to be read. It is not meant to suggest. We are the suggestion of divinity."¹³ According to Browning, this evocative sense of openness becomes more legible, and more indicative of the individuality of the divinity, when the *candomblé* rhythms are taken into the street in the Carnival.

Browning notes how this dance tradition is largely entrusted to women. While Euridice must ascend the hill at the beginning of the film to find her cousin and share her first moment of recognition with Orpheus, it is her descent into the exuberant tumult of the Carnival that both announces her union with Orpheus and leaves her vulnerable to the man in the skeleton costume (Adhemar de Silva), who, as one of the little boys tagging after Orpheus perceptively observes, is not a man in a costume at all but Death itself. Orpheus is convinced, however, that he can out-trick Death and that his love will make him the victor. Central to this film is what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "the carnival sense of the world"—life drawn out of its usual rut, "the trope of the world upside down."¹⁴ While praising the film as avoiding some of the Hollywood clichés about Brazil, film scholar Robert Stam notes that *Orfeu negro* fails to link carnival to Afro-Brazilian mythology: "Rather than create a synthesis or a counterpoint, it simply superimposes one set of cultural references over another."¹⁵

At the end of *Orfeu negro*, Orpheus holds the limp body of Euridice, which he has retrieved from the morgue. He ascends the hill, speaking softly to the inert form. "You are guiding me like a child," he whispers. Gone is

the concern for looking back, or not looking back. At the summit of the hill they encounter the hysterically jealous Mira and other screaming women—this film's version of the Maenads. When Mira hurls a rock at Orpheus, she sends him and Euridice pummeling down the hillside until the two unconscious bodies come to rest against an outgrowth in the rock. Having ascended together, they now descend the Morro, bodies intertwined. Camus adds a coda of several of the *favela* children dancing and playing the guitar to bring up the dawn, thus carrying on the Orphic tradition. This rather artificial coda becomes a nod toward the sense of "openness" in the myth itself.

Orfeu (2000)

Camus's version of this myth is not the only one to come out of a Brazilian setting. Carlos Diegues's more recent rendering of the Vinicius De Moraes play, entitled *Orfeu*, is set in the Rio of the end of the twentieth century, a world far more turbulent than the Rio of the 1950s of *Orfeu negro*.¹⁶ Diegues clearly embraces the ideals of the Brazilian Cinema Novo, which he defined as a movement with "no official theoreticians, no popes or idols, no masters or guiding lights. . . . Cinema Novo is only part of a larger process transforming Brazilian society and reaching, at long last, the cinema."¹⁷

Diegues's Orpheus (Toni Garrido) is a sexy yet vulnerable young composer. As the unofficial guardian saint of the *favela* community "O Morro de Carioca," he is frequently dressed in white (in contrast to the more sinister character Luchinho, who prefers black). This long-haired Orpheus is somewhat larger than life: He is the object of desire of Euridice (Patricia França); of Carmen, Euridice's middle-aged aunt; of Mira, his Playboy-cover self-proclaimed fiancé; of Luchinho, a former boyhood friend turned cold-blooded drug gang leader; and even, it seems, of his mother Conceição, who cautions him not to tie himself down to one woman.¹⁸ He moves in a space that is uniquely his own. Later, when he goes in search of Euridice's body, none of the gang's machine-gun bullets can penetrate his skin. He will die only when he himself wills it.

In the Diegues adaptation, children still wake Orpheus to "play in" the dawn. They still fly kites over the breathtaking Rio skyline. But Diegues's Orpheus composes his songs on a laptop computer and plays them on his electric guitar, while the local gang lord Luchinho watches a broadcast of the Carioca Samba School on a neighbor's television. According to the director, one reason he made *Orfeu* was to show how, in contemporary Brazil, "despair walks hand-in-hand with wealth, the archaic with the modern, violence with creativity, tragedy with *joie de vivre* . . . establishing an unending dialectic between heaven and hell."¹⁹

The belief in indigenous gods that characterizes Orpheus's otherwise pragmatic mother contrasts with his born-again Christian father who looks askance (but with some hidden delight) at the samba performances. Yet it is the father who takes up the drum beat, like a grieving tribal elder, to announce the death of his son. At the end of this film, the music continues as a lament, a call to attention. The two dead lovers lie side by side while the living encircle them. Even the police stand in tribute over the two young bodies. The street boy with green hair, who has named himself after Michael Jackson, turns and turns, screaming hysterically. Will this tragedy signal a change in the climate of gang violence that has strangled the poor community of the Morro? The equivalents of the Maenads—frighteningly sexy women in black fishnet stockings and heels—hurry away as Death takes up the main theme.

