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# **The Orpheus Complex: Understanding Cinema through Maurice Blanchot**

Amber Blanksma  
MA in French and Film  
XXXXXXX

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College of Arts  
The University of Glasgow

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## Abstract

This dissertation conceptualises the Orpheus complex as a way to understand the nature of the cinematic image and the pleasure of spectatorship. It uncovers the potential of Blanchot's philosophy of literature to elucidate cinema, taking his exegesis of the myth of Orpheus as its point of departure. Blanchot's philosophy of literature and his deconstruction of narcissism were unpacked to elucidate his notion of the Orphic gaze. This was, then, put into dialogue with two differing theories of the gaze in cinema, namely Mulvey's theory of an identificatory male gaze and Derrida's theory of the visor effect. This revealed that a misidentification lies at the heart of the theory of specular recognition, in cinema, and that a sense of haunting permeates the cinematic experience. This notion was then applied to the case study, *Paris, Texas* (1984), which contemplates identity and loss, through a storyline resembling the orphic myth. This offered a new way of understanding the film as a symptom and rumination on the Orpheus complex. Moreover, the film was shown to be a self-reflexive study of the cinematic image, which opened up for a consideration of the Orpheus complex within the cinematic image, at large. This led to the conclusion that spectatorship is characterised by a dissociated gaze and the desire to look at images is reflective of a compulsion toward fascination, which come together to form the Orpheus complex.

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## List of Abbreviations

### Maurice Blanchot

TO - Blanchot, M. 1941, *Thomas l'obscur* [1ère édition], Gallimard, Paris.

PF - Blanchot, M. 1949, *La Part du feu*, Gallimard, Paris.

ES - Blanchot, M. 1955, *L'Espace littéraire*, Gallimard, Paris.

EI - Blanchot, M. 1969, *L'Entretien infini*, Gallimard, Paris.

ED - Blanchot, M. 1980, *L'écriture du désastre*, Gallimard, Paris.

SL - Blanchot, M. & Smock, A. 1982, *The Space of Literature*, University of Nebraska Press, London; Lincoln, Neb.

IC - Blanchot, M. & Hanson, S. 1993, *The Infinite Conversation*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

WD - Blanchot, M. & Smock, A. 1995, *The Writing of the Disaster*, New edn, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Neb.

WF - Blanchot, M. 1995, *The Work of Fire*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.

### Jacques Derrida

SM - Derrida, J. 1993, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*, Galilée, Paris.

EF - Derrida, J. & Stiegler, B. 1996, *Echographies de la télévision: entretiens filmés*, Galilée, Paris.

CF - Cahiers du cinéma, *Avril 2001* ["Le cinéma et ses fantômes" (Jacques Derrida, 2001)], No.556, Editions de l'Etoile.

EE - Derrida, J., Stiegler, B. & Bajorek, J. 2002, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, Polity Press, Cambridge; Malden, Massachusetts.

SME - Derrida, J., Magnus, B. & Cullenberg, S. 2006, *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Routledge, London; New York.

CG - Baecque, A.d., Jousse, T., Derrida, J., Kamuf, P., translator & Delorme, S. 2015, "Cinema and Its Ghosts: An Interview with Jacques Derrida", *Discourse (Berkeley, Calif.)*, vol. 37, no. 1-2, pp. 22-39.

### Gilles Deleuze

C2F - Deleuze, G. 1985, *Cinéma II: L'image-temps*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris.

C2E - Deleuze, G. Tomlinson, H. Galeta, R. 1997, *Cinema 2: Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press.

### Roland Barthes

LC - Barthes, R. 1980, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie*, (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, Gallimard / Seuil).

CL - Barthes, R. & Howard, R. 2000, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Vintage Books, London.

### Wim Wenders

PT - Wenders, W., Shepard, S. Sievernich, C. 1984, *Paris, Texas, Road Movies*, Berlin; Nördlingen.



## Author's Declaration

“I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.”

Printed Name: AMBER BLANKSMA

Signature:

# Introduction

## 1.1 Why Orpheus? Why Blanchot?

*“Le complexe d’Orphée, ce serait une sorte de compulsion à se retourner sur son passé, pour essayer de le comprendre, c’est-à-dire de le faire exister, pour essayer dérisoirement de le changer là où il a été par trop insatisfaisant, pour essayer tout simplement d’avoir de la mémoire, et finalement couronner tout cela d’un renvoi au néant” - Jacques Aumont, *Amnésies*: 45*

[The Orpheus complex would be a sort of compulsion to look back on one’s past, to try and understand it, that is to say, to make it exist, to try, pathetically, to change it where it has been too disappointing, to try, quite simply, to have memory, and, finally, to top it all off with a return to oblivion (my translation)]

The myth of Orpheus has been reappropriated for millennia to explore the power of art, love, and myth. However, fewer renditions dwell on the death that stares Orpheus in the face, in the madness of his backward gaze. Maurice Blanchot argues that “[t]oute la gloire de son œuvre, toute la puissance de son art [...] sont sacrifiés à cet unique souci: regarder dans la nuit ce que dissimule la nuit, l’*autre* nuit, la dissimulation qui apparaît” (*EL*: 180) [[a]ll the glory of his work, all the power of his art [...] are sacrificed to this sole aim: to look in the night at what night hides, the *other* night, the dissimulation that appears (*SL*: 172)]. This dissertation will unpack this statement to conceptualise the Orpheus complex and the fatal compulsion that drives it. Taking Aumont’s above formulation of the complex as a point of departure<sup>1</sup>, the Orpheus complex will be demonstrated through cinema, a medium that encapsulates the sense of passion, obscurity, and loss, proper to the myth. The film philosophies that will bolster this argument, namely Jacques Derrida’s hauntology and Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinéma 2, L’image temps* (1985) (hereafter, referred to as *Cinéma 2*), are influenced by Blanchot’s philosophy, constituting the bridge between these disciplines to which this dissertation contributes. This dissertation will, thereby, enrich three under-investigated fields: the importance of the Orphic myth

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<sup>1</sup> This is the first use of this formulation in a cinematic context. Kontaxopoulos (2001) and Dawson (2000) use the term after the publication of *Amnésies* and Schultz (1996) speaks of an Orpheus complex in a literary and theatrical context, before the publication of the book.

within Blanchot's *oeuvre*; the potential of Blanchot's thought to illuminate existing philosophies of cinema; and how the notion of an Orpheus complex, gleaned from Blanchot's study of the figure, can inform a new theory of cinema spectatorship. In foregrounding Orpheus's gaze - the element of the myth that is usually repressed to favour a triumphant depiction of the poet - this dissertation will argue that a profound sense of loss and self-effacement lies at the heart of cinema spectatorship, framing the cinephile's passion for the cinematic image as an Orpheus complex.

## 1.2 Aims and Challenges

One key challenge of this dissertation is to be found in its interdisciplinary approach; how can Blanchot's philosophy be applied to cinema when it is almost exclusively concerned with literature? This concern is echoed by Odin, in his book on Gary Hill's exploration of Blanchot, through video, who asks:

Comment l'utilisation même de la référence à Blanchot est-elle possible avec l'image, dans l'image, alors que la différence entre l'image et le mot a un statut privilégié chez Maurice Blanchot, celui-ci ayant tiré les conséquences les plus radicales d'une théorie de l'image dans l'écriture, que l'on pourrait presque dire contre l'image visuelle? (Odin, 2007: 304)

[How is the very use of a reference to Blanchot possible with the image - in the image - when the difference between the image and the word has a privileged status within Maurice Blanchot's work, which drew the most radical consequences from a theory of the image in writing, and which could almost be said to be against the visual image? (my translation)]

To address this concern, this study will be aligned with the work of Ropars-Wuilleumier, one of the most eminent scholars of Blanchot and cinema, who observes that Blanchot's distrust of the visual is often "compris comme un désaveu du regard, alors qu'il ne rejette que le pouvoir de la vision, et non le recours au geste de voir" (Ropars-Wuilleumier, 1994: 114) [understood as a renouncement of the gaze, even though he rejects only the *power* of vision, and not the recourse to the gesture of looking (my translation)[my emphasis]]. Instead, she observes, in his work, "un écrire qui, *par le regard*, se détournerait de la représentation et de la signification qu'elle implique" (Ropars-Wuilleumier, 1994: 115) [a writing that, *through the gaze*, turns away from representation and the signification that it

implies (my translation)]. If we consider, as does Derrida, that the term “écriture” (Derrida, 1967: 19) [writing (Derrida, 1997: 9)] can designate “tout ce qui peut donner lieu à une inscription en général, qu'elle soit ou non littérale et même si ce qu'elle distribue dans l'espace est étranger à l'ordre de la voix : cinématographie, chorégraphie, certes, mais aussi « écriture » picturale, musicale, sculpturale, etc.” (Derrida, 1967: 19) [all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural “writing.” (Derrida, 1997: 9)], we may begin to consider cinema as an extension of this Blanchotian form of writing. This allows us to conceptualise what Blanchot defines as literature, not as constrained to a certain medium or format but, rather, to the condition that it not conform to one form or another. The seeds of this idea can be seen in Blanchot’s statement that “il y aura encore des livres, longtemps après que le concept de livre sera épuisé” (*EI*: vi) [there will still be books a long while after the concept of book is exhausted (*IC*: xi)] because “[e]ssais, romans, poèmes semblaient n’être là, n’être écrits que pour permettre au travail de la littérature [...] de s’accomplir” (*EI*: vi) [[e]ssays, novels, poems seem only to be there [...] to allow the labour of literature [...] to accomplish itself (*IC*: xi)]. This means that books, which Blanchot understands as fragmentary entities that believe themselves to be whole, will persist despite their incompleteness. In their attempts to combat their insufficiency, they will continue to find their *raison d’être*; in their pretension of wholeness, they will continue to unveil what prevents them from being whole. This paradoxical, spectral quality of the book incites a sort of blind seeing that engages with the invisible in the visible and the unthinkable in thought. In this way, the book incites a mode of perception that watches something as it disappears, or grasps an idea as it eludes comprehension. Therefore, a large part of the argumentation of this dissertation will draw on Derrida’s hauntology which proposes that the cinematic image “est d’abord du visible. Mais c’est du visible invisible” (*EF*: 129) [is of the visible, but of the invisible visible (*EE*: 115)]. In tracing what is invisible in cinema, this challenge becomes an advantageous way to reevaluate the nature of the cinematic image and its potential to explore the paradoxical relation between absence and presence, and vision and blindness, in its most extreme form.

Another question that this dissertation must address is whether the Orpheus complex is the affliction of the filmmaker or the cinema spectator. While the intricacies of filmmaking cannot be accounted for in a study of this scope an Orphic undercurrent can be seen in the approach of various filmmakers. For example, Jean-Luc Godard, states in “Les Signes parmi nous”, in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, that “cinéma autorise Orphée de se retourner sans faire mourir Eurydice” (Godard, 1988-1998). Jean Cocteau, who modelled himself around the figure of Orpheus, dying and resurrecting himself through his art, described film as the ideal medium. Similarly, in “Why Make Films” (Wenders, 1991), which will be unpacked in the third chapter, Wenders discusses a “compulsion” (ibid:1) to see things as they are, through the lens of the camera, which is highly reminiscent of the Orphic compulsion to see Eurydice. To bridge this gap, a self-reflexive case study that explores the nature of the cinematic image and the gaze has been chosen to consider the Orpheus complex in relation to, not one specific process or another of filmmaking, but the passion for the image proper to both the filmmaker and the cinephile.

## 1.3 Blanchot and Cinema

### 1.3.1 Within Blanchot’s Œuvre

Blanchot rarely wrote about cinema and the missing link between the two is a key concern of this dissertation. However, it must be acknowledged that the cinematic, in rare instances, trickles into Blanchot’s *œuvre*. Firstly, it is important to note that Blanchot enjoyed films. Letters from Jacqueline Laporte show that Blanchot had a taste for cinematic classics, such as Murnau, Ozu, Bergman, and Orson Welles, among others (Hoppenot, Rabaté, Blanchot, 2014: 102). One can imagine that despite not writing critically about films Blanchot will have engaged intellectually with cinema. This adds depth to what Watt deems “the most notable moment in Blanchot’s published output in which he engages with the cinema” (Watt, 2017: 6): an intimate moment that takes place, between two characters, in a cinema salle, found in the first edition of *Thomas l’obscur*<sup>2</sup> (1950). This alone justifies further investigation into Blanchot and the cinematic image. Additionally, Blanchot shared a

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<sup>2</sup> The book was later cut, almost in half, and a second edition was published under the same name in 1950. Among the omissions was the cinema scene.

friendship with the writer and filmmaker Marguerite Duras (Hoppenot, Rabaté, Blanchot, 2014: 162-163) of whom he conducted various commentaries, namely, his analysis of *La Maladie de la mort* in *La Communauté inavouable* (1983: 58-67). He also gives theoretical insights on her work in their personal letters, in *Le Livre à Venir* (1959: 207-215), *L'Entretien infini* (1969: 466), and *L'Amitié* (1971: 98-101) in which he contemplates whether her film, *Détruire, dit-elle* (1969), is 'un « livre », un « film » ? l'intervalle des deux ?' (Blanchot, 1971: 93) ['a "book"? a "film"? the interval between the two?'] (Blanchot, 1997: 113). This demonstrates Blanchot's notion that literature is defined not by formats or traditions but by its unrelenting refusal to conform to them.

While we may highlight the instances in which Blanchot did, albeit obliquely, reference the cinematic image, it is crucial to consider why he chose not to explore the medium further. After all, Blanchot's literary career spanned over sixty years and his choice to focus on literature was deliberate. To explain this, we should acknowledge that Blanchot was notoriously private, influencing his interactions with the public and mass media. As a child, he spent long periods in isolation due to illness and, in his later life, he would recede into a life of solitude, in the village of Èze (Bident, 1998: 301). He declined to appear in television interviews, at a time in France when prominent philosophers would do so, and he did not consent to the publication of photographs depicting him. During his life, only two images of Blanchot surfaced in the public eye. In 1985, a paparazzi photo was taken of Blanchot in the car park of a supermarket and published in *Lire* magazine, "forcefully dragging Blanchot out of obscurity into the limelight" (Lyons, 2018: 127). Two years later, Levinas submitted a selection of photographs from his time at university, for a journal interview, some of which featured Blanchot. Perhaps, he allowed Levinas to do so because he was Blanchot's best friend (he was the only person, outside of his family, whom he addressed with the informal "tu" (Bident, 1998: 40)), or perhaps it was because the photos were taken several decades prior. In any case, Blanchot's avoidance of the public eye reflected his attitude toward the identity of the writer. He believed that the literary writer requires great privacy to remain unfettered by the expectations of audiences or institutions and that the writer should not lose sight of literature by becoming overly concerned with his self-image. In 1986, when requested to submit a photograph to Vu Agency, for an exhibition featuring the portraits of seventy writers, he

requested that his image be substituted by his letter of response which expresses his will to “apparaître le moins possible, non pas pour exalter [ses] livres, mais pour éviter la présence d’un auteur qui prétendrait à une existence propre” (Bident, 1998: 535) [appear as little as possible, not so as to privilege [his] books, but to avoid the presence of an author with a claim to an existence of his own (Bident, 2019: 428)]. This highlights that his concern lies not with the prevalence of his writings, or his identity as an invisible and god-like writer, but with the idea that his life had nothing to do with the life of his books; as though he could not take credit for them because, like Orpheus, he *himself* was absent when they were written. Another of Blanchot’s critiques of the visual can be found in “La Parole quotidienne” (1959), where he discusses the medium of television and its relation to a wider movement of depoliticisation. While Blanchot argues that certain visual media risk inducing a sense of “contemplation superficielle, insouciante et satisfaite” (*EI*: 277) [superficial, uncaring, and satisfied contemplation (*IC*: 240)], he, thereby, implies that there is room for a situation in which the image, insofar as it stimulates and doesn’t mute the imagination, can induce an experience akin to that of literature. Overall, Blanchot’s lack of publicity and his criticism of audiovisual forms do not rule out the possibility of there being a link between his philosophy and the cinematic image. His criticisms of audiovisual forms are more concerned with the media and desensitisation whereas, as will be shown later, his depiction of a cinematic scene, in *Thomas l’obscur*, likens the cinematic to the literary, warranting further study of the two.

### 1.3.2 Within Blanchot Studies

Due to his scant treatment of the medium, Blanchot’s philosophy is rarely applied within film studies; only two full-length studies of Blanchot and cinema exist while various articles tackle this intersection on a smaller scale. Citations of Blanchot in film studies often concern Godard, namely his references to the former in films such as *Histoire(s) du cinéma*<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps just as frequently, scholars explore Deleuze’s appropriation of Blanchot in *Cinema 2*<sup>4</sup>. A large part of Ropars-Wuilleumier’s work on Blanchot has focused on the links between Deleuze’s film philosophy and Blanchot. Young (2022) traces cinema’s capacity to undermine power structures, by reading Deleuze’s film philosophy

<sup>3</sup> See Harris (2011), Hill (2012), and Saliot (2021).

