

## CROSSTALK

### *histoire d'amour*

Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950) adapts the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, expanding the original by introducing new plotlines and characters. In this world, the married couple Orphée (Jean Marais) and Eurydice (Marie Déa) frequently cross paths with Death (María Casares) and her henchmen, the angel Heurtebise (François Perier) and the dead poet, Cégeste (Edouard Dermithe). Death is drawn to Orphée, each following the other until the two are returned to their respective worlds.

Orphée meets Death for the first time outside the Café des Poètes, where she accompanies Cégeste. Deeply intoxicated, Cégeste starts a brawl over his poems, and the young poet falls to the ground, badly injured. Death asks Orphée to step into her Rolls Royce to help her take Cégeste to the hospital. As they talk, Cégeste dying between them, Heurtebise turns on the radio. And Orphée hears the mesmerizing words spoken in Cocteau's voice:

*Le silence va plus vite à reculons.  
Silence goes faster backwards.*

Like an oblivious lover, Orphée ignores these words at first, raising his voice to drown them out. As the film continues, however, he is increasingly drawn to them, sitting in the Rolls Royce for hours to capture them with his pencil. The love that he feels for these words transcends the mythic source material. This attraction slips between fiction and Cocteau's personal history passing into the realm of the dead and returning to that of the living, unharmed. *Orphée* (1950) is a love story between Orphée, a stand-in for the film's director, and the radio, a mechanism imbued with mythic power to reach Cocteau's lost love.

To understand this love story, we must go backwards before we can go forwards. After all, silence goes faster backwards. It is April 1918 and Cocteau is driving an ambulance. His lover, the young poet Jean Le Roy, has just been killed at the front. Let us imagine that he turns on the radio. In that fugue state, perhaps he hears the words that will later populate his poem *Discours du grand sommeil*:

*J'ai une grande nouvelle triste à t'annoncer: je suis mort.  
I have very sorrowful tidings to tell you: I am dead.*

From beyond the grave, the voice of Cégeste channeling Le Roy reflects gently, tenderly on time. Le Roy breaks the boundaries of this world and the next:

*Les vivants et les morts sont près et loin les uns des autres comme le côté pile et le côté face d'un sou...  
The living and the dead are near and far from each other like the heads and tails of a coin...*

The radio can breach this distance. After Cégeste has died, his spirit passes into the radio, transmitting poetic fragments which are received by Orphée in the voice of the film's director. The swapping of the voices of Edouard Dermithe with Cocteau's creates a troubling instability in the identity of the speaker.

This unknowability is furthered in the collapse of Cocteau's personal history into the film. Cocteau found his Cégeste (Edouard Dermithe) in a bookshop, perhaps as the two were browsing Greek myths. This was to be his last great love and muse. The love between them was founded on mutual affection and kindness.

In the end, Cocteau adopted Dermithe, and it was Dermithe who carried on his legacy, organizing his affairs and promoting his work after his death.

Two years before World War II Cocteau began a love affair with Jean Marais who was to become his Orphée. Marais came to audition for a play that Cocteau was directing, and Cocteau was drawn to his beauty. The two of them defied Nazi occupation in their romantic partnership that spilled over into Cocteau's creative work. By the time that *Orphée* was filmed, their love story was over. Cocteau had begun again.

Following the release of the film into an uneasy postwar France, Cocteau animated the specter of mass death and war. In an interview, Cocteau revealed that the inspiration for the radio lay in the real station of Radio Londres, which was created by the French Resistance during World War II. Hence the strange repetitions and numbers that resemble ciphers. There is a touch of mourning in this invocation for the lives lost during the occupation.

For Cocteau, love and artistic inspiration were closely interwoven. Each of these three lovers, Le Roy, Marais, and Dermithe, changed and shaped his work. He wrote poems for them, directed films that were molded around them, and built mythical worlds from them.

These three great romances of Cocteau's life are united into the feelings of desire that Orphée has for the poetic fragments that he hears on the radio. In these words, there are traces of Cocteau's painful relationship with love, stemming from his first great romance with Le Roy.

The love that Orphée feels for the radio and its words is entrenched in this pain. It is as though the radio lets Cocteau communicate with both the past and the dead. The radio provides a way of making sense of the destruction and the heartbreak. It is, in effect, a site of recuperative séance.

essay by **Lucy Whiteley**

**The full text of the poetic fragments written by Jean Cocteau in *Orphée* (1950) is reproduced below in both French and English.**

*Le silence va plus vite à reculons  
Un seul verre d'eau éclaire le monde  
Les miroirs seraient bien de réfléchir davantage  
L'oiseau chante avec ses doigts  
Le crêpe des petites veuves est un vrai déjeuner de soleil  
Jupiter rend sage ceux qu'il veut perdre*

*Silence goes faster backwards  
A single glass of water lights the world  
The mirrors would do well to reflect further  
The bird sings with its fingers  
The mourning shroud of little widows is a true lunch of sunshine  
Jupiter gives wisdom to those he would lose*