Unlike Camus's romanticized view of poverty, Diegues's Morro is a place where young boys sell cocaine on the streets and women without a future gaze out windows. Euridice, who is from the rural area of Acre, recognizes this immediately and resolves to leave even as she has just arrived. There is no costumed Death pursuing her here—only the same evils that drag so many others in that community down. This Euridice cannot dance the samba and Orpheus himself mostly carries out a kind of rollicking rap as the elaborately jewelled students of the samba school, Los Unidos de Carioca, perform intricate choreographies at the Sambadrome. Although Euridice does not actually participate in the Carnival, she is dressed by Orpheus's mother in a flowing gown of pale pink, like Lady Guinivere in a medieval ballad.

Mirror imagery plays a role in this adaptation, as it did in Cocteau's film. Deeply in love, Orpheus proclaims that "Orpheus and Euridice are the same." When he realizes he has lost her to Death, he sees her image superimposed over his own in the mirror. Overjoyed, he reaches to go through the mirror to her (surely a reference to Cocteau's film), but the glass shatters around him.

Diegues's Orpheus does descend into hell—the side of the overgrown slope where half-decomposing bodies and other abandoned objects are discarded—in his attempt to find Euridice. After he discovers her body where it has landed, draped over a tree, he himself descends into madness. But even the living morgue on the hill becomes transformed into a paradise as the camera pans from darkness to dawn, to close-ups of dew on green leaves and red birds of paradise (a transformation from the blood red of the earlier scene).

Unlike Cocteau's adaptation, there is no hope of reviving Euridice in this version. The most Orpheus can do is to ascend the familiar hill again with the body of Euridice in his arms, pleading with Mira or Carmen to help him out of his misery. Mira embraces him while simultaneously stabbing him,

and he falls with Euridice in his arms. The coda ending of the film offers a moment of breath, if not of redemption. A high-angle shot of the Carnival shows an imagined scene of a costumed Orfeu and Euridice dancing and embracing, with their faces illuminating the nighttime scene. This wishful scene reminds us of all that could have been, and—like the ritual stomping of the mourners gathered around the corpses in the previous scene—reinforces the “open discourse” aspect of this retelling of the myth.

Ugetsu (1953)

Based on ghost stories by eighteenth-century Japanese writer Ueda Akinari (1734–1809), and on a short story by French writer Guy de Maupassant, this tale of a sixteenth-century potter and his encounter with a beautiful ghost won the Silver Lion at the Venice Film Festival of 1953 and is often cited by critics as one of the ten greatest films ever made.²⁰ Set in the tumultuous period of internecine fighting in twelfth-century Japan, this is the tale of a potter, Genjūrō, who leaves his loyal wife Miyagi and their son in order to live in apparent luxury with a beautiful noble woman, Lady Wakasa, only to discover that she is actually a ghost. When he is finally freed of her spell and able to return to his village, a sadder but wiser man, he thinks he sees his wife Miyagi there, only to find out that she is a spirit as well. (Miyagi had been killed by vagrant soldiers during the war.) With his deceased wife’s spiritual help, Genjūrō rededicates himself to his work, his pottery, and to the care of their son.

The journey motif is undertaken by each of the four characters of *Ugetsu* to varying degrees. The circular journey motif is established first in Genjūrō and Tobei’s marketing forays into the city and back, and then repeated in the pattern of the wake of the boat in the Lake Biwa scene. In this sense, Genjūrō’s journey (which could also be called both Orphic and Dantean) takes a living man to a kingdom of death—a journey involving a painful passage through fire, and a final purification, with a woman (Beatrice/Miyagi) as a guide. Genjūrō’s journey, like that of Odysseus, with its pattern of embarkation, return, and renewal, is associated with the working through of a metaphysical problem concerning the nature of desire. The journey moves toward desire, to loss, to a partial restitution of what is lost—from the marketplace of the world back to a present enriched by memory.