<sup>4</sup> See Ropars-Wuilleumier (1994, 1995, 2006), Fotiade (2018), and Young (2022).

through Blanchot. More recently, Bellour (1999, 2009) and Watt (2018), have developed a notion of Blanchotian fascination in cinema - the latter being the author of one of the two books on Blanchot and cinema. The other full-length study, by Odin, explores Gary Hill's investigation of Blanchot's philosophy through the medium of video, namely, his *Incidences of Catastrophe* (1987) which is an adaptation of Blanchot's *Thomas l'obscur* and features excerpts of text from the book. These longer studies reflect the capacity of Blanchot's work to bolster a rigorous investigation of the cinematic image while the scattered, shorter articles, written by various film theorists, reflect the potential for diverse applications of his work to the medium. For instance, Serge Daney compares Blanchot's *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980) to Resnais film *L'Amour à mort* (1984), in his *Ciné journal 1981-1986*. A significant portion of Shaviro's *The Cinematic Body* (1993) utilises Blanchot's theory of the image to examine the interminable fascination and loss at work in cinema. MacCormack (2008) examines the queerness of cinema spectatorship as it exists outside of the logic of binary oppositions, including the man/woman binary, drawing on Blanchot, among other post-structuralist thinkers. Lastly, in "Out of the Dark" (2020), Didi-Hubermann analyses Lázló Nemes's *Son of Saul* (2015) which compares the story of a prisoner, Saul, in Birkenau who tries to give a proper burial to the body of a boy he believes to be his son, to Blanchot telling of the Orphic myth. Otherwise, several articles that mention Blanchot and cinema consist of focused comparative analyses between his philosophy and one film that demonstrates it particularly well. For example, Norman (2013) elucidates the temporality of death as it appears in Blanchot's work and Herzog's *Time of Death*; Fort (2010) compares the instant of death in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* to that of Blanchot's *L'Instant de ma mort* ([1994] 2000); and McMahon (2008) reads Duras's *India* song, through Blanchot's *La Communauté inavouable*. These focused studies highlight the capacity of Blanchot's work to elucidate the paradoxical logic of the most enigmatic of films. However, this field remains limited and requires attention. The formulation of the Orpheus complex in relation to Blanchot and cinema constitutes an original contribution that can be used as a dynamic and useful theoretical frame for future scholars to understand the nature of spectatorship and the cinematic image.



This dissertation is situated at the intersection between Derrida's hauntology in cinema and Blanchot's work because the former is, perhaps, the most in-depth reader of Blanchot and, as we will see, the two share innumerable similarities. However, they diverge in that while, for the most part, Derrida concerns himself with language and literature, in his later years, he addresses the medium of film. This occurs across the span of three films - Ken McMullen's *Ghost Dance* (1983), Safaa Fathy's *D'ailleurs Derrida* (1999), and Amy Ziering Kofman and Kirby Dick's *Derrida* (2002) - in which he plays himself, and in interviews with Stiegler (1996) and the *Cahiers du cinéma* (2001). However, as Lippit writes, "without designating cinema as an object of inquiry, as he did with painting, photography, video, and television [...] Derrida gestures toward cinema, speaking of and to it in passing [...] it is a thought that effaces the sovereignty of thought" (Lippit, 2016: 1-2). An important elucidation of this fragmented body of work has been effectuated by Fotiade's *Pictures of the mind*, which conceptualises an "aesthetics of spectrality" (Fotiade, 2018: 2), exemplified by the work of surrealists artworks and the media of photography and cinema. Similarly, Lippitt (2005, 2008, 2016) has produced numerous investigations of cinema through Derrida, namely his book *Cinema without Reflection* which examines cinema through Derrida's work on narcissism. These works exert significant influence on this dissertation, which constitutes an innovative contribution to the subject by emphasising Blanchot's influence on Derrida, considering how this may facilitate a better understanding of cinema spectatorship, and foregrounding the figure of Orpheus, to exemplify this.

### 1.3.3 Within Cinema

There exists a culture of Blanchotian cinema, albeit a rather limited and esoteric one. As we have seen, a handful of filmmakers are often associated with Blanchot: Marguerite Duras, Godard, and Gary Hill. Watt remarks that "Duras's films are the screen on which a connection between Blanchot and film has to an extent already been played out" (Watt, 2017: 4). Meanwhile, Bellour (1990), Temple (2004), Williams (ibid), Harris (2011), and Saliot (2021) have done much work to illuminate the influence Blanchot had on Godard's films. The filmmaker, in a press conference about *JLG/JLG : autoportrait de décembre* (1994), stated that he had aimed to "make a movie like the books [he] happened to read when [he] was growing up, by Blanchot, or Bataille" (Bergala, 1998: 396). Aside

from the aforementioned filmmakers, Benoît Jacquot made a film entitled *Lecture du chapitre X de Thomas l'Obscur de Maurice Blanchot* (1970) and Christophe Bisson's short film *La Folie du jour* (2010) features abstract visuals, producing a sense of vision without clarity, and a voice that reads excerpts from the eponymous book. The filmmaker Phillipe Grandrieux takes significant influence from the work of Blanchot which is seen, in particular, in his shooting journals for *Malgré la nuit* (2016) which has been analysed by Watt (2021). This small but rich culture of visual explorations of Blanchot's thought highlights a shared passion for obscurity of the filmmaker and the literary writer.

## 1.4 Blanchot and Psychoanalysis

In writing of an Orpheus complex, this dissertation will also contribute to the interdisciplinary field between Blanchot studies and psychoanalysis, drawing on passages from *L'Entretien infini* and *L'Écriture du désastre*, which consist of, perhaps, Blanchot's most elaborate studies of the subject. Much like the intersection between Blanchot and cinema, there remains a reticence to explore this junction. What is, arguably, the most direct and in-depth study of these themes was only released in 2019, entitled *Maurice Blanchot and psychoanalysis* by Kuzma, and calls for a long overdue interrogation of these themes (Kuzma, 2019: 1). Blanchot, having been, for significant periods, both a patient and a medical student (Bident, 1998: 49), showed equal apprehension and interest in psychoanalysis. While Blanchot championed Freudian psychoanalysis in its effort to open up a dialogue with the other, he also observes that the institutional context of such encounters "often works toward the opposing goal of reasserting certainty, stability, and conformity - thus muting the force of contestation to which both Freud and Lacan seek to give voice in both their writings and clinical practice" (Kuzma, 2019: 28). This is seen in Blanchot's *La Folie du jour* (1929) which narrates the hospitalisation of a young man and problematizes the hierarchised relationship between doctor and patient. Kuzma's book highlights the difficulty of handling a philosophy like Blanchot's, which deals with the unrepresentable and the unspeakable, in dialogue with a subject like psychoanalysis, which aims to articulate and clarify mental processes. He, therefore, proposes, instead of 'a *direct* approach to the question of "Blanchot and psychoanalysis"' (ibid: 4), that one "disrupt immediately the uneasy

balance between these two terms [...] by introducing a third term which gives context and colour to this conversation” (ibid); that being “politics” (ibid). Although political themes are relevant to this investigation<sup>5</sup>, it will diverge from Kuzma’s approach by exchanging “politics” with another third term: “cinema”. This spectral medium will illustrate the Orpheus complex in a way that straddles the visible and the invisible, the rational and the mysterious, as does Blanchot’s psychoanalytic theorisations.

## 1.5 Orpheus through History

### 1.5.1 Overview

In discussing the history of Orpheus, it is important to note that myths are not equal to the works that depict them. As Dawson writes, “myth is a pre-text. As soon as it is written down, it ceases to be a myth. It becomes a unique text” (Dawson, 2000: 246). Myths are not inherently ideological or moralistic. Their power is not in their message but in their latency. That being said, one must, nevertheless, attempt to identify a general pattern of events that can be used to identify different versions of the myth to draw productive comparisons and conclusions. In an extensive study of the history of Orpheus, Warden presents a “standard version” of the myth that “most people at most times would have recognised as the myth of Orpheus” (Warden, 1982: viii). It goes as follows: Orpheus was born to Apollo<sup>6</sup>, a god associated with order and harmony, and Calliope, a Muse known as the “patron of epic poetry” (Anderson, 2013: 164). He was a talented musician and poet who could enchant animals and the chaotic forces of nature into harmony and was seen as “a prophet and a religious teacher who knew the secrets of the world of the dead [who] used his spells to bring the dead back to the world of the living” (Warden, 1982: viii). He was best known for attempting to bring his wife Eurydice back from the underworld after she died from a viper bite. Orpheus agrees with the king and queen of the underworld that he may have his wife back on the condition that he abstain from looking

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the gendered aspect of the myth of Orpheus is reflective of misogynistic traditions highlighted in gender studies; Gubar (2014) and Huffer (1998) which will be addressed in the second chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Though, on other accounts, Orpheus’s father is said to be King Oeagrus (Anderson, 2013: 164) (Friedman, 1970: 6).

at her, throughout his journey back to earth. However, he turns back to look at Eurydice, losing her forever. Orpheus, then, “retreats into the wilds of Thrace, abjures womankind and laments” (ibid: viii-ix). He is later killed by the Bacchantes, the female followers of Dionysus, for his renunciation of women and his abandonment of his post as a priest of Dionysus in order to worship Apollo in “a change from the irrational [...] and violent religion of Dionysus to the service of a rational, celestial, and legalistic god” (Friedman, 1970: 6-7). They tear off his head, which floats down the river Hebrus along with his Lyre which continues to play music. To summarise, the myth can be characterised by the loss of a loved object, a creative effort to resurrect the lost object, the haunting undead presence that ensues, and Orpheus’s ultimate death and fragmentation. This generic glean of the myth reveals something about the nature of history, myth, and the human mind: the aspects of mastery and identity prevail, while disorder and loss are repressed. Despite having lost Eurydice and failing his mission, Orpheus goes down in history as a “harmonizer of opposites and trickster of death” ([Ehrlich] Plate, 2003: 67). Of all the pieces that Orpheus was dismembered into, it is the reverberating lyre, recalling the resilience of art, that audiences remember. Not only is this prevalent in the standard telling of the myth but it is also reiterated across the various modifications that the myth has undergone, throughout history. The earliest surviving tellings of the myth come from Augustan poets Virgil (70BC-19BC), in his *Georgics*, and Ovid (43BC-18AD), in *Metamorphosis*. Roman senator, consul, and philosopher Boethius used Orpheus’s fatal look back at Eurydice to warn against the dangers of succumbing to primal desires (Friedan, 1970: 90). The Latin writer, Fulgentius, on the other hand, used the myth to promote the idea that individuals should civilise themselves through the art produced by passion and desire (ibid: 89). In both cases, the goal is order, civilisation, and the sublimation of passion into more intellectual pursuits. In their “detestable habit of extracting a moral lesson from every fact or work of art,” (ibid) mediaeval writers, politicians, and scholars analysed these writings, along with others of their time, to extract and perpetuate various moral messages. This was followed by the secularisation of the figures of Orpheus and Eurydice, after the 12th Century, exemplified by *Eurydice* by Scots poet Robert Henryson and the anonymously written *Sir Orfeo* and *Orpheus*. This new Orpheus was to be seen in Operas in the late Renaissance and early Baroque periods, presenting a sentimental, romantic Orpheus, as opposed to a promoter of rationality and civilisation. This transition to sentimentality was

hyperbolised “[i]n the Romantic period, [when] the predominant concern becomes individual identity” (Dawson, 2000: 250). The emphasis on the individual is further elaborated by the numerous avant-garde operas produced in the early 20th century, including Carl Orff, Milhaud’s *Les Malheurs d’Orphée* (1924), Malipiero’s *L’Orfeide* (1926), Krenek’s *Orpheus und Eurydike* (1926), and Cocteau’s *Orphée* (1926). These pieces contemplate poetic and creative identity. Around this time, the misogynistic undertones of the myth inspired a wave of feminist revisions reclaiming narrative power, from writers and poets such as H.D, Caroline Gordon, Kathy Acker, Muriel Rukeyser and Margaret Atwood, often interpreting the drama from Eurydice’s point of view (ibid: 256-261). Overall, the Orphic myth, in following an oscillation between the opposing poles of a binary pair - day and night, art and reason, man and woman, and life and death - can lend itself to the concerns of its time, whether they lean towards Enlightenment or Romanticism. In either case, however, there is an emphasis on identity. While Medieval and Renaissance works promoted morality and the Romantic works triumphed individuality, and modern approaches contemplated the identity of the poet, they are all driven by a concern for identity. The former is concerned with embodying a sense of responsibility, and sophistication, while the latter two are concerned with constructing a sense of identity through the beauty of art and poetry. It may seem peculiar to argue that each rendition aims to assert identity; one would think that each Orpheus, regardless of historical period or political standpoint, can be seen to assume some sort of identity. This is precisely the aspect on which Blanchot’s Orpheus differs: rather than achieving a strong sense of identity, Blanchot’s Orpheus, “lui-même, en ce regard, est absent” (*EL*: 180-181) [“in this glance back [...] himself is absent” (*SL*: 172)]. Blanchot does not radically reconfigure the myth to make this argument; the distinguishing features outlined above are all present. Rather, he illuminates aspects of it that often go unseen. For instance, it seems that the myth owes its capacity to shape-shift to its structuring around a lost object - that being Eurydice or, in later feminist renditions, her gaze - and that each epoch uses this gap to reveal the ghosts of that which is absent in society. Rather than taking these ghosts for what they claim to be, Blanchot contemplates the void that engenders them: that which the infinite transmutation of this “mythe inépuisable” (*EI*: 215) [inexhaustible myth (*IC*: 187)] cannot dispel. His approach is innovative and facilitates a new understanding of not only the figure of Orpheus but also the self-reflexive quality of the myth. Its

contents reflect its historical context, moving between clarity and obscurity, between the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Romantic Period, and Modernity, before the eventual disintegration of both, in the gaze and in Blanchot's post-structuralist, post-modern exegesis of it. The existence of a hidden insight into the nature of memory, history, myth, and art is hinted at in this self-awareness, which was, until Blanchot, concealed or ignored. This overlooked, cyclical, and self-referential turning will come to be understood as the Orpheus complex.

### 1.5.2 Orpheus and Cinema

Orpheus and cinema foster a history of their own, marked by the release of Cocteau's *Orphée* in 1950. While his first film *Le Sang d'un poète* (1932) is considered to be the first of his Orphic trilogy, which also included *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1960), the release of *Orphée*, is more widely known to have influenced the French and Brazilian subcultures of Orphic cinema. Although it shares the mythic character of the 20th-century Hollywood epics, based on classical mythology, screenings of *Orphée* in America were limited to art houses and college film societies, thereby beginning its influence on Brazilian Orphic films, such as Marcel Camus's *Black Orpheus* (1959) and Carlos Diegues *Orfeu* (1999). The influence of Cocteau's *Orphée* is visible in the French cinema of the *Nouvelle Vague*. For example, Godard, who took great influence from Cocteau, follows an Orphic sequence of events in *Alphaville* (1965), *Allemagne Neuf Zéro* (1991), and *Hélas pour moi* (1993) and has been described as an Orphic figure by Jacques Aumont in *Amnésies* (1999: 33-66). The Orphic myth was also reappropriated by Alain Resnais's *Vous n'avez encore rien vu* (2012), which is structured around a *mise-en-abyme*, unfurling several layered frames, allowing for an exploration of the relation between Orphic loss and the media of theatre, video, and film. This overt reference to Orpheus highlights more covert references to the myth in several of Resnais's previous films, including *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), *Je t'aime, Je t'aime* (1968), and *L'Amour à mort* (1984), as they contemplate love, memory, loss, and resurrection. These examples show that cinema, due to its realistic quality and temporal form, is particularly well-equipped to deal with the themes of memory, loss, and the passage of time. This is seen across a disparate culture of films that focus on the resurrection of a woman, through mourning, memory, imagination, or art, whether she be inaccessible, lost, mad, or dead. This

woman could be Eurydice, the lover, or, perhaps, a more originary figure for which Eurydice is the surrogate: the mother. We see this in films such as Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957), Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), Robert Bresson's *Une femme douce* (1969), Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) or *Mirror* (1975), and Marguerite Duras's *India Song* (1975) or, more recently, Catarina Vasconcelos's *The Metamorphosis of Birds* (2020), Guy Maddin's *My Winnipeg* (2007), and Céline Sciamma's *Portrait de la jeune fille en feu* (2019); the list goes on and the trend is evident. While one may be inclined to conclude that the Orphic myth applies best to art-house, Postmodern, experimental, or poetic films, like these, the myth has also been compared to various film noir, neo-noir films, and popular Hollywood narrative films. For example, the myth has been compared to: *The Matrix*, "with its pointedly named character Morpheus" (Plate, 2003: 82); Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948) (Mayer, McDonnell, 2007: 50); Sidney Lumet's *The Fugitive Kind* (1960), which is based on Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending* (1958); Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* (1985)<sup>7</sup>; and the Hitchcockian psychological drama, (Poznar (1989), Buckley (2021), and Berman (1997), Brown (1986)), which has also been likened to an Orphic descent to the underworld of the unconscious mind. For the most part, these examples do not explicitly mention or examine the myth, so much as they reflect a Western fascination with good and evil, light and darkness, and the saviour that heroically emerges from the latter into the former. Between these two groups of the poetic and nostalgic Orpheus, seen in art films, and the heroic Orpheus, seen in Neo-noir and narrative films, emerges the age-old conflict between reason and sentimentality, from as far back as the earliest renditions of the myth. However, among them are films that do not fit either of the two categories, such as Resnais's meta-filmic and fractured *Vous n'avez encore rien vu*, Tarkovsky's deterritorializing *Solaris* or *Mirror*, Duras's vertiginous portrait in *India Song*, or Marker's *La Jetée* which adopts a circular temporality structured around loss. These films are not so much concerned with moralism, reason, or romanticism as they are with dissociation, loss, and estrangement. They occupy a space between the loss of identity and the failed, but hypnotising, attempt to resurrect a woman who perpetually slips from the viewer's grasp. The emergence of this third category hints at cinema's aptitude for illuminating this other, Blanchotian

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<sup>7</sup> See Conard (2007: 207) and Baker (2021: 102-103).

Orpheus and the hidden awareness to which the myth alludes. This essay aims to prove and explain this phenomenon.