Ugetsu takes the protagonist on a journey of purification downward, through violence and self-destruction, and then returns him home, a new kind of man. Genjūrō returns not only to his home and village but also to himself, in a new and more humble encounter (in Japanese, *deai*) with the true nature of his story. Like many heroes, he assumes a greater leadership

role in his community. Dudley Andrew has pointed out how Mizoguchi's later films, like *Ugetsu*, produce a sense of "full emptiness," an intermediary state "between the borders of identification [when the text gives the illusion of plentitude], and interpretation." Andrew states that, in viewing a Mizoguchi film, we are "captive neither of artwork (traditional illusionism) nor of our own constructions (modernism)."²¹

In Western tragic drama, a character's fall from grace is often brought on by his or her sense of hubris. The Japanese downward and upward pattern is not without its concern for hubris, but it is also tied into Buddhist teachings of rebirth. For example, in one type of *mugen nō* performance, the ghost's descent to the human world is often followed by release from painful attachments and then ascent to the Western Paradise of the Amida Buddha. As Japanologist Arthur Thornhill explains, the ascent aspect is connected with a view of transcendence and salvation found in the newer sects of Buddhism, such as the Pure Land sect.²² The physical structure of the *nō* theater itself incorporates the sense of a journey found in the structure of the *hashigakari* (an entranceway for the *shite* [protagonist]) who often reveals himself or herself to be a spirit from the dead returned to avenge some wrong or, in some other way, to work through entanglements or unfulfilled desires that took place while the *shite* was alive.²³ The reserved yet powerful vocal and movement *kata* (patterns) point to the central themes of the plays: Life as a dream and the desire to be liberated from the world of illusion. Komparu Kunio reminds that "the unfinished quality of *nō* signifies quite clearly that the shared experience born of the encounter between actor and audience is not limited to the duration of the performance."²⁴

At one point Lady Wakasa sings, and the song's message is that of *mujiō* (the evanescence of all things), pointing to the underlying philosophical framework and dignity that Mizoguchi, the director, and Yoda Yoshikata, the screenwriter, gave to all of the characters of this ghost story. As figures of the fantastic, the ghostly Lady Wakasa and the deceased Miyagi are like great directors who serve as representations of the imagination of the artist. Genjūrō's fate is sealed by the pivotal moment of Lady Wakasa's *nō* dance during his first night at her "palace" (which is actually a broken-down ghost house, transformed through supernatural means and skillful lighting). Wakasa's dance leads to the sudden ghostly chanting by her deceased father (whose voice is heard through his armor on display in the room), and then to her overt seduction of the now puppetlike potter.

Mizoguchi's exquisite unscrolling opening and closing panoramas, and his use of the diagonal (both in interior and exterior scenes), lead the eye outward to what might lie outside of the frame of the screen, connecting the inner with the outer world. In a similar fashion, in the ending of two other celebrated Mizoguchi films from the 1950s—*The Life of Oharu* (*Saikaku*

ichidai onna, 1952) and *Sansho the Bailiff* (*Sanshō dayū*, 1954)—the camera assumes a distinctive kind of movement that heightens the theme of return. In the ending of these three late Mizoguchi films (including *Ugetsu*), we can see how the restless camera movements that precede the ending sequences are slowed down—not gradually, but suddenly. The central figure who had been surrounded by a large cast of characters is suddenly left alone in the frame. This is a moment of moral elevation, yet it is also a moment of realized loss. As Kenneth Johnson wrote in terms of the point of view of this kind of wandering camera:

it is the wandering camera only that reveals the monstrator [i.e., the camera] moving in a time and space that has no logical place in the story. The more the monstration [i.e., the movement of the camera] is revealed, the further away we get from the “effaced” discourse of classical cinema, where point of view is meant to occur primarily through character.²⁵

Like the *emakimono* (horizontal scroll) nature of many sequences of Mizoguchi’s films, the viewer is made aware of the continuation of the story beyond the last frame. What we reach at the end of a Mizoguchi film from the later period is a point of stillness. Is it a moment of transcendence? Yes and no. Even more, it is a moment of return to what had previously been seen as inadequate. Desire for wealth is silenced; status is disregarded. All that is left in this kind of open ending is a begging bowl, pots baking inside a kiln, and an anonymous man collecting seaweed on a deserted beach.

Vertigo (1958)

Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* lends itself to the modern psychosexual interpretation of the Orpheus myth, yet it is so much more. [Fig. 3.1.] As the characters in this film spy on each other, an elaborate dance with deception and reality develops. In the first part of the film, the retired detective Scottie (Jimmy Stewart) is manipulated by his deceitful “friend” Gavin and his accomplice Judy (Kim Novak) in order to make Scottie an unwilling accomplice to the murder of Gavin’s wife Madeleine. In the second half of the film, Scottie himself becomes the manipulator of Judy as he tries to remodel her into the image of the Madeleine he remembers.

Following Madeleine’s death, Scottie’s life itself becomes a dance with death—for Judy (who had been disguised as Madeleine) in essence dies and becomes the false creation Scottie envisions.²⁶ An idealized love that requires one woman to transform herself into another leads to an ending in which a distraught Judy, startled by the sudden appearance of a nun in the bell tower, jumps to her death.



Figure 3.1 "Hitchcock's *Vertigo* lends itself to the modern psychosexual interpretation of the Orpheus myth, yet it is so much more. As the characters in this film spy on each other, an elaborate dance with deception and reality develops." (© 1958 Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions/ Paramount Pictures Corporation. Photo courtesy the Cleveland Public Library)

In the first part of the film, Madeleine (as impersonated by Judy) is surrounded with a seeming mystery as she leads Scottie to “little pockets of silence and solitude, another world.”²⁷ Yet, about two-thirds of the way through the film, Hitchcock reveals the nature of the murder of the original “Madeleine,” a startling move that Robin Wood describes as “one of cinema’s most daring alienation effects.”²⁸

There is an important moment in the film, close to the ending, that fuses past and present in the mind of the now totally obsessed Scottie and that illustrates his mental instability. Having convinced Judy to transform herself once again into Madeleine, the two lovers kiss and are filmed in a bold 360-degree tracking shot.²⁹ For a brief moment, the background is transformed, through the use of process footage, into the livery stable on the San Juan Bautista estate where, in the first part of the film, the couple had spent their last few moments together. The instability of their stance in the 360-degree shot reveals Scottie’s instability at this moment and foreshadows the film’s inexorable rush toward its tragic ending. At the close, after dragging Judy up the bell tower, Scottie is freed of his crippling vertigo but not of his memories. He stands on a ledge, facing outward toward—what? While the immediate story has ended, the discourse is so open that it is impossible to predict what the rest of Scottie’s existence will be. This is a bold step for a director working in a Hollywood milieu where films without a (relatively) neat sense of closure tend to be scorned. In comparing Scottie to Orpheus, Royal Brown refers to him as “a character forever ‘wandering’ between the Apollonian and the Dionysian,” and notes, “not content to love Judy (or even Judy/Madeleine on a sexual, human level), Scottie is compelled to ‘look’ at her, i.e. to discover her secret and lay it bare, and in so doing loses her forever.”³⁰

El amor brujo (1986)

El amor brujo, the third film in Saura’s dance trilogy, starring the formidable dancer Antonio Gades, is based on the two-act flamenco ballet of the same name by Manuel de Falla (composed in 1914–15). [Fig. 3.2.] In this story, two fathers arrange for their children (Candela and José) to marry when they have reached a more mature age—an arranged marriage that benefits the families without any regard for the childrens’ feelings.

In Saura’s film, the protagonist, Carmelo (Antonio Gades)—a kind of Orpheus figure—descends into hell, this time *with* his beloved, Candela (Cristina Hoyos), in order to restore life to her. The true lovers—Carmelo and Candela—can only be reunited through an exorcistic dance with Death, a dance that calls Candela’s deceased husband José (Juan Antonio Jiménez) back into being. The dance expresses Candela’s longings for

revenge against José, even if it will result (as we suspect) in the death of José's lover Lucia (Laura del Sol), though in the end we never quite know for certain if she dies. Spanish film scholar Marvin D'Lugo refers to this as a duality of "entrapment/liberation": entrapment within the confines of community tradition and liberation as the true lover frees his love from the emotional constraints that have bound her.³¹

At the end of *El amor brujo*, the two lovers are reunited, arm in arm, without threats from the dead. As they turn to face the dawn, the camera pans up and beyond the stage set of the gypsy encampment that we had grown to think of as a real locale, and not as the stage set in the old Samuel Bronston studio in Madrid (which we are shown at the beginning of the film). Harmony has been restored as the human figures grow smaller, as in a landscape painting where the human forms and setting merge. As Brent Plate wrote in an essay in *Literature and Theology*: "Transcendence does not come by an escape from the body, and in the visual arts it does not come through a disembodied vision, but it comes precisely *through* the material and the body."³² It is precisely through the human form, perfectly embodied in the dancers, that the narrative will continue.