### 1.5.3 Blanchot's Orpheus

While the nature of Blanchot's Orpheus has been hinted at, here, the analysis of this figure will be reserved for the body of this dissertation. In preparation for this, let us observe the importance of the myth within Blanchot's corpus. In a letter to Londyn, Blanchot endorses her proposition to conduct a study of his analyses of Orpheus. He writes: "le sujet ... me semble très justifié: *L'Arrêt de mort* [1948], *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas* [1993], *Au Moment voulu* [1951] et aussi, d'une manière plus désespérante [...] *Le Dernier homme* [1957] ou *L'Attente l'oubli* [1997] sont portés par ce mouvement ... et les réflexions théoriques sur Orphée, dans *L'Entretien infini*, sont, à mon sens, infiniment plus restreintes" (Londyn, 1980: 261) [the subject seems very justified: *Death Sentence*, *The One Who was Standing Apart from Me*, *When the Time Comes* and also, in a more desperate manner, *The Last Man* or *Awaiting Oblivion* are carried by this movement ... and the reflections on Orpheus in *The Infinite Conversation* are, in my opinion, infinitely more restrained (my translation)]. This shows that the vast majority of Blanchot's fictional work is modelled around an Orphic movement and investigations of Orpheus, namely the essay "Orphée, Don Juan, Tristan", permeate one of his most influential works, *L'Entretien infini*. His most significant and explicit address of the myth, however, is to be found in *L'Espace littéraire* (1955), which contains "Le Regard d'Orphée" and extensive analysis of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. The importance of this book within Blanchot's *œuvre* cannot be understated. Not only is it one of his most cited works<sup>8</sup> but it is, arguably, one of his most elucidating interrogations of literature. It is not to be overlooked, then, that this book is overtly structured around the events of the Orphic myth. In the opening paragraph, Blanchot states that each page in the book moves towards a central concern: the essay entitled "Le Regard d'Orphée" (*EL*: V) ["Orpheus's Gaze" (*SL*: V)]. In light of this, it is surprising that Blanchot's Orpheus has garnered relatively few critical investigations. Michel conducted the only full-length study on Blanchot's

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<sup>8</sup> Google Scholar has recorded over 3100 citations of *L'Espace littéraire*, as opposed to *L'Entretien infini*, with 2500, and *L'Écriture du désastre*, with over 1900, and *Le Livre à venir*, with over 1800. No other book of Blanchot's has this many citations, according to this database.



Orpheus, entitled *Maurice Blanchot et le déplacement d'Orphée* (1999) which constitutes a key point of reference in this dissertation.

## 1.6 Paris, Texas, Wim Wenders

A secondary aim of this dissertation is to extend the application of Blanchot's philosophy beyond the culture of Blanchotian films - in that they explicitly or implicitly reference him - outlined above, to further prove its validity and credibility. *Paris, Texas* has been chosen as the case study because, as Jasper states, the film "has overtones of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. Travis must enter into the underworld, which here is the red-light area of Houston, where Jane (Nastassja Kinski) is working in a peep show club [...] trapped in a system of one-way mirrors in which she can be seen but not see" (Jasper, 2004: 137). However, this is not so much a tale of saviour and redemption as it is of loss, exclusion, and selflessness. Not only does it allow for a contemplation of the physical appearance of the Orpheus Complex but it also self-reflexively considers the impact that spectral media has in the cycle of loss and creation that characterises the complex. In this way, *Paris, Texas* can be seen as a microcosm of Wender's *œuvre* which, like Blanchot's version of the Orphic myth, is concerned with the irreconcilable tension between narrative and image, movement and inertia, and teleology and idleness. Wenders admits that he is "no great theorist [and] tends not to remember things [he has] read in books" (Wenders: 1). While he speaks humbly of his works, here, this statement does reflect the fact that his approach to film operates on an intuitive, rather than an analytic or systematic level, which will both complement and test Blanchot's philosophy which is both highly rigorous and extremely abstract.

## 1.7 Dissertation Structure

The first chapter of this dissertation will be dedicated to illuminating Blanchot's depiction of literature laying a thorough theoretical groundwork. This will further elucidate the two contradictory movements in the myth and its history, highlighted above, through Blanchot's critique of the Hegelian dialectic. Contrasting this, Blanchot's conceptualisations of fascination and the *other* night will be

unpacked to illustrate the moment of Orpheus's gaze and the Orpheus complex. The second chapter will bolster the theories presented in the first using Blanchot's contributions to psychoanalysis, putting them into dialogue with his work on Orpheus. This will consist of his investigation of narcissism and the myth of Narcissus in *L'Écriture du désastre*, leading to a comparison between Orpheus and Narcissus, as they are written by Blanchot. This will elucidate Blanchot's understanding of the gazes of Orpheus and Narcissus which will be compared to two theories of cinema spectatorship: Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and Derrida's theorisation of hauntology. The former argues that the cinematic experience is structured around an identificatory relationship with the on-screen protagonist whereas the latter argues that spectatorship consists of an experience of loss and the dispersion of subjectivity. This will not only contextualise a Blanchotian understanding of cinema between two dominant but opposed theories of spectatorship but it will also put this theory to the test. The findings will, then, be applied to Wenders's *Paris, Texas*, in the third chapter. Travis will be framed as exemplary of the third category of Blanchotian Orpheuses highlighted above, through the examination of four key scenes in which Travis enacts a sort of Orphic gaze. These instances are mediated by screens or mirrors, resembling cinema screens, allowing an exploration of cinema's capacity to facilitate a dissociative Orphic gaze and perpetuate the Orpheus complex.

# Chapter 1: Orpheus and the Ghost of Eurydice

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will unpack Blanchot's philosophy of literature, showing that the myth of Orpheus is a microcosm of his thought. To illuminate the opposing movements between day and night in the Orphic myth, Blanchot's understanding of literature will be contrasted against dialectical speech. The latter follows a movement towards totalisation and mastery whereas the former foregrounds the haunting traces of the referent it cannot capture. In a wider sense, Blanchot's philosophy challenges the Western privileging of reason, knowledge, presence, and light, perpetuated by the philosophy of Kant and Hegel, for example, since the European Age of Enlightenment. His notion of the Orphic gaze, which will be explicated through his conceptualisation of fascination, is contrasted against this tradition.

## 2.2 The Gaze of Orpheus

### 2.2.1 The Mastery and Usurpation of Language

Blanchot points to the first use of language, according to ancient religious scripture, when Adam named each animal after God created the world, to show that language represses the ungraspable so that a sense of coherence can prevail. He states that "Dieu avait créé les êtres, mais l'homme dut les anéantir. C'est alors qu'ils prirent un sens pour lui, et il les créa à son tour à partir de cette mort où ils avaient disparu" (*PF*: 312-313) [God had created living things, but man had to annihilate them [...] and he in turn created them out of the death into which they had disappeared (*WF*: 323)]. Adam plunges animals into oblivion, through the abstraction of representation, so that he can pluck them out of the void, transformed into an idea, claiming the power of God as his own. Here, Blanchot describes negation: the process whereby, through language, presence is negated and then reinstated in the form of a concept. This is the power of the dialectic which consists of the "grasping [of] opposites in their unity" (Hegel [1812], Di Giovanni, 2010: 35), the positive containing the negative. In fact, "it contains even more than that, for it is the unity of itself and its opposite [...] it has to come to completion in an unstoppable and pure progression that admits of nothing extraneous" (Hegel [1812],

Giovanni, 2010: 33). This “unstoppability” of the dialectic reflects the Hegelian belief that thought inevitably moves towards a higher sense of consciousness and completion. According to the dialectic, that which is not known will eventually become known, that which is unmastered will, if given enough time, become harnessed. Blanchot both contests this belief and distrusts this sense of mastery proper to the dialectic. Evoking the enduring tradition in literature and art of the objectification of women by men as an example of the danger that negation entails, he writes: “[j]e dis : cette femme, et immédiatement je dispose d’elle, je l’éloigne, la rapproche, elle est tout ce que je désire qu’elle soit” (*PF*: 312) [I say, “This woman,” and she is immediately available to me, I push her away, I bring her close, she is everything I want her to be (*WF*: 322)]. Here, Blanchot highlights the centrality of the subject, in the act of writing, who moulds and summons his referents. However, through his ironic phrasing, he shows that the cost of this sense of centrality is a disconnect between the woman, as she is, and the woman that the subject wants her to be. This is because, far from reconciling the referent with the representation, or absence with presence, language is “fait d’inquiétude [et] de contradictions” (*PF*: 315) [made of uneasiness [and] contradictions (*WF*: 325)]. While the writer may feel a sense of omnipotence, as does Adam, this mastery is feigned, usurped, and subject to being taken back. Language does not turn absence into presence, chaos into order, and the unknown into knowledge. Rather, the paradoxical coexistence of absence and presence within it renders language haunting and uneasy. Within a word, “le néant lutte et travaille, sans relâche il creuse, s’efforce, cherchant une issue, rendant nul ce qui l’enferme, infinie inquiétude” (*PF*: 315) [nothingness is struggling and toiling away, it digs tirelessly, doing its utmost to find a way out, nullifying what encloses it - it is infinite disquiet (*WF*: 326)]. These ideas orbit a key question of Blanchot’s œuvre: can there exist a speech outside of dialectical recuperation? To satisfy this question, one must, paradoxically, forgo answering it. The response to the dialectic must be indirect because it is nearly impossible to oppose one component of a binary pair without constituting another binary opposition. Instead of answering this question, Blanchot’s conception of literature preserves the “vie de la question. Elle peut se renfermer sur celle-ci, mais pour la préserver en la gardant ouverte” (*EL*: 219) [question's vitality. It can close in around the question, but it does so in order to preserve the question by keeping it open (*SL*: 211)]. It is an impossible speech which, like a secret, can only exist by

remaining untold. Indeed, “[l]’œuvre attire celui qui s’y consacre vers le point où elle est à l’épreuve de l’impossibilité” (EL: 169) [he who devotes himself to the work is drawn by it toward the point where it undergoes impossibility (SL: 163)], rendering literature the “révélation où rien n’apparaît” (EL: 208) [revelation where nothing appears (SL: 199)].

### 2.2.2 The Centre that Displaces Itself

Blanchot’s introductory note to *L’Espace littéraire* begins to elucidate his response to the dialectic, through the myth of Orpheus. It reads:

*Un livre, même fragmentaire, a un centre qui l’attire : centre non pas fixe, mais qui se déplace par la pression du livre et les circonstances de sa composition. Centre fixe aussi, qui se déplace, s’il est véritable, en restant le même et en devenant toujours plus central, plus dérobé, plus incertain et plus impérieux. Celui qui écrit le livre l’écrit par désir, par ignorance de ce centre. Le sentiment de l’avoir touché peut bien n’être que l’illusion de l’avoir atteint; quand il s’agit d’un livre d’éclaircissements, il y a une sorte de loyauté méthodique à dire vers quel point il semble que le livre se dirige : ici, vers les pages intitulées Le Regard d’Orphée (EL [original emphasis]: V)*

*[A book, even a fragmentary one, has a center which attracts it. This center is not fixed, but is displaced by the pressure of the book and circumstances of its composition. Yet it is also a fixed center which, if it is genuine, displaces itself, while remaining the same and becoming always more central, more hidden, more uncertain and more imperious. [...] When the book in question is one whose purpose is to elucidate, there is a kind of methodological good faith in stating toward what point it seems to be directed: here, toward the pages entitled "Orpheus' Gaze." (SL [original emphasis]: V)]*

This centre, which perpetually displaces itself, refers to Blanchot’s notion of the outside which can be described as the dark underside of understanding, clarity, and knowledge. However, it does not exist in the binary pairing with meaning that this may suggest. It is neither meaning nor incomprehensibility, neither knowledge nor the unknown, neither logical nor illogical. It cannot be understood through a relation to its binary opposition and its inexhaustible otherness offers no prospect of recuperation. In this way, it is not present, as such, and can be better understood as an exteriorising force. As Blanchot explains, the outside is the source of thought in that it irresistibly urges consciousness to capture it. However, it is also the limit of language, as that which is always exterior to meaning. Within the myth of Orpheus, Eurydice plays the role of this origin and limit of representation. This is illustrated by the search for the book’s centre, in *L’Espace littéraire*, which is

then displaced and substituted by the essay “Le Regard d’Orphée”. Within the essay, the pursuit of the centre that becomes more central persists: that of Eurydice, “le point profondément obscur vers lequel l’art, le désir, la mort, la nuit semblent tendre” (*EL*: 179) [the profoundly obscure point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend (*SL*: 171)]. When Orpheus looks at Eurydice, she disappears, and “l’essence de la nuit devient l’inessentiel” (*EL*: 182) [the essence of night becomes the inessential (*SL*: 173)]. Orpheus’s song is inaugurated by the search for Eurydice and her essence and the attempt to render her present. His gaze, on the other hand, consists of the revelation that there is no essential, pure, or whole Eurydice that the song could resurrect; she is already dead. While Orpheus’s gaze appears to have ended the work, his turning does not mark its termination because he “peut tout, sauf regarder ce « point » en face, sauf regarder le centre de la nuit dans la nuit” (*EL*: 179) [is capable of everything, except of looking this point in the face, except of looking at the center of night in the night (*SL*: 171)]. Eurydice’s invisibility renders his gaze one that never reaches its term, revealing the turning of an interminable cycle. Blanchot states that “[i]l est inévitable qu’Orphée passe outre à la loi qui lui interdit de « se retourner », car il l’a violée dès ses premiers pas vers les ombres” (*EL*: 180) [[i]t is inevitable that Orpheus transgress the law which forbids him to “turn back,” for he already violated it with his first steps toward the shades (*SL*: 172)]. This means that, because the song is not possible without Eurydice’s absence, the revelation of this absence begins as soon as the song does, inscribing in it the inevitability of the irresistible backwards gaze. Far from terminating the work, “[é]crire commence avec le regard d’Orphée” (*EL*: 184) [writing begins with Orpheus’s gaze (*SL*: 176)]. In walking away from Eurydice, in attempting to bring her back to the light of day, Orpheus had always been facing her absence and inadvertently moving toward her banishment to the underworld. In the same way, the outside, as both the condition upon which thought depends and an immutable threat to its integrity, does not permit language or thought to reach a state of completion.

### 2.2.3 Day’s Night and the *Other* Night

Writing is described by Blanchot as “[e]xpérience qui est proprement nocturne, qui est celle même de la nuit” (*EL*: 169) [purely nocturnal, it is the very experience of night (*SL*: 163)]. Here, Blanchot’s use of the term “nuit” [night] further elucidates his deconstruction of the dialectic. In an everyday sense,

Blanchot explains, the night is understood through its relation to day, deriving its signification and significance not in and of itself but from the fulfilment of its “devoir de s’opposer au jour” (*EL*: 174) [duty of opposing itself to the day (*SL*: 168)]. Blanchot writes, “[q]uand on oppose la nuit et le jour et les mouvements qui s’y accomplissent, c’est encore à la nuit du jour qu’il est fait allusion” (*EL*: 174) [[w]hen we oppose night and day and the movements accomplished in each, it is still to the night of day that we allude (*SL*: 168)]. The night gains its importance as that which “rend la lumière plus riche et fait de la clarté, au lieu de la scintillation de la surface, le rayonnement venu de la profondeur” (*EL*: 174) [makes the light richer and gives to clarity's superficial sparkle a deep inner radiance (*SL*: 167)]. As is the case in the dialectic, the negative is subservient to the positive component of a binary pair. This motion towards clarity and wholeness corresponds to Orpheus’s attempt to resurrect Eurydice intact. Like the work of reason, the day, and the dialectic, Orpheus’s “*œuvre*, c’est de le ramener [la profondeur] au jour et de lui donner, dans le jour, forme, figure, et réalité” (*EL*: 179) [*work* is to bring [the depths] back to the light of day and to give it form, shape, and reality in the day (*SL*: 171)]. In Blanchot’s words, this movement allows the day to become “le tout du jour et de la nuit” (*EL*: 174) [the whole of the day and the night (*SL*: 167)] fulfilling “la grande promesse du mouvement dialectique” (*EL*: 174) [the great promise of the dialectic (*SL*: 167)]. However, according to Blanchot, there is an *other* night. If “[d]ans la nuit, tout a disparu” (*EL*: 169) [[i]n the night, everything has disappeared (*SL*: 163)] the *other* night is encountered when “« tout a disparu » apparaît” (*EL*: 169) [“everything has disappeared” appears (*SL*: 163)]. This is equal to the moment when Orpheus witnesses the disappearance of Eurydice and the transformation of her essence into the inessential. In the *other* night, “l’aveuglement est vision encore, vision qui n’est plus possibilité de voir, mais impossibilité de ne pas voir” (*EL*: 23) [blindness is vision still, vision which is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing (*SL*: 32)]. Not only is it impossible to see the void that exerts its pull, but it is also impossible not to look at it. When one looks, however, it becomes invisible and invisibility is what becomes visible which, in turn, must disappear, and so on. This is the very definition of haunting as, as Blanchot states, “ce qui nous hante est l’inaccessible dont on ne peut se défaire, ce qu’on ne trouve pas et qui, à cause de cela, ne se laisse pas éviter” (*EL*: 271) [[w]hat haunts us is something inaccessible from which we cannot extricate ourselves. It is that which

cannot be found and therefore cannot be avoided (*SL*: 259)]. The gaze of Orpheus and the *other* night are the incessant starting over of a search for a beginning that has not yet occurred and an ending which has not yet reached its term. While it is true that in everyday life we must, to an extent, repress the infidelity of language to its referent because “la vie pratique et l’accomplissement des tâches vraies exigent ce renversement” (*EL*: 273) [[p]ractical life and the accomplishment of true tasks require this reversal (*SL*: 260)], it is the role of the literary writer to momentarily remember and write the dreadful thought of the impotence of thought. This is the moment of Orpheus’s gaze, who yields to his desire for Eurydice who he has, until now, so faithfully denied. In this way, the task of literature is to speak about nothing, which is to speak of that which cannot be named. The type of speech that recognises its inherent failure would follow the movement of Orpheus’s gaze back which seeks “non pas la faire vivre, mais avoir vivante en elle la plénitude de sa mort” (*EL*: 180) [not to make [Eurydice] live, but to have living in her the plenitude of her death (*SL*: 172)].