D'Lugo notes how *El amor brujo* (along with Saura's earlier film *Blood Wedding* (*Boda de sangre*, 1980) helps to universalize the marginalized



Figure 3.2 "In this 'transcendental aestheticism' of the flamenco . . . we as audience members become involved as well, waiting to catch those special moments of authentic flamenco *cante* and dance." (© 1986 Orion Pictures)

gypsy culture both within and outside of Spain through a “sustained narrative form.”³³ The universalization enriched by the works of García Lorca and De Falla (inspirations for Saura’s “dance films”) moved away from the kind of *nacionalflamenguismo* imposed by Franco during his dictatorship as a way to support a flagging sense of Spanish identity.

In this “transcendental aestheticism” of the flamenco (to quote writer Luis Rosales), we as audience members become involved as well, waiting to catch those special moments of authentic flamenco *cante* and dance.

Purification through Fire

The *katabasis* pattern provides a mechanism for the purification of the protagonists in the Orpheus films—frequently it is a purification through smoke and fire. In *Ugetsu*, Genjūrō is warned by a wandering priest that the woman he had thought desirable is really nothing but a ghostly hag. Appalled by this realization, he slashes out at the phantom as she retreats through the equally empty rooms of her “mansion.” One sword thrust overturns a candle, and the wooden structure quickly catches flame. After Genjūrō awakens in a field surrounded by the charred ruins of imagined splendor, the officials who find him tell him that the only reason he will not be arrested for stealing the sword—the one valuable object remaining from his journey into hell—is the fact that the castle has burned down. Purified by his journey through flame and smoke, Genjūrō can now return home a renewed man, the embodiment of the hero who must return home “humbled rather than elevated, wary rather than brash, the saved rather than the savior.”³⁴

In *El Amor Brujo*, the protagonists who must confront Death strengthen themselves through a ritual dance around fire, which reunites them with the community through the help of the village sorceress Tía Rosa (although the dance does not completely free Candela of José’s spell). In contrast, in *The Fugitive Kind* (1960), Sidney Lumet’s version of the Orpheus myth based on Tennessee Williams’s play *Orpheus Descending*, fire appears not as purifying and uniting but as a means of annihilating Orpheus along with his song. The film and play, set in an unnamed Southern town, focuses on Lady (Anna Magnani), the Italian American wife of a cruel American shop owner, Jabe (an invalid).³⁵ Into her shop walks Val (Marlon Brando), a seductive drifter who claims that he wants to settle down. He is the guitar-playing Orpheus figure who speaks lyrically of a bird with no legs that can sleep on the wind.

As in *Orfeu negro*, the upper and lower dynamics of *The Fugitive Kind* are the reverse of those of the myth, with the lower realm representing

relative safety and the upper world, danger. Movement along the staircase in Lady's house is a central visual motif. At the top of the stairs is Jabe, her husband and torment. In the shop on the lower level, Lady and Val find a brief haven for their love, a place where they can flourish like the once-barren fig tree Lady recalls from her youth. All of the outsiders in the film—Lady, Val, the promiscuous “bad girl” Carol (Joanne Woodward), the Sheriff's wife Vee (Maureen Stapleton), and the conjure man—adapt strategies for survival in the face of the overwhelming complacency and bigotry of the town.

When Lady recreates her father's wine cellar behind the shop, the outdoor space around it becomes a fantasy world of hanging lights and leaves. This is the space where Lady and Val retreat to embrace, after hearing that she is pregnant with his child. Here, for a moment, this claustrophobic film “breathes.” But it soon becomes a hellish site as Jeb, from his sickroom above, throws a flaming torch into the wine cellar on its opening day and then shoots his wife as she starts to ascend the stairs. The racist local police drive Val back into the burning room with their police hoses, ensuring that there would be no restoration of harmony in this retelling of the Orpheus myth, and no continuation of the narrative.³⁶

Contemporary Variations

The films described above do not exhaust the possibilities of films that recall the myth of Orpheus.³⁷ For example, there is the rather awful Vincent Ward film *What Dreams May Come* (which *Rolling Stone* described as “a skin-crawling nightmare of New Age clichés”³⁸). The Orpheus figure in the story, Chris Nielsen (Robin Williams), resolves to remain in hell to try to save his wife Annie (Annabella Sciorra). Based on a 1978 novel of the same name by Richard Matheson, this film incorporates South Asian mythological ideas of *lila* (the play of the divine realm) onto a “visual palette composed entirely of Western romantic artwork.”³⁹ Particularly striking in this otherwise unremarkable film is the role given to the imagination in creating one's own afterlife, and the way Orpheus *must* look back in order to save his wife.

Moving even deeper into the mainstream Hollywood milieu, we could look to the sci-fi thriller *Matrix* (directed by the Wachowski Brothers, 1999), with its pointedly named character Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne)—alternatively a cult leader, terrorist, or freedom fighter—who discovers a savior in the character Neo, a software expert (played by Keanu Reeves). What specifically ties into (but inverts) the Orpheus myth in this film is the fact that the sane world of Zion resides *beneath*, while Hell is the everyday

world above. The katabasis pattern is reversed; instead we find the trope of an ordinary life disguised as something sinister.

These kinds of films can be seen as (in the words of Mircea Eliade) “swarming with half-forgotten myths, decaying hierophanies, and secularized symbols.”⁴⁰ With our contemporary analytic distance from myth, we can view them as magic, as literary entertainment, as a stage all cultures must pass through, as superstition. Or we can view myth as cosmogonies describing the way the world came into being, or as “hierophanies”—spontaneous eruptions of the sacred into everyday life. Very few of us in modern society could speak as confidently as French professor of comparative poetics Yves Bonnefoy, who wrote:

this primordial sacred history, formed by the body of significant myths, is fundamental for it explains and justifies at the same time the existence of the world, of man, and of society. This is why myth is considered both a *true story* . . . and the exemplary model and justification for the activities of man.⁴¹

Perhaps it is our discomfort with the idea that myth could have any objective validity that leads us to prefer the ambiguous ending. “It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth. . . . We constantly drift between the object and its demystification,” writes Barthes, “powerless to render its wholeness.”⁴²

Final Landscapes

Only in the landscape are the ambiguities of the ending brought to some sense of harmony. In *Ugetsu*, the camera itself makes the final ascent in a sweeping pan that rises up from the mother’s grave to encompass the entire village. As viewers, we assume the position of the camera as it places human activities in scale, like a Sung-period Chinese landscape dotted with examples of human livelihood (fishing, studying, and so on). In *Orfeu negro*, the camera leaves the children dancing on the summit of the Morro and pans over the striking skyline of Rio de Janeiro. *Vertigo* ends with the image of James Stewart as a point in an unclear vista. In *El amor brujo*, the dance entraps and then frees the disoriented Orpheus figure.

Along with the landscape, the struggles of art offer a possible resolution to the open ending. To Maurice Blanchot, Eurydice is “the limit of what art can attain,” yet Orpheus’s turning away is his only possible means of approaching her.⁴³ This paradoxical stance—desiring yet losing, working within an awareness of the futility of work—is what Blanchot defines as “inspiration,” which is both the necessary condition and the indication of a

dangerous impatience. "Orpheus' gaze unties [order, rectitude, law], destroys its limits . . . [it] is the extreme moment of freedom . . . [it] frees the sacred contained in the work, *gives* the sacred to itself. . . ."44 Blanchot calls this contradictory state the only condition in which writing is possible, when the artist enters what he calls "the *other* night," a kind of endless death that opens onto a great depth.⁴⁵

These different interpretations of the Orpheus myth show how the cinema "transcends reality (quasi-magically) while maintaining a close connection to the pictorial accuracy often associated with reality."⁴⁶ They also point to the ways an ancient myth can be made contemporary and culturally specific. Now we await new versions of the Orpheus myth on screen, as we continue to explore the resonance of myth in our own time.