## 2.3 Fascination: Orpheus Haunted

### 2.3.1 The Dispersal of Subjectivity

Blanchot coins the haunting of literature fascination, through which brings the notions of the subject and identity under the same scrutiny as he did the dialectic and the day. To understand fascination, one must ask: how is it possible that Orpheus looks back to give up *both* his vocation as a poet and the love of his life, Eurydice? Does he choose a life of poetry, in sacrificing Eurydice, or one of love, in choosing to look at her? According to Blanchot, the answer lies in the idea that *he* is momentarily no longer there. He does not choose one, or the other, or neither of his options; he does not choose *tout court*. He is lost in passion and cannot be identified as the talented musician and devoted husband he is typically known as, in his betrayal of Eurydice and his abandonment of the song. He cannot recognise himself in the throes of a desire that comes from outside of him and his own motives. This is because “l’*autre* nuit est toujours l’*autre*, et celui qui l’entend devient *autre*, celui qui s’en rapproche s’éloigne de soi, n’est plus celui qui s’en rapproche, mais celui que s’en détourne” (*EL*: 176) [[t]he *other* night is always the other, and he who senses it becomes the other. He who



approaches it departs from himself, is no longer he who approaches but he who turns away (*SL*: 169)]. In this way, fascination renders the categories of subject and object, self and other, redundant. When one encounters the *other* night, the dissociative force of the outside causes the dispersal of subjectivity, uprooting the experience of a fixed centre of consciousness. It's a case of "passer du Je au Il, de sorte que ce qui m'arrive n'arrive à personne" (*EL*: 24) [[passing] from the first to the third person, so that what happens to me happens to no one (*SL*: 33)]. Fascination occurs in writing because no self, no fully constituted whole, can speak; "[l]e langage ne commence qu'avec le vide; nulle plénitude, nulle certitude ne parle; à qui s'exprime, quelque chose d'essentiel fait défaut" (*PF*: 314) [[l]anguage can begin only with the void; no fullness, no certainty can ever speak; something essential is lacking in anyone who expresses himself (*WF*: 324)]. In alignment with the relation between speech and the outside, the condition that selfhood be engendered is that there not be a self in the first place. For identity to persist, it must remain impossible to attain. The resulting identity is both permeated and haunted by this absence and is produced in and of an interminable sense of loss. It is for this reason that Orpheus is "infiniment mort" (*EL*: 182) [infinitely dead (*SL*: 173)] in the gaze. The effacement of identity is equal to the impossibility of temporal progression, personal narratives, and a teleological movement towards an articulated sense of self. In other words, fascination removes the writer from a chronological experience of temporality and instead enters him into "la fascination de l'absence de temps" (*EL*: 20) [the fascination of time's absence (*SL*: 32)]. Fascination is not experienced because it occurs outside of time: it can only be experienced as having already occurred or as the threat of its return. This is exemplified by the structure of the Orphic myth in which Orpheus is not led to an articulated sense of self, by his song, and is, instead, suspended between a death that has already occurred and another that threatens, allowing us to understand the gaze as a dissociative occurrence that stops the passage of time.

### 2.3.2 A Blind Seeing

As with the experience of the *other* night, fascination consists of a blind witnessing of the appearance of disappearance. Blanchot writes that fascination "est la relation que le regard entretient, relation elle-même neutre et impersonnelle, avec la profondeur sans regard et sans contour, l'absence qu'on voit

parce qu'aveuglante" (*EL*: 24) [is the relation the gaze entertains - a relation which is itself neutral and impersonal - with sightless, shapeless depth, the absence one sees because it is blinding (*SL*: 33)]. This absence is blinding because it is the ungraspable that cannot be ascertained nor ignored. In the same way that Blanchot disputes the purity of knowledge, the clarity of vision is compromised by literature. However, as we know, the outside does not simply leave thought alone; it provokes it into being. Likewise, the fascinating spectacle is so overwhelming that, at the same time as casting the subject away, it seizes the gaze. As a result, the fascinated subject "ne voit pas à proprement parler, mais cela le touche dans une proximité immédiate" (*EL*: 24) [doesn't see, properly speaking, what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity (*SL*: 33)]. This is precisely, the formulation of Orpheus's irresistible but impossible gaze upon Eurydice and the experience of the *other* night. While the loss of agency and subjectivity of fascination lets us begin to conceptualise the compulsion that would govern the Orpheus complex, the notion that fascination seizes the gaze, allows us to imagine the sort of blind seeing that this reflex would exert, both of which will be analysed in relation to *Paris*, *Texas*.

## 2.4 Conclusion

This chapter has served as a theoretical background upon which to construct the analyses of the following chapters. It has shown that the myth of Orpheus epitomises Blanchot's understanding of literature in that, in contrast to the dialectic, it exceeds ontologisation and fails to recuperate its referent. The gaze of Orpheus was compared to Blanchot's notions of the *other* night and fascination, which are conceptualised as an occurrence that takes place outside of time, memory, understanding, and visibility but which, nevertheless, seize language and the eye. This has paved the way for the following chapter, which further investigates Blanchot's critique of mastery in language, applying it to his interrogation of common notions of narcissism and identity which will, in turn, be applied to my case study in the third chapter.

## Chapter 2: Orpheus and Narcissus

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will view the fascination in Orpheus's gaze, from a psychoanalytic angle, using Blanchot's critique of narcissism, in *L'Écriture du désastre*. As Lacoue-Labarthe states, this book aims "to destroy [...] the conventional conception of narcissism" (Lacoue-Labarthe, 2015: 106)<sup>9</sup> by tackling three popular appropriations of the myth of Narcissus, which still inform common understandings of narcissism today. These will be unpacked to facilitate a comparison between Orpheus's gaze and that of Narcissus, as Blanchot understands them. This will then be applied to two differing theories of cinema spectatorship, namely Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and Derrida's theorisation of hauntology, to demonstrate the significance of Blanchot's conceptualisation of the gaze in cinema. This will lay the groundwork for the application of these ideas to *Paris, Texas*, in the following chapter.

### 3.2 Blanchot, Narcissism, and the Primal Scene

#### 3.2.1 Narcissism: Definitions and Challenges

To begin, let us sketch the conventional definitions of narcissism that Blanchot tackles. In an everyday sense, the term connotes excessive self-admiration or self-obsession. In a similar vein, the first known usage of the term in a psychoanalytic context, by Paul Näcke in 1899, maintained that narcissism was a trait of perverse people who view their own body as a sexual object. In the essay "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914), Freud quickly dismisses this derogatory definition of the term, widening its scope to signify the "libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature" (Freud, 1914: 74). Here, narcissism is understood as the self-love that seeks to preserve the ego and the condition of every psyche. Blanchot

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<sup>9</sup> This quotation is taken from "Interview with Pascal Pozzos" which she conducted as part of her doctoral thesis on Maurice Blanchot and psychoanalysis. The interview was never intended for publication and was not included in the original French edition of *Agonie terminée, agonie interminable* (2011). It is only available in translated form, in the English edition of *Ending and Interminable Agony* (2015).

writes that this conception of narcissism is “facile d’en dénoncer l’effet en tout et partout” (*ED*: 192) [easily discernible in everything everywhere (*WD*: 125)]. Like the day, narcissism subsumes its opposite. Both to be and not to be narcissistic can be considered as such, for no one is more narcissistic than he who claims not to be. Blanchot seeks to interrupt this economy of narcissism in the same way that he disrupts daytime thought. This is not a simple task as presenting the self with otherness allows it to be further differentiated, defined, and affirmed. It would be just as unfruitful to discuss the techniques of the faceless author who exerts an invisible authority, “de s’affirmer en s’annulant” (*ED*: 192) [to affirm by annulling himself (*WD*: 125)]. As Lacoue-Labarthe states, “the great self-effacing writer who disappears, who is anonymous, etc., is really only a stunt that reinforces the figure of the author, the writer as a sovereign self” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 2015: 100-101). So, in the same way that he highlights the prohibition of Orpheus’s song, Blanchot tackles narcissism by considering its conditions and limitations. He asks: what appears in disappearance when one seeks the origin of the self, as Orpheus sought the origin of his song? Which condition or law does one forget when this turning back, to the first moment of selfhood, is carried out?

### 3.2.2 Ovid’s Omission

Let us turn to narcissism’s origin: the myth of Narcissus. The most well-known rendition is that of Ovid, which posits that Narcissus, a young demi-god, was punished for rejecting the love of his secret admirer, Echo. He was condemned to fall in love with his reflection, in a lagoon, paralysing him in adoration of the figure he believed to be real until his death, after which a flower blooms from his corpse. Not unlike Freud’s understanding of narcissism, this version of the myth follows a dialectical movement toward recuperation, symbolised by the flower that grows on the site of Narcissus’s tragic death, bearing new life and beauty. This is consolidated by Kuzma, who writes, “[n]ot only does the myth put death to work in the service of a moralistic lesson, it also puts otherness to work in the service of self discovery” (Kuzma, 2019: 105). However, Blanchot reproaches Ovid’s version of the myth, stating that it “finit par oublier” (*ED*: 192) [forgets (*WD*: 125)] a crucial aspect. In Ovid’s version of the myth, a prophet tells Narcissus’s mother that “il vivra s’il ne se connaît pas” (*ED*: 196) [he will live if he does not know himself (*WD*: 128)], implying that Narcissus chooses self-knowing

over life. Blanchot, on the other hand, emphasises that Narcissus does not love or know himself because he does not recognize himself in the water. He believes the reflection to be someone else, someone perfect. In this way, the attraction that he experiences is not the pleasure of identification but the pull of a vacuous image which, like “toute image [...] est attirante, attire du vide même et de la mort en son leurre” (*ED*: 193) [every image [...] exerts the attraction of the void, and of death in its falsity (*WD*: 125)]. Narcissus’s fascination with it ensures that there is no self for the image to refer to, rendering it the repetition of a person who was not there to begin with. In this moment, Narcissus “se dilue sans savoir, perdant une vie qu’il n’a pas” (*ED*: 193) [is washed away without knowing it, losing a life he does not have (*WD*: 126)], revealing his identity as the expression of absence and loss. Ovid’s forgetting is reminiscent of Orpheus who forgets the law that prohibits him from looking back. Blanchot completes the gesture that Ovid commenced, in looking back at Narcissus in his absent presence, naming this ghostly version of Narcissus “anti-Narcissus”. The contrast between Ovid’s Narcissus and Blanchot’s anti-Narcissus is parallel to the contrast between the Eurydice that Orpheus believes to have captured in the song, and the ghostly shade that he glimpses when turning around. In the same manner that the principal explorations of the myth of Narcissus forget this important aspect, we may see the same forgetting occur in dominant interpretations of the Orphic myth which remember him as a “shaman and a magician who [...] used his spells to bring the dead back to the world of the living” (Warden, 1982: viii). This illustrates Blanchot’s argument that in every expression of identity, lingers the simultaneous falling away of a faceless, anti-narcissistic figure, in the same way that, with every turn towards the day, comes an Orphic turn toward the *other* night.

### 3.2.3 Every Poet is Narcissus

Mathäs highlights that, before Freud popularised the psychoanalytic use of the term narcissism to describe the drive for self-preservation, the Jena Romantics<sup>10</sup> used the myth to explore the auto-poiesis of the poet. This appropriation of the myth constitutes another avenue through which Blanchot takes in his deconstruction of narcissism. For the Jena Romantics, the myth epitomised the

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<sup>10</sup> The Jena Romantics were a group of 18th-century German Romantic Poets. They constituted the first phase of German Romanticism and included poets such as Novalis, Hölderlin, Caroline Schlegel, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Friedrich Von Schlegel.

way in which the poet explores his soul through poetry, blurring the lines between life and art. Despite their poetic ambitions, however, their appropriation of the myth bears a striking resemblance to that of psychoanalysis. As Mäthas writes, “the literature of [the German Romantics] reflects the tension between the bourgeois writer’s need for stable identity and the desire for self-transformation through artistic expression” (Mäthas, 2008: 14). This is comparable to the Freudian subject, who “in attempting to cure himself is also involved in a kind of narrative cure” (Kahane, Bernheimer, 1985: 18), designed to suit the needs of the “inner-directed bourgeois character” (Carveth, 1992: 101). Freud believed that the analyst’s role was to restore a sense of coherence to the patient, by ontologizing and historicising events that caused a sense of fragmentation and a loss of control. Therefore, we see in both the Romantic and psychoanalytic pursuit of identity, what Blanchot described as the “le vertige occidental qui rapporte toutes les valeurs au Même” (*ED*: 192) [dizzying occidental tendency to link all values back up with the Same (*WD*: 125)] which is “d’autant plus s’il s’agit d’un « même » mal constitué” (*ED*: 192) [all the more pronounced when it is a matter of an ill-constituted “same” - the self (*WD*: 125)]. In other words, despite their concern with subjectivity, the guiding philosophy of the Romantic poets and the Freudian analyst/subject is structured around a hierarchical relation between identity and otherness, favouring the subject, coherence, and consciousness while repressing, what Blanchot calls, the outside. Blanchot further explores this via Willhelm Schlegel’s proclamation that “[t]ous les poètes sont des Narcisse” (*ED*: 205) [[e]very poet is Narcissus (*WD*: 135)]. He suggests that rather than “se contenter de retrouver là superficiellement la marque du romantisme pour lequel la création - la poésie - serait subjectivité absolue, le poète se faisant sujet vivant dans le poème qui le reflète” (*ED*: 205) [be content simply to rediscover in this statement the superficial mark of a certain romanticism according to which creation - poetry - is absolute subjectivity and the poet a living subject in the poem that reflects him (*WD*: 135)] his readers should interpret Schlegel’s statement in an alternative way. Reiterating his counter-reading of the Narcissus myth, Blanchot argues that the poet “ne se reconnaît pas, c’est qu’il n’y prend pas conscience de lui-même, rejeté de cet espoir facile d’un certain humanisme selon lequel, écrivant ou « créant », il transformerait en plus grande conscience la part d’expérience obscure qu’il subirait” (*ED*: 205) [does not recognise himself, for he does not become conscious of himself. He is excluded from the facile, humanistic hope that by

writing, or “creating,” he would transform his dark experience into a greater consciousness (*WD*: 135)]. Far from engendering a higher sense of self-knowing, the poet’s work reveals the absence and insufficiency that necessitates and flounders it. If every poet is Narcissus, then every poet must also be anti-Narcissus, echoing Blanchot’s statement that Orpheus “n’est Orphée que dans le chant [...] mais, dans le chant aussi [...] Orphée lui-même est l’Orphée dispersé” (*EL*: 181) [is Orpheus only in the song [...] but in the song too [...] Orpheus himself is the dispersed Orpheus (*SL*: 172)]. Moreover, Blanchot describes Narcissus, as “détourné de soi, portant et supportant le détour, mourant de ne pas se re-connaître [sic], laisse la trace de ce qui n’a pas eu lieu” (*ED*: 205) [turned away from himself - causing the detour of which he is the effect, dying of not re-cognizing himself - leaves the trace of what has not occurred (*WD*: 135)]. Evoking the motif of turning, so intimately linked to the Orphic myth, he reiterates how the gaze upon the image irreversibly moves towards the dissociative instant of fascination, as is the case in the Orphic myth.

The contrast between Narcissus and anti-Narcissus is reminiscent of that between a Blanchotian, fascinated Orpheus and various portrayals of a self-centred, sentimental poet, who casts Eurydice aside in favour of his art. The latter likely contributes to a study of the Orpheus complex that describes a poet whose “self-absorption resembles narcissism” (Dawson, 2000: 256). This type of Orpheus is found in the numerous renditions of Orpheus in modern, post-modern, and contemporary cinema, as mentioned in the introduction. For example, in *Deconstructing Harry*, Woody Allen plays a self-centred man who descends to the underworld to win his Eurydice back, but only because she had lost interest in him due to his ignorance of her emotional needs. In Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, which has also been likened to an Orphic tragedy (Brown, 1986), Scotty reproduces his own Eurydice, in the image of a hallucinatory woman he loves but has never spoken to or understood - again, gratifying his desire by creating a vacuous image of her. Similarly, Cocteau’s Orpheus (Jean Marais), in *Orphée*, instead of loving Eurydice who is depicted as a simple, dull housewife, loves the female personification of his death and the impetus of his poetry. This reflects Cocteau’s belief that the poet’s “role is to stir up [...] the ‘night’ within the human soul, the creative obscurity out of which individuality and hence fulfilment spring” (Tolton, 1999: 27). These romantic and traditional

examples are “conspicuous for the evidence of their author’s self-indulgent identification with Orpheus than for the interest of either their literary form or their psychological implications” (Dawson, 2000: 249). Moreover, they typify the precarious belief in self-affirmation that Blanchot seeks to destabilise. That being said, it must be noted that his poetic explorations of the relation between art and death are not dissimilar to Blanchot’s<sup>11</sup>. For instance, in *The Testament of Orpheus*, Cocteau states that, like Oedipus, “les œuvres se font toutes seules et rêvent de tuer père et mère” (Cocteau, 1960: 00:24:59-00:25:04) [artworks make themselves and dream of killing their mother and father (my translation)]. This suggests that despite Cocteau’s self-obsession, there was a sense that he was merely a vehicle for his art and excluded from any final product. Klawans captures this, stating that “for all his narcissism, [Cocteau] did somehow vanish into the mirrors he had gathered around himself” (Klawans, 2011: 333). Cocteau’s doubling, between an Orpheus who expresses his individuality and one who disappears amidst a cluster of reflections, reinforces Blanchot’s statement that the poet, no matter how self-indulgent he may be, does not recognize or find himself in his work but, rather, is “rejeté, exclu de ce qui s’écrit” (*ED*: 205) [dismissed, excluded from what is written (*WD*: 135)].