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Annette Lavers, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 137.
2. The *katabasis* pattern might sound familiar because of its role in certain film genres like the Western, the war story, and science fiction, where the descent into the underworld is often replaced with a journey into equivalent hells, such as a hostile wilderness or enemy territory. The hero is frequently aided by a guide figure. Heroes who return from this kind of journey often assume roles of greater responsibility, as teachers or rulers. One could say that the journey, death, and resurrection aspects of the life of Christ form a *katabasis* pattern as well.
3. The other three ending strategies are: (1) the classical closed-text film (where the story is resolved and the narrative discourse is closed, as in John Ford's *The Quiet Man*), (2) the open-story film (where the story is left unresolved but the narrative discourse is closed, as in Truffaut's *400 Blows* and de Sica's Neorealist classic *The Bicycle Thief*), and finally (3) the open text film (where both narrative levels are left open, as in Godard's New Wave film *Weekend*). While Neupert fails to find any film that completely fits the third category, he does cite the metaphoric ending of Claude Chabrol's *Les bonnes femmes* (1960) as one possible example. See *The End: Narrative Closure and the Cinema* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995).
4. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 127.
5. Judith E. Bernstock, *Under the Spell of Orpheus: The Persistence of a Myth in Twentieth Century Art* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 179.
6. Elizabeth Sewall, *The Orphic Voice, Poetry and Natural History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 4.
7. Dudley Andrew, "The Well-Worn Muse: Adaptation in Film History and Theory," in *Narrative Strategies: Original Essays in Film and Prose Fiction*,

- Sydney M. Conger and Janice R. Welsh, eds. (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1980), 16.
8. Writing about Cocteau's 1926 play, Walter A. Strauss observed: "when you streamline a well-known tragic theme, you come dangerously close to parody." "Jean Cocteau: The Difficulty of Being Orpheus," in *Reviewing Orpheus: Essays on the Cinema and Art of Jean Cocteau*, Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, ed. (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press: 1977), 31.
 9. Morty Schiff, "Jean Cocteau: Poet of the Cinema," *Cineaste* 20.3 (1994): 60.
 10. Camus draws on some changes that had been suggested in notes of the playwright (such as having Orfeu killed on the top of the Morro by sharp-edged plants), but he eliminates complete aspects of the original play, such as a dialogue between Apolo and Clío (Orpheus's parents) in act I, as well as Clío's terrifying descent into madness in act III, and the sorrowful remembrances by the people in act III.
 11. Jared Banks, "Cinematic Adaptation: Orfeu Negro da Conceicao," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 23.3 (September 1996): 799.
 12. *Candomblé* is based on the worship of *orixas* (or *orishas*, anthropomorphized nature deities). Afro-Brazilians merged African deities with the Catholic church's saints, with the result being a syncretic tradition similar to the Santería of the Caribbean. The African roots become especially apparent in the dance elements of the ceremonies.
 13. Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 47-58.
 14. Marty Roth, "Carnival, Creativity, and the Sublimation of Drunkenness," *Mosaic* 30.2 (June 1997): 8.
 15. Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 175.
 16. Carlos Diegues (b. 1940), one of the founders of the Cinema Novo movement, is best known outside of Brazil for his films *Bye-bye Brazil* (1979) and *Quilombo* (1984). De Moraes is known for the lyrics he wrote to the song *The Girl from Ipanema*. Carlos Diegues has also explored the setting of Rio in his 1994 film *Rio's Love Song*, inspired by the songs of Jorge Ben Jor, Gilberto Gil, Chico Buarque, and Caetano Veloso. De Moraes passed away just as the cinematic project was beginning, so it took more than a decade to deal with legal rights to the play and resume the cinematic work. Some of the songs from Camus's 1958 version can be heard in *Orfeu*, and new musical selections, ranging from the late thirties to the late nineties, were coordinated by Caetano Veloso.
 17. Randal Johnson and Robert Stam, eds., *Brazilian Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 65. This statement was originally published in *Movimento 2* (May 1962), the journal of the National Students' Union.
 18. The actress who plays Conceição, Zezé Motta, compares her character to Jocasta. See New Yorker Films press kit, n.d., 12.
 19. *Ibid.*, 5.
 20. Ueda's book, published in 1776 but begun in 1768, was originally titled *Kinki kaidan* (New and old tales of wonder). All of the stories were set in the chaotic periods before the Edo period, or at the end of the Heian period. Mizoguchi