### 3.2.4 The Primal Scene: Freud and Narcissism

Another ‘origin’ of narcissism that necessitates further examination is Freud’s notion of the primal scene which concerns the genesis of selfhood in the male subject and was conceived by Freud, in “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis” (1918), also known as the “Wolf Man” case. This case concerned a patient who would recount a recurring nightmare that he had as a child of three or four years of age. In the dream, the child looks out of a window to see six or seven wolves standing on the branches of a tree, inciting terror in him. Freud argues that “behind the content of the dream there lay some such unknown scene - one, that is, which had already been forgotten at the time of the dream” (Pankejeff, Gardiner, Freud, Brunswick, 1989: 178) which he aimed to unveil. Through a long period of psychoanalytic sessions, he deduces that the boy, at age one and a half, had witnessed his parents

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Blanchot saw, in Cocteau, an “intelligence qui usurpe la fonction de l’esprit” (Bident, 1998: 118) [intelligence which usurps the role of the mind (Bident, 2019: 94)].



engaged in coitus. The sight of the mother's genitals induced castration fear in the child, who was already afraid of his authoritative father. This scene came to constitute an archetypal model to understand the constitution of the male subject, known as the primal scene, structured around the events of the mythological tale of Medusa. According to the myth, anyone who looks upon the face of the terrifying Medusa is turned to stone. The sight of Medusa's head symbolises the young boy's first-ever glimpse of the female genitalia - the cluster of snakes resembling the pubic area - which incites castration anxiety. The fear and curiosity that the spectacle induces characterise Freud's conception of fascination, whereby the radical otherness that the female genitalia represents must be appropriated to terminate the sense of disarmament it exerts. The turning to the stone of the Medusa's onlooker is, therefore, interpreted as "a stiffening which defiantly reasserts the presence of the dubious penis" (Connor, 1998: 14), allowing the child to escape his paralysis through self-affirmation. This constitutes a dialectical movement of recuperation that aims at ontologizing, rearranging, and hierarchising the same and other to subordinate otherness to the affirmative image of the self. The figure of the Law emerges, in the form of the father who imposes the Oedipal prohibition in a "mission [...] to break into and disrupt the symbiotic connection between mother and child" (Carveth, 1992: 8), through castration anxiety. As a result of this scene, the child emerges into the symbolic order, having broken the undifferentiated union with the mother that precedes the inauguration of the self. Had Blanchot conducted a reading of the myth of Medusa, he may have interpreted this petrification as he did Narcissus who, having "devenue image, il se dissout dans la dissolution immobile de l'imaginaire" (*ED*: 193) [turned into an image, dissolves in the immobile dissolution of the imaginary (*WD*: 126)]. The turning to stone would imply an immobility - an impotence - as opposed to the rigidity - an assertion of masculine power - seen in Freud's reading of the sequence of events. In other words, the Blanchotian fascinated subject is lost in the slippage of an image that withdraws from the world whereas the Freudian fascinated subject puts otherness to work to emerge as an evermore complete and coherent entity. Despite this, the spectral presence of the outside of narcissism can be seen in Freud's lengthy struggle with defining the notion. As Rees writes, Freud "often seems at pains to argue that love of others disguises a foundational love of self; and yet each time he attempts to elaborate it, that love of self, too, seems curiously other-oriented" (Rees, 2022:

892), indicating “traces of an alterity at the heart of identity” (ibid). Freud’s obsessive attempts at reflecting, arranging, and ontologizing identity, and his perpetual failure and struggle to do so, are exemplified by the opposing movements in the Orphic myth. This is captured by Aumont’s statement that an Orpheus complex would consist of the compulsion to express one’s identity by “se retour[n]ant sur son passé, pour essayer de le comprendre, c’est-à-dire de le faire exister” (Aumont, 1999: 45) [look[ing] back on one’s past, to try and understand it, that is to say, to make it exist (my translation)]. These thwarted attempts are simultaneously terminated and rebirthed by their own impossibility and the retrospective gaze serves to “finalement couronner tout cela d’un renvoi au néant” (Aumont, 1999: 45) [finally, to top it all off with a return to oblivion (my translation)].

While Blanchot did not write of the myth of Medusa, he does respond to the Freudian primal scene that it inspired. His primal scene is an abstract rendering of an ungraspable event that “ne prouve rien, ne découvre rien” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 2011: 49) [proves nothing, uncovers nothing (Lacoue-Labarthe, 2015: 21)]. Subverting Freud’s approach, the child in Blanchot’s primal scene does not find an original scene behind his vision, nor does he transcend to a state of absolute self-knowing. Rather, he encounters the nothingness that the scene carries within it. In this way, Blanchot argues that “[i]l n’y a pas d’origine, si origine suppose une présence originelle” (ED: 180) [[t]here is no origin, if origin presupposes an original presence (WD: 117)] because identity is forever haunted and threatened by the absence that founds it. This ambiguity is reflected as early as the title, (« Une scène primitive? ») [“A Primal Scene?”], by the question mark that quickly puts the notions of scene (i.e. a cohesive and whole event) and first-time under scrutiny. This is emphasised by the fact that not just one but three fragments, under this title, are dispersed throughout *L’Écriture*. The central fragment describes a young child of around 7 or 8 gazing out of a window onto his garden, his play space, and the trees. Looking up to the sky, he watches:

*Le ciel, le même ciel, soudain ouvert, noir absolument et vide absolument, révélant (comme par la vitre brisée) une telle absence que tout s’y est depuis toujours et à jamais perdu, au point que s’y affirme et s’y dissipe le savoir vertigineux que rien est ce qu’il y a, et d’abord rien au-delà (ED: 117)*

*[the sky, the same sky, suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had broken) such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein - so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond (WD: 72)]*

The primal scene is not so much an enclosed and coherent incident, as it is an unfurling of frames that break and fail to contain their contents, beginning with the parentheses that frame the title. This is echoed by the frame of the window that presents the scene before it is shattered. The window opens up to an earlier primal scene: that of the Freudian child who looks at the wolves through the window. Following this strange revelation, the child experiences a flood of tears which recalls Nietzsche's episode, when he broke down in tears in front of a collapsing horse, pulling a carriage<sup>12</sup>. These intertextual links and frames give the reader a sense that, as Blanchot states, the primal scene "ce n'est pas un commencement: chaque scène est toujours prête à s'ouvrir sur une scène antérieure, et chaque conflit n'est pas seulement lui-même, mais le recommencement d'un conflit plus ancien, qu'il réanime et au niveau duquel il tend à se rétablir" (*EI*: 267) [is not a beginning inasmuch as each scene is always ready to open onto a prior scene, and each conflict is not only itself but the beginning again of an older conflict it revives and at whose level it tends to resituate itself (*IC*: 231)]. This endless shattering of frames is synonymous with Orpheus breaking the prohibition that stops him from looking at Eurydice. To explain, Cixous states that the black sky the child sees is not a night sky, because there are no stars. She writes, "[i]f he had seen the stars or a satellite, if he had had an Einsteinian vision or if he had seen God, the world would have had its limit," (Cixous, 1991: 23) but instead, the child "tolerates what is intolerable for the human imagination, that is to say the absence of limit" (*ibid*). The lack of a limit is identical to a lack of the law because "[t]he law first designates something and then limits it right away" (*ibid*). Here, the child watches the law disintegrate into the black sky. Every fixed idea or rule that structures his understanding of the world collapses. It is revealed that "[t]he secret of the law, of the categorical imperative, of the Oedipal prohibition, and of all the laws under which we live, is that there is no secret, there are no stars" (*ibid*: 25). The child's gaze upon the dark sky is strictly an Orphic gaze because, through it, Orpheus "affronte l'essence de

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<sup>12</sup> This was likely intentional, on Blanchot's part, considering that Nietzsche had a significant influence on his thought (Kuzma, 2016). Blanchot also spent a large portion of his life living in Èze, on the French coastal cliff top where Nietzsche wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (*ibid*: vii).

la limite, à savoir son caractère inaccessible: en approchant la limite, il la fait disparaître, mais il est en même temps confronté à une autre limite (l'absence de limites), autrement dit au retour de la limite” (Michel, 1999: 34) [faces the essence of the limit, namely its inaccessible character: in approaching the limit, he makes it disappear but he is, at the same time, confronted with another limit (the absence of limits), otherwise known as the return of the limit (my translation)]. This look reveals the fragility and falsity of the easily broken rule, and the absence of what he believed to be there all along: the Law/Eurydice. Indeed, the name “Eurydice” contains the greek word for law, meaning that to witness her absence “serait donc saisir la loi de l'œuvre” (Michel, 1999: 30) [would, then, be to grasp the law of the work (my translation)] which is revealed to be absent. If, as Cixous states, the law means that “[w]e are always inside the social [...] We are inside the narrative of the law and we cannot help it” (Cixous, 1991: 25), Orpheus's gaze, consists of exiting the realm of representation, narrative, and identity, to witness their disintegration. Again, the breaking of the window signifies the breaking of the narrative and identity it promises to contain. This motif is employed across Blanchot's œuvre. For instance, in *The Madness of the Day*, in which Blanchot contemplates notions of selfhood and their relation to psychoanalytic institutions, the narrator has broken glass thrown into his eyes by an unknown stranger. He is taken to the hospital where he is instructed to give his anamnesis. The narrator struggles to outline his story, offering the doctors a series of contradictions, proclaiming, “un récit? Non, pas de récit, plus jamais” (Blanchot, Davis, 1981: 31) [A story? No. No stories, never again (ibid: 18)]. As Cools points out, across various of Blanchot's récits, including *Le Dernier mot*, *Au Moment voulu*, *Celui qui m'accompagnait pas*, and *L'Arrêt de mort*, windows evoke both a distance and a desire to abolish this distance by smashing the window (Cools, Van de Mosselaer, 2019: 25-26). For example, in *Au Moment voulu*, the narrator craves breaking a window when he struggles to understand his opaque friend Judith. Michel argues that these instances are a meta-literary commentary on the frustration of the reader who attempts to cognize the text, and thereby recognize themselves in relation to it:

Récit aux mille reflets, *Au moment voulu*, comme les autres livres de Blanchot, attire et enferme le lecteur, qui est tenté, pour échapper à ce miroitement infini, de “casser les vitres” [...] et d'arrêter ainsi le mouvement vain qui, malgré les échecs successifs, le porte

à toujours croire se rapprocher d'un hypothétique point central, qui permettrait de rendre compte de la totalité du texte (Michel, 1999: 95).

[Tale of a thousand reflections, *When the Time Comes*, like Blanchot's other books, attracts and encloses the reader, who is tempted, in order to escape this infinite shimmering, to "break the windows" [...] and thus stop the vain movement that, despite successive failures, always leads them to believe they are approaching a hypothetical central point, which would allow them to realise the totality of the text (my translation)]

This relates this moment of fascination to an incapacity of language and an inability to identify. Blanchot does not allow the reader to identify, or to misidentify, with the characters and perspectives in his fiction, instead opening up a slippery sense of loss. In contrast to Freud's primal scene in which the entrance into the symbolic order consists of a definitive inauguration of self and the casting away of the mother, Blanchot's primal scene is the mark of an unending haunting and sense of exclusion from the symbolic order. Indeed, when the child in Blanchot's primal scene comes back to his senses, he is lost for words. Overcome by "la joie ravageante dont il ne pourra témoigner que par les larmes, un ruissellement sans fin de larmes [...] Il ne dit rien. Il vivra désormais dans le secret. Il ne pleurera plus" (*ED*: 117) [the ravaging joy to which he can bear witness only by tears, an endless flood of tears. [...] he says nothing. He will live henceforth in the secret. He will weep no more (*WD*: 72)]. Here, tears implicate the impotence of language; they arise when language fails to express an inexpressible emotion. The motif of the tearful eye also foregrounds a link between the impotence of language and a lack of visual clarity. Teardrops are not unlike the shards of glass that spring from "la brisure d'une vitre (derrière laquelle l'on s'assure d'une transparence protégée)" (*ED*: 178) [the smashing of a pane (behind which one rests assured of perfect, of protected, visibility) (*WD*: 115)]. The two link a lack of identification with a disruption to "cette exigence optique qui, dans la tradition occidentale, soumet depuis des millénaires notre approche des choses et nous invite à penser sous la garantie de la lumière ou sous la menace de l'absence de lumière" (*EI*: 28) [the optical imperative that in the Western tradition, for thousands of years, has subjugated our approach to things, and induced us to think under the guaranty of light or under the threat of its absence (*IC*: 27)]. This notion is contemplated by Derrida, who writes that "[a]u moment même où elles voilent la vue, les larmes dévoileraient le propre de l'œil [...] la *vérité* des yeux dont elles révéleraient ainsi la destination suprême: avoir en vue

l'imploration plutôt que la vision, adresser la prière, l'amour, la joie, la tristesse plutôt que le regard" (Derrida, 1990: 125) [at the very moment they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye [...] the *truth* of the eyes, whose ultimate destination they would thereby reveal: to have imploration rather than vision in sight, to address prayer, love, joy, or sadness rather than a look or gaze (Derrida, 1993(b): 126)]. Tears reveal the inextricable link between loss and expression, constituting a meeting point between the perception of the imperceivable and the expression of the inexpressible. This configuration matches that of the Orpheus complex as a compulsion to see and express the outside of vision and language, which inevitably reaches a point of invisibility and unspeakability. Moving forward, we may understand Orpheus's gaze as an example of the Blanchotian primal scene, which will be shown to be the case in *Paris, Texas*.

### 3.3 Blanchot, Identification, and Cinema

#### 3.3.1 Mirrors, Identity, and Fascination in Cinema

To prepare for the case study, this section will apply the ideas elaborated above to cinema in two ways. Firstly, it will read Mulvey's seminal text "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) against the grain, through Blanchot's critique of Ovid's telling of the myth of Narcissus. This will allow us to consider whether there is room for a Blanchotian sense of fascination within, what Mulvey has conceptualised as, a specular gaze, in cinema. Secondly, it will put Blanchot's alternative understanding of narcissism, the primal scene, and fascination into dialogue with Derrida's theorisation of hauntology to show that the absent-present character of the cinematic image renders it particularly well-equipped to channel the kind of gaze and speech that take place in the Blanchotian primal scene. Mulvey's essay belongs to a branch of film theory that Noël Carroll and David Bordwell coined "The Theory" (Bordwell, Carroll, 1996: xiii), which emerged and dominated in the 1970s and included work from theorists such as "Christian Metz (1975) [and] Louis Althusser ([1971] 2001)" (Wagner, 2020: 48). Considering its impact on a scholarly understanding of spectatorship, it would be logical and fruitful to contrast this theory against that of Blanchot. This section will focus on Mulvey's theory, as opposed to the aforementioned scholars, because, as Mulvey argues, the mastery

or control at the heart of identification is often gendered, which is seen in both the myth of Orpheus and *Paris, Texas*. By highlighting this power, we may trace the shadowy impotence that conditions and limits it.

Mulvey's essay draws heavily on Lacan's "The Mirror-phase as Formative of the Function of the I" (1936) which argues that because human babies have limited motor capacities, in comparison to other species, they experience a more intense pleasure in identifying with spectacles and images than their animalistic counterparts. This satisfaction arises from the identification with a body that is more capable and more whole than the infant experiences his own body to be, as he does not yet have full control over it. This persists into the relations formed throughout the rest of adult life and existence in social and symbolic orders. Mulvey argues that this applies to the sense of vicarious control gained from the specular identification with on-screen masculine heroes and the male gaze that they exert on submissive, objectified female characters. In the same way that language is used to have mastery over referents, such as "cette femme" (*PF*: 312) [this woman (*WF*: 322)] mentioned in Blanchot's work, the cinema spectator "[b]y means of identification with [the male hero], through participation in his power [...] can indirectly possess her [the female character] too" (Mulvey, 1975: 13). Mulvey uses Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958), and *Marnie* (1964) to exemplify this tendency. The male protagonists of these films are resemblant of the daytime Orpheus: they "are exemplary of the symbolic order and the law - a policeman (*Vertigo*), a dominant male possessing money and power (*Marnie*)" (ibid: 15). They cast an authoritative eye over the women that they fall in love with and try to save them, as Orpheus tries to save Eurydice from the underworld. For example, "Jeff [*Rear Window*] does not merely watch [Lisa] through his lens, as a distant meaningful image, he also sees her as a guilty intruder exposed by a dangerous man threatening her with punishment, and thus finally saves her" (ibid: 16). Likewise, Scottie in *Vertigo*, is given the opportunity to resurrect the woman he loves by 'reconstruct[ing] "Madeleine" out of Judy' (Brown, 1986: 33). This is carried out at the expense of the female character and she is, in the Blanchotian sense, annihilated by the power of representation. Scottie 'becomes the Orphic hero by attaining a symbolic, god-like immortality, living his own death (that of his double) while not dying himself, so that Judy/"Madeleine's" demise

becomes a sort of sacrificial murder' (ibid: 40). As a result, Brown writes, in order to complete his mission, "Scottie must rise to a level that is not only more purely Orphic but, ultimately, Narcissistic" (ibid: 39). Again, this highlights the relation between a classical understanding of the figure of Orpheus and Narcissus, which were explored through examples such as Cocteau's and Woody Allen's identification with the figure of Orpheus. Crucially, it exposes that, despite their sense of control, mastery, and heroism, these figures are haunted by the absent origins of their creations and identities.

To explain, Mulvey writes:

The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child's physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous and that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with mis-recognition (Mulvey, 1975: 9)

If viewed through Blanchot's exegesis of the Narcissus myth, the pleasure of identification is not "overlaid" with misidentification but, rather, is the strange joy of fascination, established within a moment of misidentification. This misrecognition renders the power of the male gaze a falsity which must be concealed, otherwise "the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the "invisible guest" [i.e. the spectator in the darkness of the cinema salle and the voyeuristic protagonist]' (ibid: 18) would be "destroyed" (ibid). This is why "the most important absence is that of the controlling male gaze within the screen scene" (ibid: 15) and "voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms" (ibid: 17) are deployed to preserve the refuge that this provides. This also reinforces the idea that to subvert a reassuring, specular image would involve exposing the invisible gaze that controls all: turning looked-at-ness into a feeling of being-looked-at. Mulvey's hypothesis is robust and it is not my intention to denounce it, nor is it her intention to explore the misrecognition that is the condition of the male gaze. What it does show, however, is that inscribed in cinema's "voyeuristic potential" (ibid) must lie the possibility for cinema to show what is not seen, controlled, or possessed when this misrecognition is revealed. This is the character of the Orphic gaze, the anti-narcissistic gaze, the tearful eye of the child in Blanchot's primal scene, and, as we will be shown in the following sub-section, the haunted gaze of the cinema spectator in Derrida's hauntology.



### 3.3.2 Hauntology

This subsection will introduce the governing principles of Derrida's hauntology, to highlight Blanchot's influence on the philosophy and, therefore, his applicability to the cinematic medium, in preparation for their application to the case study, in the following chapter. Derrida's hauntology consists of an interrogation of the spectre which is not merely a disembodied presence or a vestigial replica of something or someone who once lived. Rather, it resists identification, ontologisation, and representation. It is 'quelque « chose » qu'il reste difficile de nommer : ni âme ni corps, et l'une et l'autre. [...] Il y a du disparu dans l'apparition même comme réapparition du disparu' (*SM*: 25) [some "thing" that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other [...] There is something disappeared, departed in the apparition itself as reappearance of the departed (*SME*: 5)]. The spectre is undecidable in that it exceeds "les oppositions ontologiques entre l'absence et la présence, le visible et l'invisible, le vivant et le mort" (*EF*: 33) [the ontological oppositions between absence and presence, the visible and the invisible, the living and the dead (*EE*: 25)]. The ungraspability of the spectre endows it with a power that Derrida terms the visor effect, which he derives from the encounter between Hamlet and the ghost of his father, in the opening sequence of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1623). When the spectre appears, Hamlet cannot identify him because of the visor he is wearing which affords its user the elusive power of looking without being seen, hyperbolising Hamlet's sense of being haunted. Derrida writes: "[l]e spectre, ce n'est pas simplement ce visible invisible que je peux voir, c'est quelqu'un qui me regarde sans réciprocité possible, et qui donc fait la loi là où je suis aveugle, aveugle par situation" (*EF*: 137) [[t]he specter is not simply this visible invisible that I can see, it is someone who watches or concerns me without any possible reciprocity, and who therefore makes the law when I am blind, blind by situation (*EE*: 121)]. The sense of powerlessness exerted by the visor is reminiscent of the haunting literature of fascination, which seizes the gaze through its simultaneous unavoidability and ungraspability and, for this reason, goes "au-delà d'une logique du sujet conscient" (*EF*: 32-33) [beyond the logic of a conscious subject (*EE*: 24)]. The contrast between the mastery of dialectical, daytime speech and the ghostly absent-presence of literature is paralleled, in cinema, by the switch from the powerful identificatory male gaze outlined by Mulvey, in which the gaze is concealed to ensure voyeuristic, specular pleasure, and the visor effect

which exposes the gaze through the feeling of being watched. As in Blanchotian fascination and the primal scene, the subject's gaze and agency are snatched away by the visor effect and the lack of the Law is revealed, “[c]omme nous ne voyons pas qui nous voit, et qui fait la loi” (*SM*: 27) [[s]ince we do not see the one who sees us, and who makes the law (*SME*: 7). In the place of the law's historical and social narratives comes “la demande du fantôme, [ce qui] est aussi celle de l'avenir comme celle de la justice” (*EF*: 32) [the demand of the phantom [which] is the question and the demand of the future and of justice (*EE*: 24)]. The spectre, therefore, is the point of departure from which political responsibility and commemoration spawn because “[a]ucune justice [...] ne paraît possible ou pensable sans le principe de quelque responsabilité, au-delà de tout présent vivant, dans ce qui disjointe le présent vivant, devant les fantômes de ceux qui ne sont pas encore nés ou qui sont déjà morts” (*SM*: 15) [[n]o justice [...] seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead (*SME*: xviii)]. Again, as it contradicts the male gaze and the symbolic violence it inflicts on women, we may understand the decentering of the subject and the haunting of the visor effect as reflective of a political responsibility towards the other.

Derrida states that “[l]’expérience cinématographique appartient, de part en part, à la spectralité” (*CF*: 77) [[t]he cinematic experience belongs thoroughly to spectrality (*CP*: 26)]. This applies in two senses. Firstly, cinema “peut mettre en scène la fantômalité presque frontalement” (*CF*: 77) [can stage phantomality almost head-on (*CP*: 26)], through the content of its films. For instance, they can facilitate the haunting of political injustice, inciting anxiety through societal monsters, ghosts, and vampires, or reproducing the image of a dead person. For example, McMullen's film *Ghost Dance*, in which Derrida plays himself, stages the hauntings of various literary and philosophical figures and political movements, such as the spectral remnants of Freud, Marx, Kafka, and the Paris Commune - not to mention those of Derrida. Derrida has also spoken of an experience of spectrality in which he rewatched the film after the death of his co-star Pascale Ogier. In the scene, he asks her whether she believes in ghosts, to which she replies affirmatively. Derrida highlights the paradoxical temporality of haunting, in cinema, stating that when ‘elle a répété cela dans mon bureau, [...] déjà [sic] cette

spectralité était à l'œuvre [...] même si elle n'était pas morte dans l'intervalle, un jour, c'est une morte qui dirait : « je suis mort »' (*EF*: 135) [she repeated this in my office, already, this spectrality was at work [...] even if she hadn't died in the interval, one day, it would be a dead woman who said "I am dead" (*EE*: 120)]. As is the case in the atemporal instant of Blanchotian fascination, the spectre concerns a sense of time that is simultaneously directed towards the past and the future, which is brought to the fore in filmic scenarios such as this one. In another sense, cinema is spectral regardless of what it represents. Through what Derrida calls, '« greffes » de spectralité' (*CF*: 78) ["grafts" of spectrality (*CP*: 25)], cinema allows ghosts to return and various layers of haunting can be produced, by virtue of its absent-present form. In this way, cinema "inscrit des traces de fantômes sur une trame générale, la pellicule projetée, qui est elle-même un fantôme" (*CF*: 78) [inscribes traces of ghosts on a general framework, the projected film, which is itself a ghost (*CP*: 27)]. The roots of this idea can be seen in Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, in which he investigates the relationship between photography and death. Photography is indexical, meaning the contents of each photograph correspond to real bodies that had been before the camera at some point. In this way, "[t]oute photographie est un certificat de présence" (*LC*: 135) [[e]very photograph is a certificate of presence (*CL*: 87)], so much so that "le corps photographié vient me toucher de ses propres rayons" (*LC*: 128) [the photographed body touches me with its own rays (*CL*: 81)]. However, the photographic referent, frozen in time, is juxtaposed with the unstoppable passage of time and the eternal exile of the present moment. In this way, despite the overwhelming suggestion of presence, photography paradoxically "produit la Mort [sic] en voulant conserver la vie" (*LC*: 144) [produces death while trying to preserve life (*CL*: 92)]. Barthes's argument that photography is a stamp of presence that bares death differs from Derrida's, who says that the spectre allows the return of something that had not been present in the first place, which also resembles the structure of the Orphic myth in which Eurydice is always already dead; unresurrectable. This is because the present moment eternally diverges between past and future, and is therefore always split. Derrida coins the juxtaposition between a perpetually absent present and the paradoxical temporality of representation a time "out-of-joint" (*SME*: 1), referring to an expression used by Hamlet upon seeing the ghost of his father. Cinema extends this paradox between life and death, as it shares

photography's indexicality and atemporality while also introducing movement which, at once, further simulates presence and emphasises the loss and absence at the heart of this illusion.

The visor effect is foregrounded in the cinematic image, through the technique of "eye-line". During filming, an invisible line of sight is invented to give the impression that characters, filmed from opposite angles, are looking each other in the eyes. During the filming of a conversation between the two, in *Ghost Dance*, Ogier explained this technique to Derrida, who suggests that this illusory eye-line extends beyond the screen, towards the spectator. In said scene, Ogier's eye-line is cast to the side of the camera, creating the effect that she is almost looking into the lens. The slight misalignment between the camera's perspective and Ogier's eyes, renders her look "dissymétrique, échangé au-delà de tout échange possible, *eye-line* sans *eye-line* [...] l'autre regard croisé, dans une nuit infinie" (*EF*: 135) [dissymmetrical, exchanged beyond all possible exchange, eye-line without eye-line [...] the other gaze met, in an infinite night (*EE*: 120)]. Not only is this reminiscent of Orpheus's unrequited gaze but it also supports the idea that, as opposed to theories of identification and imaginary participation, in cinema, we encounter gazes that do not recognize us. We become concerned and haunted by others who disregard and exceed us. This decentres the spectator who is left haunted by the frustration of the unreciprocated gaze. To further conceptualise this, Derrida considers the impact that watching an image of oneself can have. We may presume that looking at an image of oneself would produce a much stronger specular recognition than watching a heroic protagonist in a narrative film played by a movie star, for instance. On the contrary, Derrida suggests that even an image of oneself can produce a strong sense of haunting and separation. He writes: "cette part de moi, je la gagne, je la retrouve narcissiquement, mais je la perds en même temps [...] j'aime les choses qui n'ont pas besoin de moi, les traces qui partent de moi" (Derrida, 2002: 22) [this part of me, I gain it, I recover it narcissistically, but I lose it at the same time [...] I love things that have no need for me, the traces that part from me (Cahill, Holland, 2015:13)]. Here, the pleasure of identification is undercut with a "love" for things outside of ourselves, like the dead Eurydice's allure inciting Orpheus's gaze. This reframes the dominant theory of pleasurable narcissistic identification, in cinema, as a certain "passion de l'image" (*EL*: 23) [passion for the image (*SL*: 32)], a self-effacing fascination, or an Orpheus complex.

### 3.4 Conclusion

This chapter served two key purposes. The first was to unpack Blanchot's deconstruction of common notions of narcissism in *L'Écriture du désastre* to inform a theory of the Orpheus complex. The second was to apply this notion to cinema through two differing theories of spectatorship. The first section showed that Blanchot uproots the poetic and psychoanalytic beliefs that narcissism affords self-knowing and permeates all aspects of life, proposing instead, that there is a radical dissociation and loss at the centre of identification. Three critical aspects of this theory were unpacked: Firstly, Blanchot's deconstruction of Ovid's version of the Narcissus myth which served to highlight a misrecognition at the heart of identity; secondly, his critique of the Jena Romantics' appropriation of the myth which emphasised this same sense of loss and exclusion within the context of poetic creation, including that of Orpheus; and finally, his reconfiguration of the Freudian primal scene which disputed the notion of a first time, which would presuppose the definitive constitution of a whole and the existence of a creative origin. Instead, Blanchot characterises the origin as an absent-present space of haunting which permeates any subsequent sense of identity. These three denouncements were contrasted against Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, unveiling the misrecognition that affords the male gaze a sense of power. Derrida's hauntology was then explored to consider the implications of this misalignment, presenting cinema spectatorship as an instance of Blanchotian fascination and the passion at the heart of this as the impetus of the Orpheus complex. In the next chapter, we will see this misrecognition and exclusion from the image at work in *Paris, Texas*. Importantly, it will be shown that this film actively works to subvert and destabilise the masterful gaze that Mulvey describes, as did the reading of Mulvey through Blanchot and Derrida, in this chapter.

## Chapter 3: The Orpheus Complex in *Paris, Texas*

### Introduction

This chapter will analyse *Paris, Texas* through Blanchot's deconstruction of narcissism and identity to show that the protagonist, Travis, exhibits a Blanchotian Orpheus complex. After summarising the plot, it will consider the relevance of the two theories of spectatorship that were analysed through Blanchot, in the previous chapter, by considering Wenders's approach to identity in his films, in general, and in *Paris, Texas*. This will be followed by the analysis of four primal scenes, in *Paris, Texas*, which are illustrative of Blanchot's notions of fascination and Derrida's understanding of spectrality, which form the Orpheus complex.

### 4.2 A Summary of the Film

*Paris, Texas* begins with a wide shot of the Mojave Desert through which the dishevelled Travis walks aimlessly, with the vacant, curious stare of a newborn baby. He finishes the last drops of water in a large container, before searching for more in a village, where he collapses of dehydration. A local gas attendant takes him to the nearest clinic where a German doctor examines him. He procures a piece of paper containing Travis's brother Walt's (Dean Stockwell) phone number who is contacted and, subsequently, makes a journey from Los Angeles to the desert to pick him up. We know from Walt's questions that Travis has been missing for four years and that something grave happened between him and a character called Jane, which likely caused his disappearance. Travis meets his son, Hunter (Hunter Carson), who had been adopted by his brother and sister-in-law following his disappearance and we, thereby, learn that Travis and Jane were married and are Hunter's biological parents. Walt suggests that the four watch some Super-8 films, taken a year prior to Travis's disappearance. The films feature beautiful, dreamlike images of the family, frolicking on a beach which, seemingly, inspires Travis to reconnect with Jane. Travis and Hunter try to track her down after Anne (Aurore Clément) informs Travis of the bank where Jane deposits money for her son at the start of each month. The plot reaches its climax when Travis finds Jane working in a peep-hole bar. He recounts the

missing puzzle piece of his story to Jane, through a telephone, on the other side of a one-way mirror, in a peep-show cubicle. Through his soliloquy, we learn that Travis's taciturnity had been the result of a traumatic separation. He had been controlling, abusive, and jealous of Jane which resulted in her setting their trailer home on fire to escape him. Following this episode, Travis ran for five days, ceasing to speak. He returned to his 'origin', Paris Texas where his parents had first fallen in love and, he estimates, conceived him. When Travis's brother finds him, Travis must speak and rewrite himself, but this time he seeks to avoid the controlling ways he used previously with his wife, freeing himself from the destructive power of images and narratives, and forming bonds with his family that exceed a need for control and identity. He decides to reunite Jane, his ex-wife, with their son Hunter, without himself in the picture. He leaves a tape recording for Hunter, in which he attempts to explain his decision before watching the two reconcile in a hotel room, from a parking lot below. He, then, drives away with tears streaming down his face.

Through this brief gloss, it becomes evident that Travis exemplifies the Orpheus complex. Like Orpheus, following the devastating loss of his love, he undertakes a pursuit of an annihilated origin. For Orpheus, this is the descent to the underworld, and the gaze back at Eurydice which reenacts her first death. For Travis, this takes the form of a return to a supposed origin that he has never been to: Paris, Texas. After the return to the lost origin, Orpheus tries to retrieve Eurydice, and Travis tries to track down Jane with the help of Hunter. Orpheus sings; Travis speaks. When Travis finds Jane, he is able to tell his story to her, affirming his identity and personal narrative, as does the song of Orpheus. However, all this is brought to a close when Hunter and Jane are reunited separately and Travis is not afforded the final recuperation of his identity as father and husband. Like Orpheus, who effaces himself, ruins the song, and loses Eurydice, Travis is excluded from the product of his work of recalling, reconstituting, and reconciling the remnants of his past. The ending of *Paris, Texas* is not so much an ending as it is a gaping absence, perpetuating the Orpheus complex.