- adapted two of the nine stories "Jasei no in" (The lust of the white serpent) and "Asaji ga yado" (House among the reeds).
21. Dudley Andrew, "The Passion of Identification in the Late Films of Kenji Mizoguchi," in *Film in the Aura of Art*, Dudley Andrew, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 173–75.
 22. Arthur Thornhill, "The Spirit World of Noh," in *Noh and Kyogen: An Interpretive Guide* (Honolulu: Center for Japanese Studies, 1989), 17.
 23. It is important to remember in this context that the elegant *nō* dance, which developed from more rustic harvest and folk dance forms, is considered to have possible connections to earlier shamanistic traditions. In the *nō* drama, the protagonist (known as the *shite*) often reveals himself or herself to be a spirit from the dead, returned to earth to avenge some wrong or, in some other way, to work through entanglements that took place while the *shite* was alive.
 24. Kunio Komparu, *The Noh Theatre: Principles and Perspectives* (New York: Weatherhill/Tankosha, 1983), 42.
 25. Kenneth Johnson, "The Point of View of the Wandering Camera," in *Cinema Journal* 32.2 (winter 1993): 51.
 26. In the original story on which the film was based, *D'Entre Les Morts* by Thomas Narcejac and Pierre Boileau, the murdering husband had fled from Paris when the police questioned him, and he was killed in a German air raid. Flavieres (the "Scottie" character) sees a newsreel from Marseilles in which a woman who looks like Madeleine appears. He finds her but she (now named Renee Sourange) denies his story. Flavieres persists and she finally admits that she was involved in the plot. In his anger and shock, Flavieres strangles Renee and then surrenders to the police.
 27. Robin Wood, *Hitchcock's Films* (New York: Castle Books, 1969), 79.
 28. *Ibid.*, 72.
 29. Actually the actors were put on a turntable, and the background was filmed with a gentle track backward, then forward again, as the actors were turning.
 30. Royal S. Brown, "Vertigo as Orphic Tragedy," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 14.1 (January 1986): 33.
 31. Marvin D'Lugo, *The Films of Carlos Saura: The Practice of Seeing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 216–218.
 32. S. Brent Plate, "Religion/Literature/Film: Toward a Religious Visuality of Film," *Literature and Theology* 12.1 (March 1998): 29.
 33. D'Lugo, *The Films of Carlos Saura*, 214–215.
 34. Robert A. Segal, *Theorizing about Myth* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 129.
 35. The play *Orpheus Descending* opened on March 21, 1957, but was met with mixed reviews and lasted for only 68 performances. Other (more well-known) films by Sidney Lumet include: *12 Angry Men* (1957), *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962), and *The Pawnbroker* (1965).
 36. In his 1988 stage (and 1990 television) version of the play, Peter Hall adds to the ending a Ku Klux Klan parade retreating and a naked and wounded Val in a cruciform position. Val's full name, "Valentine Xavier," contains overtones of a savior. For more information on Hall's interpretation, see Donald Costello,

- "Tennessee William's 'Conjure Man' in Script and Screen," *Cineaste* 27.4 (1999): 263-270.
37. Note, for example, the chapter by Inez Hedges in *Breaking the Frame: Film Language and the Experience of Limits* (Inez Hedges, ed. [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991]) entitled "Truffaut and Cocteau: Representations of Orpheus," which includes a discussion of Truffaut's film *La chambre verte* (*The Green Room*, 1978). Other films that could be included are: Rick Schmidt's independent film *American Orpheus* (1992) and Marcel Hanoun's French film *La nuit Claire* (1978).
 38. Quoted in Susan L. Schwartz, "I Dream, Therefore I am: *What Dreams May Come*," *The Journal of Religion and Film* 4.1 (2000). Available at <http://cid.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/IDream.htm/>.
 39. Kim Newman, "Rubber Reality," *Sight and Sound* 9.6 (June 1999): 8.
 40. Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 18.
 41. Yves Bonnefoy, *Asian Mythologies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4.
 42. Barthes, "Mythologies," 118, 158.
 43. Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1981), 99-104.
 44. *Ibid.*, 104.
 45. *Ibid.*, 100.
 46. Paul Monaco, "Film as Myth and National Folklore," in *The Power of Myth in Literature and Film* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1980), 37.