### 4.3 Wenders and Identity

To preface the investigation of Travis, this section will examine the portrayal of selfhood and identity across Wenders's oeuvre. Through the comparison in the previous chapter between Lacanian/Mulveyan film theory, Derridean hauntology, and Blanchotian fascination, it will be shown to take a Blanchotian and hauntological approach. Kuzniar argues against a Lacanian reading of Wenders's films, by examining the way in which his characters interact with windshields. The windshields in Wenders's road films are often reflective. However, rather than arguing that these mirror-like panes of glass offer his characters a higher sense of self-knowing, Kuzniar posits that they are "non-referential" ([Kuzniar] Cook, *Gemünden*, 1997: 227) and come "to represent a kind of void, a screen on which to record the movement of disappearance" (*ibid.*). The interaction with screens, whether they be windscreens, mirrors, or film projections, is coded as a fascinating encounter with disappearance, reminiscent of Blanchot's *other* night and Eurydice's disappearance. Likewise, Kuzniar highlights Baudrillard's statement that, like dreaming, "[d]riving is a spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated" (*ibid.*: 232). However, the driving/dreaming that the characters experience affords them no conclusive awakening. Again, this dark underpinning of the cinematic experience is hinted at by Mulvey who argues that, while cinema can inflate identity, it also hides within it "[t]he sense of forgetting the world as the ego has subsequently come to perceive it (I forgot who I am and where I was)" (Mulvey, 1975: 10). It is as if Wenders's characters remain in a protracted moment of estrangement, loss, and forgetting, that conditions identification. Kuzniar continues: "[t]hese individuals do not travel to gain experience, and their journeys do not lead to any profound, articulated insight into the self [...] Wenders's characters exist as this membrane. Self-effacing, they seem like afterimages of the movie star" (Cook, *Gemünden*, 1997: 232). In contrast to the movie heroes whose wholeness, according to Mulvey, induces a strong desire for identification, Wenders's characters are as fragile as the images that they gaze at. They are vestigial reminiscences of a time when complete and powerful characters offered the refuge of identification. In this way, the car journeys that these characters undertake more closely resemble dreamless insomnia than they do the immersion and wish fulfilment of dreaming. This use



of the cinematic image, rather than enclosing the viewer in the embrace of narcissistic identification, exposes the misrecognition that preconditions every relation and is the source of this unrest. This links these images to the idea that the Blanchotian night opens up a time of restlessness, where “il n’est pas trouvé de refuge dans le sommeil” (*EL*: 281) [no refuge is to be found in sleep (*SL*: 266)], and Schefer’s notion, poignantly paraphrased by Deleuze, that “l’état de cinéma n’a qu’un équivalent : non pas la participation imaginaire, mais la pluie quand on sort d’une salle, non pas le rêve, mais le noir et l’insomnie” (*C2F*: 219) [the condition of cinema has only one equivalent, not imaginary participation but the rain when you leave the auditorium; not the dream, but the blackness and insomnia (*C2E*: 168)]. Thus, it is not coincidental that in the days following Travis’s return to Walt and Anne, he does not sleep (*PT*: 35). Importantly, these characters are not experiencing alienation which is a key characteristic of the Lacanian mirror stage (Cook, Gemünden, 1997: 233), as this would allow the subject/character to oscillate between identifying with and distinguishing themselves against specular images, putting otherness to work to privilege the “same”. On the contrary, “[t]hese various films depict less the identity formation or the suturing of the self than its dissolution before the image. The self mirrors not the actual image it sees but the depthlessness and two-dimensionality of the image” (*ibid*: 234). As will be shown, Travis epitomises the Wendersian exilic protagonist who, like anti-Narcissus, loses a life he didn’t have in the first place. The mirroring of the image and the self that will be examined “does not give Travis an image with which to identify [...] It signifies only a displacement, a space [he] does not and will never occupy” (*ibid*: 234). *Paris, Texas* begins this exploration of the impossibility of identity when Travis looks at himself in the mirror. He sees his reflection for the first time in a motel room, where the two brothers have stopped for the night. He is unkempt and dirty: he still wears his old worn clothes, including an infantilising baseball cap, and sports a ragged beard. He immediately flees at the sight of himself. The second time he looks in the mirror he is clean-shaven and wearing an ironed shirt that Walt bought him. This time, he remains inert in the frame, like a picture, returning his own gaze. Here, he seems to experience the comfort and bewilderment of identifying with an image that appears more complete than himself. However, as the film progresses, this illusory sense of refuge is revealed as the inertia of fascination, and Travis is never truly afforded rest in identity.



Figure 1: Travis looks at himself in the mirror for the first time. Wim Wenders, 1984.



Figure 2: Travis looks at himself in the mirror for the second time. Wim Wenders, 1984.

## 4.4 The Opening Scene

### 4.4 1 The Devil's Graveyard: A Lawless Land

I will now analyse the opening shots of the film, presenting this sequence as a Blanchotian primal scene which, indeed, is not originary and haunts the remainder of the film. Wenders explains that he had initially planned to shoot this scene in the Big Bend National Park, which houses the Rio Grande River (Wenders, 1991: 66-67). However, while flying over the Mojave desert, the helicopter pilot told him of a region, known as The Devil's Graveyard, which could not be found on a map (ibid). As its name suggests, this region is a deathly land, void of water and people. Despite its situation on the border between the United States and Mexico, it is unpoliced because the vast majority of those who attempt to cross it die of thirst. Its lack of topographical representation renders it an unrepresentable nowhere which is reiterated by the lack of water and consequent lack of reflection (i.e. representation). This codes Paris, Texas as the outside of the film, in the Blanchotian sense. This space is presented as the beginning of the film which, due to its retroactive mode of story-telling, is revealed to be anything but primal; the beginning of the film is, in fact, the end of another story, which will be revealed at the end of the film in the peep-show scene. This space is also the limit of the film: the limit of the previous story that ended in Travis losing himself there, and also the space where Travis will return to, effacing himself, at the end of the film. The idea that Paris, Texas is a non-originary origin is reiterated by its proper name. In it, the older, more original Paris, France, as it is typically known and imagined, is *dépaysé* within the barren, deathly landscape of the Mojave desert. As Bromley writes, “[t]he title of the film announces boundary and division, a seemingly contradictory state, an *entre-deux* - never reducible to the differences it joins and separates” (Bromley, 1997: 103). Like Blanchot's outside, the space of self-perpetuating distance that Paris, Texas constitutes, haunts the viewer, in the form of photographs and recounted memories, but does not make itself seen or known, after the opening scene.

This space allows for an exploration of the tension between images and stories that characterise Wenders's oeuvre. Wenders's essay "Why Make Films?" addresses the titular question by evoking several possibilities. Like in the case of Blanchot's Orpheus, "there is one answer in the morning and one at night" (Wenders, 1991:1). The daytime Orpheus seeks to give form to the absent Eurydice, while the nighttime Orpheus desires her mystery. For Wenders, the same divide between the Law, the day, the outside, and the night can be seen. As he remarks, there is one reason "at the editing table, and one when I'm looking at stills of earlier films of mine, another when I'm speaking to my accountant, and yet another when I think of the team I've been working with for years now" (ibid). However, behind all these reasons 'there must be something "more fundamental", some "commitment", or even a "compulsion"' (ibid). To capture this strange impulse, Wenders evokes a childhood memory of fascination. The young Wenders films the street below and his father asks him why he films such a banality, to which he has no response. A decade later, he finds himself in the same situation, filming "crossroads from the sixth floor, without moving the camera until the reel was finished. It didn't occur to me to pull away or stop shooting any earlier" (ibid). This speaks to a responsibility of the filmmaker, as Wenders puts it, quoting Béla Balàz, "to show things as they are" (ibid). Here, Wenders highlights a sort of Orphic compulsion to look back at the 'real' Eurydice. This responsibility haunts Wenders, as seen in his exploration of the irreconcilable distance between the image, which is his primary concern, and storytelling, which he sees as a pretext or a vehicle to take him to images, through which he aims to convey a true "act of seeing" (Wenders, 1997). This compulsion to see disrupts, at once, narrative progress and what Wenders calls "degraded" (Graf, 2002: 100) images in which, typically, "the image of Woman is [...] appropriated, then remoulded, imprisoned in the image to reach a certain goal" (ibid), reflecting a tradition of "violence" (Wenders, 1997: 31). These goal-oriented images recall the pursuit of mastery that Blanchot denounces. As Graf explains, the tension between seeing and narrative, and responsibility and degraded images, is contemplated as early as this opening shot:

[T]he film moves from a dead space, where narration is impossible, but where vision on the level of the image is unlimited, to inhabited or developed spaces, where the liberty of images becomes increasingly restricted spatially, and where the fact of communication - the presence of language - promotes the act of narration in the film (Graf, 2002: 96).

The shots of the desert are wide and move slowly. While the shots feel almost frameless, allowing the eye to gaze freely, there is a sense that they are so vast that one does not know where to look. This sense of disarmament echoes the shattering of the window in the primal scene and the witnessing of the lack of a limit. This is further emphasised by Travis's cutting through the space, without moving in any particular direction or following a path. The slow tracking of the camera and the wide scope of the frame give the illusion that he is barely moving at all. The juxtaposition between movement and stasis, and narrative and image, is echoed, in this film and others by Wenders, such as *The Wrong Move* (1975) and *Kings of the Road* (1976), through shots taken out of car windows. The rapid movement of the scenery, through the windshields, results in an effect whereby "[t]he movement registered on the car windows and mirrors [...] seems frozen, almost photographic in its stillness" (Cook, Gemünden, 1997: 226). Moreover, the characters whose viewpoint these shots are aligned with often sit together in silence and, "[t]hey travel in a car as if sitting alone in a movie theatre, in blank solitude, with the images unfolding before them" (ibid: 225). This explicitly links this paradox to the cinematic experience, in particular. Likewise, tracking shots of the cars, moving along endless, straight highways, give the illusion that the vehicles move at a high speed while remaining inert, as if on a treadmill. Even when in motion, "Wenders's characters do not go anywhere" (ibid: 225), lodging the characters and viewers into the placeless, timeless space of Blanchotian fascination.



Figure 3: Travis walks through the Devil's Graveyard. Wim Wenders, 1984.



Figure 4: Wide shot of Walt's car as the brothers drive to Los Angeles. Wim Wenders, 1984.

In this way, in the desert and the image, the visual takes over while narrative movement and signification come to a halt. However, with this comes a certain impotence. The eye cannot attribute meaning or identity to anything it sees and it loses the mastery that is traditionally attributed to it. In line with Blanchot's notion of fascination, "ce qui est vu s'impose au regard" (*EL*: 23) [what is seen imposes itself upon the gaze (*SL*: 32)]. In this futility, the subject is dispossessed of itself. Blanchot writes, 'chaque chose se retire en son image et que le « Je » que nous sommes se reconnaît en s'abîmant dans la neutralité d'un « Il » sans figure' (*EL*: 21) [each thing withdraws into its image while the "I" that we are recognizes itself by sinking into the neutrality of a featureless third person (*SL*: 30)]. The opening shot exemplifies this in that the vastness of the space sinks into an insufficient image of it and Travis is reduced to an unidentified silhouette, scaling the space without making progress. At this stage in the film, the spectators have nobody to identify with and Travis offers no resolution, except in mirroring the viewer's disorientation. The disarming space of the desert and the image is contrasted by the fact that, once Travis reenters the symbolic order by employing language, stories, and narrative, he inhabits closed spaces, such as the suburbs of Los Angeles, streets and roads, cars and other vehicles, and the cubicles of the peep-hole bar. While the film incites a desire for narrative progression and affirmative identity - in that the viewer is made eager to learn about Travis and Jane's story - this teleological movement is continually interrupted by a fascination for "the promise not of adventure but of solace in the wordless, storyless, selfless eternal present" (Arcilla, 2020: 52). This is representative of the kind of distanced connection that Travis aims to have with his family members, particularly Jane, following his violent episode, to contradict his previous obsessive relationship with images which caused him to seek absolute mastery.

#### 4.4.2 The Return to the Mother

The Devil's Graveyard hyperbolises Travis's return to an infantile/prelinguistic and lawless/pre-oedipal state. In the peep-show scene, Travis tells Jane that the night before she set their trailer home on fire, he tied her to the stove, and apathetically listened to her screaming. At this moment, "he wished he was far away. Lost in a deep vast country where nobody knew him. Somewhere without language or streets. And he dreamed about this place without knowing its name"

(*PT*: 180). After he woke up, he scampered into the wilderness, looking for this place, and “ran like this until every sign of man had disappeared” (*ibid*). In seeking a place without “signs of man” Travis makes an attempt at “re-entering the space of inaugural loss, primary separation, the splitting of the subject inscribed in the Symbolic Order” (Bromley, 1997: 109). In a sense, like Freud, Travis seems to seek the primal scene: the originary event that would allow him to find himself once more. However, he, instead, enters the inconceivable, impenetrable space that the Blanchotian primal scene reveals in concealment, obliterating his identity. Travis emerges from Paris, Texas as if from the womb. When he stumbles out of the desert and into a small village, he attempts to drink, like an infant, from an outdoor faucet, “as if to suckle a breast but it is dry” (*ibid*: 104). Dying of thirst, Travis storms into a shop in a small desert town, called Terlingua. Deriving from the Latin *terra*, meaning land, and *lingua*, meaning language, this is the first proper noun that Travis encounters, marking his entrance into the symbolic order and the ‘land of language’. He swings open the fridge, ignoring the beers stacked inside and instead grabs a fistful of ice to chew on, again, coding him as a child. Similarly, he insists on sitting in the back seat of Walt’s car, speaks in a childlike, fragmented manner, and is afraid of flying. After Travis and Walt exit a plane that is about to take off, due to this newfound fear<sup>13</sup>, he insists on having the same rental car as they had previously, showing a childlike penchant for familiarity. Throughout the film, Travis speaks several times with Walt and Hunter about his mother and rarely mentions his father. Therefore, implicated in his return to Paris, Texas is a nostalgia for the mother and the prelinguistic union she represents. The impossibility of this return is emphasised by the death of Travis’s mother during the period he was missing. Indeed, as Bromley suggests, ‘[t]he literal impossibility of origin, of return, to the "ever-absent body of the mother" renders desire insatiable’ (*ibid*: 109). In *L’Espace littéraire*, Blanchot presents the mother as the figure of fascination *par excellence*, stating that “c’est parce que l’enfant est fascinée que la mère est fascinante” (*EL*:24) [it is because the child is fascinated that the mother is fascinating (*SL*: 33)]. The figure of the mother is fascinating because, often, she is emblematic of childhood which, according to Blanchot, “est elle-même fascinée” (*EL*: 24) [is itself fascinated (*SL*: 33)]. This is a space without teleological

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<sup>13</sup> We know that Travis had not previously been afraid of flying as Anne remarks that he and Jane had flown to Dallas together, several years prior (*PT*: 34).



movement, logical progression, or dialectical recuperation; one is fascinated because what one sees is fascinating, which is such because one is fascinated. Blanchot's ruminations of the figure and face of Eurydice, throughout *L'Espace littéraire*, thus, emerge as reminiscences of an earlier encounter with the fascinating face of the mother. Orpheus's pursuit of Eurydice, and Travis's search for Jane can, then, be understood as repetitions of an evermore originary and an evermore obliterated initial fascination.

#### 4.4.3 A Haunting Distance

Blanchot states that Orpheus is not followed to the land of the living by Eurydice but by "[l]'absolu de la distance, l'intervalle toujours détourné" (*EI*: 216) [[a]bsolute distance, the interval that is always facing the other way (*IC*: 187)]. In other words, the exteriorising force of the outside haunts him, not a ghostly representation of the Eurydice. Similarly, in *Paris, Texas* the ghosts of Paris, Texas and Travis's mother are not simply presented as the echoes of a space or a person who once existed. Rather, they return in the form of the dissociative distance that the name *Paris, Texas* evokes. Travis explains to Walter, on their drive back to Los Angeles, that their father would tell everyone that he met his wife in "Paris", pausing for a moment before pronouncing the punchline: "Texas" (*PT*: 31), embarrassing the painfully shy woman. He tried to present her as a "fancy" (*PT*: 84-85) woman, which she was not, and he told the joke so many times that he began to believe it. The reminders of Travis's mother recall a proliferating distance, between an imagined woman, from Paris, and a real one, who was half-Mexican and from Texas. For example, in the Super-8 scenes, one shot is presented in which the two brothers stand side by side, each with their wife under their arm. The two women look remarkably similar; they both have pale skin, a similar build, and a curly, blond bob. The camera zooms out to reveal their matching floral skirts. One woman is from France (perhaps, Paris) and the other from Texas, echoing both Travis's mother and his father's false image of her. It is intriguing, then, that Walt - the brother who is most comfortable and immersed in the world of fixed images, seen in his stable identity as Hunter's father and his profession installing billboards - is married to the French woman who corresponds to his father's false image of his mother, whereas Travis's wife Jane - in being a Texan woman - recalls the 'plain Jane' that he alleged his mother to be (*PT*: 85). Similarly,

Mexican music performed by Ry Cooder, recalling Travis's mother's heritage, is interwoven through the film, during poignant moments. For example, it can be heard when Walt recounts the story of how he and Anne came to adopt Hunter to Travis when they watch old Super-8 films of a holiday in Texas which shows Travis, Hunter, and Jane years prior to Travis's disappearance, and when Travis recounts the tale of Jane and their breakup in the peep-show. Not only do "the songs and music, rupture and puncture the growth away from the maternal" (Bromley, 1997: 112) but they also reiterate that any institution of identity is haunted by what lies outside of it: "a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered" (ibid: 105). The reminders of Travis's mother act as haunting revenants of Travis's failure to regain unity with her, both in his attempt to make a mother out of Jane and later in his return to Paris, Texas. They also recall Travis's resulting appropriation of Jane into his fabricated image of her, alternately as a mother and a whore, to control her, as his father did in representing his wife as a woman from Paris. In both cases, an irreconcilable distance between Travis and his mother, as opposed to a ghostly representation of her, is foregrounded.



Figure 5: Anne, Walt, Travis, Jane, and Hunter stand side by side. Wim Wenders, 1984.

## 4.5 The Super-8 Scene

### 4.5.1 Orpheus Turning

In contrast to the degraded images made by Travis and his father, of Jane and his mother, which resemble Orpheus's appropriation of Eurydice, the following sequences in which Travis sees Jane without possessing her, mimic the Orphic gaze. This is exemplified by the Super-8 scene, in which Travis is haunted through the medium of film. In the scene at play, Travis watches film footage of himself, Walt, Anne, Hunter, and Jane, for the first time since his disappearance. The dialogue is scarce, the acting consists mainly of exchanges of gazes, and the characters do not discuss the scene later in the film. For these reasons, this analysis has to be largely speculative, regarding the various questions that the scene evokes, such as: what is Travis thinking, at this moment? Is he beginning to remember the events that the film refers to? To what extent does Hunter remember or miss his mother? Is Travis reflecting on his bad deeds or his love for Jane? None of these questions can be answered. However, the invocation of limitless unanswerable questions demonstrates the capacity of film to launch the spectator into the space of loss, the imaginary and fascination.

At first glance, the scene seems to take on a similar structure to the Freudian primal scene, staging a reconstruction or screen memory, overlaying a series of deeper, more original events. However, in alignment with the Blanchotian primal scene, the images do not lead Travis, or Hunter, closer to their origin or self-knowing and, instead, incite the disarming moment of fascination, as seen in the opening sequences. The Super-8 is made to resemble a dream or a memory, through the fragmented editing and the use of silent film, arresting the narrative movement of the film. However, this reverie quickly turns into an insomniac tossing and turning, as seen in Travis who oscillates between turning away from and towards the images of Jane. This begins when Jane's face first appears on the screen, dominating the frame. Jane, who is both being seen for the first time and absent from the diegetic present, exerts the haunting "visibilité d'un corps qui n'est pas présent en chair et en os" (*EF*: 129) [visibility of a body that is not present in flesh and blood (*EE*: 115)] which "commence par revenir" (*SM*: 32) [*begins by coming back* (*SME*: 11)]. She places a scarf over the camera, oneirically veiling

the lens. The scarf slips away and we see her unshrouded face before Travis looks to the ground and closes his eyes. Following this shot, Jane and Travis are shown smiling and kissing each other causing Travis to place his head in his hands. His shoulders begin to tremble and it looks as though he is crying. We can deduce that looking away doesn't prevent Travis from 'seeing' Jane because he continues to evade her image. He still sees her after he turns away, so he closes his eyes. He cannot escape her by shutting his eyes so he shields them with his hands. She is still there when he covers his face, so his eyes fill with tears, rendering Jane the "absence qu'on voit parce qu'aveuglante" (*EL*: 24) [absence one sees because it is blinding (*SL*: 33)]. This encapsulates Derrida's sentiment that "le cinéma est un deuil magnifique, un travail du deuil magnifié" (*CF*: 78) [cinema is a magnificent mourning, a magnified work of mourning (*CP*: 28)], as Travis must mourn not only the loss of Jane from his life but also the loss produced by the representation of her. The haunting traces of her are inescapable and inaccessible and, as Smock writes, "that terribly strange form of blindness which is the phantom [...] an incapacity to stop seeing what is not there to be seen" ([Smock], *SL*: 9). This vision of blindness is not simply the experience of futility. Rather, it is a dissociative event which, as shown in the previous chapter, invokes a will to express, even if in the form of tears, and, as Derrida highlights, a demand for justice. This is crystallised by the fact that, after watching the film, Hunter calls Travis "Dad" for the first time and Travis decides to track Jane down. As part of this, he attempts to embody a father figure - "the father" (*PT*: 45), as he explains to Carmelita (Socorro Valdez), Walt's maid, who helps him try to imitate images of fathers in magazines. Travis, thereby, falls into the same trap as before, constituting an identity based on the flatness of an image with which he misidentifies. His imitation of a father figure is borrowed from commercial images, while the suit and cowboy boots and hat he wears to pick up Hunter are lent to him by Walt. This recalls Blanchot's notion that the writer "peut croire qu'il s'affirme en ce langage mais ce qu'il affirme est tout à fait privé de soi" (*EL*: 17) [[h]e may believe that he affirms himself in this language, but what he affirms is altogether deprived of self (*SL*: 26)]. The spectre's command for justice is not satisfied by the image; this is why Orpheus's song could not resurrect Eurydice. It demands that Orpheus fail to respond and that he eternally turn between a stimulus that makes him look and a blindness that incapacitates him. Through

this turning, and this inability to stop seeing that which is not present, Travis exposes the compulsion of the Orpheus complex, while elucidating the capacity of cinema to produce this type of haunting.



Figure 6: Super-8 footage of Travis and Jane. Wim Wenders, 1984.



Figure 7: Travis looks away from the Super-8. Wim Wenders, 1984.

#### 4.5.2 Love and the *Punctum*

After watching the projection, Hunter points out that the woman in the film is not Jane; “that’s only her in a movie... a long time ago... in a galaxy far, far away” (*PT*: 45), highlighting the temporal displacement and spatial distance that the cinematic image unveils. Recalling the child in Blanchot’s primal scene, who witnesses the revelation of a sky without stars, the image of Jane signals an inconceivable space, outside of time and place: another galaxy. However, as we know, fascination, according to Blanchot, is not simply the experience of distance but, rather, is characterised by a certain “*contact à distance*” (*EL*: 23) [*contact at a distance* (*SL*: 32)], in which what the subject sees “le saisit et l’accapare, bien que cela le laisse absolument à distance” (*EL*: 24) [seizes and ceaselessly draws him close, even though it leaves him absolutely at a distance (*SL*: 33)]. The intimate relation between distance and touch, in the medium of photography, constitutes a key focus of Barthes’s *Camera Lucida* and allows us to consider this in relation to the cinematic image. Barthes writes that “[l]a photo est littéralement une émanation du référent. D’un corps réel, qui était là, sont parties des radiations qui viennent me toucher, moi qui suis ici” (*LC*: 126) [[t]he photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here (*CL*: 80)]. This recalls the exploration in the previous chapter, concerning the paradoxical relation between absence and presence in film and photography. Like knowledge, touch connotes certitude and verity. To touch an object “assure irremplaçabilité : donc la chose même dans son unicité” (*EF*: 140) [guarantees irreplaceability: hence the thing itself in its uniqueness (*EE*: 124)]. While the spectre summons a will to know, to discover, to unveil, and to touch, it also rigorously denies this, suspending the subject in an infinite questioning. Similarly, in cinema, “le désir de toucher, l’effet ou l’affect tactile, se voit alors appelé avec violence par la frustration même, appelé à revenir, comme un revenant” (*EF*: 129) [[t]he desire to touch, the tactile effect or affect, is violently summoned by its very frustration, summoned to come back, like a ghost, in the places haunted by its absence (*EE*: 115)]. In this way, the possibility of grasping, holding, and possession is masqueraded and, yet, infinitely confiscated from the cinema spectator. This, in turn, captures the viewer, possesses them and dispossesses them from themselves, in a moment of fascination. Derrida likens the

experience of this “emanation” in film and photography to the visor effect, in cinema. He states: ‘[c]’est ainsi que je serais tenté d’entendre ce que Barthes appelait l’« émanation ». Ce flux de lumière qui me saisit, m’investit, m’envahit, m’enveloppe, c’est n’est pas un rayon de lumière, mais la source d’une vue possible: du point de vue de l’autre’ (EF: 138) [I would be tempted to understand what Barthes calls “emanation” This flow of light which captures or possesses me, invests me, invades me, or envelops me is not a ray of light, but the source of a possible view: from the point of view of the other (EE: 122-123)]. This reinforces the idea that the encounter with the cinematic is not simply a case of contact or distance, but the impossible co-occurrence of being both gripped and discarded by the image. Indeed, Hunter’s sentiment about the Jane being from another galaxy signals the opening of another, inaccessible universe and that the emanation of “l’être disparu vient me toucher comme les rayons différés d’une étoile” (LC: 126) [the missing being [...] will touch me like the delayed rays of a star (CL: 80-81)].

Barthes’s discussion of touch within the photographic image is further elucidated by his notions of the *studium* and the *punctum*, which characterise the photographic image. The former refers to the cultural significance of a photograph and the photographer's communicative or intellectual intentions. This aspect of the photo is to be identified, ontologised, and understood. The *studium* is disrupted by the *punctum* which, by contrast, is coincidental and unexplainable. The *punctum* is a “piqûre, petit trou, petite tache, petite coupure - et aussi coup de dés. Le *punctum* d’une photo, c’est ce hasard qui, en elle, me point (mais aussi me meurtrit, me poigne)” (LC: 49) [sting, speck, cut, little hole - and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me) (CL: 27)]. Through its incomprehensibility it becomes “une sorte de hors-champ subtil, comme si l’image lançait le désir au-delà de ce qu’elle donne à voir” (LC: 93) [a kind of subtle beyond - as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see (CL: 59)]. This codes the encounter with the *punctum* as an Orphic gaze, which occurs because Orpheus “la désire par-delà les limites mesurées du chant” (EL: 181) [desires [Eurydice] beyond the measured limits of the song (SL: 173)]. The term “hors-champ” reiterates this, in that not only does it refer to a ‘beyond’ but it also means “off-camera” or “off-screen”, recalling the Blanchotian outside of representation, which is

inscribed in the image. The *punctum* and the Orphic gesture are equalled through their relation to what Barthes calls “la souffrance d’amour” (*LC*: 179) [the pangs of love (*CL*: 116)]. These pangs of love are constituted by unnamable, indescribable instants in which one is touched - so much so that they are pierced - from a distance, by a blinding vision. We may see this as being the case in this scene, in which Travis and the viewer are brought unprecedentedly close to Jane, yet are left at an unbridgeable distance from her. This also opens a passage for non-possessive love, directly contrasting Travis’s previous controlling ways, allowing him to appreciate Jane without reducing her to an image. This notion is crystallised in Wenders’s statement that *Paris, Texas* is about:

How affection or love become impossible if you concentrate too hard on an image of yourself or of someone else [...] Travis, the jealous guy, had too strong an image in his head of his young and beautiful wife, which finally got in the way of his actually seeing her. And I think the obverse of a love story [...] is always that problem when you don’t see the other person any more, only the image you have of him or her. Or, more fundamentally, when you fall in love with an image – actually more of yourself than of the other person. That moment when they fall into that autistic narcissism spells the end of the love (Jasper, 2004: 136).

In this way, the *punctum* and the passion of fascination can be framed as forms of love that exceed fixed images and, instead, engage with that which cannot be seen in the image, at the point “où la dissimulation se fait apparence” (*EL*: 208) [where concealment becomes appearance (*SL*: 199)].

If we think of the *punctum* as an arrow that pierces the body, then, not only does this entail an absence within the viewer - the hole that the prick produces - but it also implies that this gap would only be revealed retroactively, upon removing the sharp object. Barthes writes: “j’entrais follement dans le spectacle, dans l’image, entourant de mes bras ce qui est mort, ce qui va mourir, comme le fit Nietzsche, lorsque [...] il se jeta en pleurant au cou d’un cheval martyrisé” (*LC*: 179) [I entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead, what is going to die, as Nietzsche did when [...] he threw himself in tears on the neck of a beaten horse (*CL*: 116-117)]. This recalls Blanchot’s primal scene - a resemblance that is cemented in the reference to Nietzsche’s collapsing before the dying horse. Like the primal scene, the encounter with the *punctum* is an experience of fascination, passion, ambiguous tears, and the spectral participation of an unlocatable,



or dead, other. It has a dissociative effect, fissures the present moment, and effaces presence: these are instances that both never seem to arrive and only seem to occur after the fact. The contact with this *hors-champ* within the photograph “atterrit [...] dans une zone vague de moi-même” (*LC*: 87) [lands in a vague zone of myself (*CL*: 53)] which can be understood as the exilic part of the viewer that is displaced, that exists only in displacement, when they find themselves moved by the *punctum*. This allows us not only to frame this scene as an anti-narcissistic primal scene in which Travis’s subjectivity is destabilised, but it also aligns this experience with that of love. If, as Barthes writes, the *punctum* is revealed “qu’après coup, lorsque la photo étant loin de mes yeux, je pense à elle de nouveau [...] pour bien voir une photo, il vaut mieux lever la tête ou fermer les yeux” (*LC*: 88) [only after the fact when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it [...] in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes (*CL*: 53)], then the experience of love also takes place with a closed mouth and eyes, in a moment of touch without possession. Travis undergoes this experience when he sees Jane with eyes closed, withdrawing from narrative progression, temporal existence, and identity. Hunter reveals to Anne that he knows that Travis is still in love with Jane, precisely, because of “the way he looked at her” (*PT*: 44). However, Travis does not look at Jane for more than a split second, throughout the screening. Unlike Travis’s father, who “looked at [Travis’s mother], but [...] didn’t see her” ([Travis] *PT*: 85), Travis sees and is seized by Jane, without looking at her, equating love and the *punctum* to not only the impossibility of representation but also to the impotence of vision. This type of love constitutes the passion that drives the Orpheus complex.

## 4.6 The One-Way Mirror Scene

### 4.6.1 Division of the Subject; Dissolution of the Object

This section will analyse the primal scene that stages Travis’s first encounter with Jane, following his disappearance, in the peep-show bar where Jane works. Through Blanchot’s notions of responsibility and intimacy, which further inform our understanding of the Orphic turning, it will be shown that this scene epitomises the Orpheus complex, in cinema. There are two instances in which Travis visits

Jane, at her place of work. The first begins by reinforcing the destruction proper to degraded images and the violent power of representation. The male clients of the bar pay to enter a cubicle where they sit on the darkened side of a one-way mirror, giving commands, through a telephone, to a woman who is visible on the other side of the screen. Their invisibility and imperative voice afford them subjective primacy over the woman, who is rendered an object of the gaze. Travis's first visit highlights this power imbalance when his possessiveness resurfaces. He interrogates her about whether she sees clients outside of work and how much money she makes on the side. When he observes the return of his controlling ways, he exits the bar. He spends the night drinking and talking to Hunter, before returning to the peep-show, the next day, to continue his reunion of the pair. To do so, he tells Jane the story of their love and separation, without revealing his identity, until she realises he is on the other side of the mirror. Carrying out an Orphic turn towards the day '[t]o speak his violence and his love[,] Travis turns his back on the one-way mirror, as Jane, discursively, becomes "the untouchable, impossible, absent body of the mother" in this moment of "narcissistic perturbation"' (Bromley, 1997: 109). Here, Travis's turn towards daytime thought and representation aligns with an attempt at narcissistic recuperation. However, the impossibility of this feat is shown in his use of the third person. He begins by stating "I knew these people..." (Wenders, 1984: 1:59:31-33<sup>14</sup>), referring to himself and Jane, prior to their separation. This resembles the opening sentence of Blanchot's autobiographical *L'Instant de ma mort*: "[j]e me souviens d'un jeune homme" (Blanchot, Derrida, 2000: 2) [I remember a young man (ibid: 3)], referring to himself. In this *récit*, Blanchot, like Travis, contemplates a primal scene in which death occurred but was not accomplished; in Blanchot's words, "l'instant de ma mort désormais toujours en instance" (ibid: 10) [the instant of my death henceforth always in abeyance (ibid:11)]. In Travis's case, this concerns the lead up to his exile in Paris, Texas, and in Blanchot's case, the autobiographical text recounts a time when he was lined up to be shot, but spared at the last minute, by Nazi soldiers, during WWII (they were later revealed to be Russians who freed Blanchot but ransacked his home (ibid: 5-7)). Derrida's analysis of the latter text applies to the former, when he writes that Blanchot "atteste qu'il se souvient de quelqu'un, de quelqu'un d'autre, un

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<sup>14</sup> The wording was slightly altered between the written version of the screenplay and the take used in the film and, for this reason, has been cited using a time-stamp, as opposed to the published script.

jeune homme. Il y a déjà, dès l'*incipit*, division du sujet" (Derrida, 1998: 65) [attests to remembering someone, someone else, a young man. Already from the *incipit* there is a division of the subject (Blanchot, Derrida, 2000: 53)]. In addition to Travis, Jane is divided, emphasised by her position behind him. The disconnect between the invisible Jane, in Travis's story, and the silenced woman, to whom Travis turns his back, is palpable. In this way, his "langage veut dire que cette personne-ci [Jane], qui est là maintenant, peut être détachée d'elle-même, soustraite à son existence et de présence et plongée soudain dans un néant d'existence et de présence" (*PF*: 313) [language means that this person [Jane], who is here right now, can be detached from herself, removed from her existence and her presence, and suddenly plunged into a nothingness in which there is no existence or presence (*WF*: 232)]. This reiterates one of the key arguments of Blanchot's primal scene that the entrance into the symbolic order does not consist of the inauguration of a fully constituted "I" and that it, rather, marks the beginning of a perpetual loss that can only be mourned. Instead of finding himself or Jane in this personal narrative, Travis, as does the Blanchotian writer, "a fait l'épreuve de lui-même comme d'un néant au travail et, après avoir écrit, il fait l'épreuve de son œuvre comme de quelque chose qui disparaît" (*PF*: 299) [put[s] himself to the test as a nothingness at work, and after having written, he puts his work to the test as something in the act of disappearing (*WF*: 307)].

#### 4.6.2 From Bad Interiority to Intimacy

Travis's initial controlling attitude towards Jane is reflective of what Blanchot calls, "*une mauvaise intériorité*" (*EL*: 138) [*bad interiority* (*SL*: 135)] which is detrimental because, therein, 'règnent les objets, le souci des résultats, le désir d'avoir, la convoitise qui nous lie à la possession, le besoin de sécurité et de stabilité, la tendance à savoir pour être sûr, tendance à « se rendre compte » qui devient nécessairement penchant à compter et à tout réduire à des comptes' (*EL*: 140) [objects reign, along with the concern for results, the desire to have, the greed that links us to possession, the need for security and stability, the tendency to know in order to be sure, the tendency to "take account" which necessarily becomes an inclination to count and to reduce everything to accounts (*SL*: 137)]. While echoes of Travis's bad interiority surface in his representation of Jane, as Arcilla argues, "the film suggests how these images can be somewhat recoded. At one point in their first meeting, Jane offers

to take off her top and Travis stops her; he insists that he just wants to talk” (Arcilla, 2020: 53). This speaks to the dual potential of the cinematic image, highlighted in the previous chapter through Mulvey and Derrida, and is hyperbolised by the one-way mirror which can be rendered transparent or opaque, depending on which side of it is darkened and which is illuminated. On the one hand, cinema, like the one-way mirror, can put the viewer in the position of the spectator who is hidden by “the darkness in the auditorium” (Mulvey, 1975: 9) and offered “the illusion of voyeuristic separation” (ibid), through which to watch objectified female characters. On the other hand, it can expose the viewer to the gaze of the other, disarming them of their optical agency and, as Fotiade states, exposes what lies “[b]eyond the specular illusion [...] from the edges of conscious perception to the outer space of the unconscious and the “unseen”” (Fotiade, 2018: 37). If the former exemplifies Blanchot’s notion of bad interiority, the latter would come under his definition of “intimacy” which, as he writes, constitutes our only “espoir de nous retourner” (*EL*: 141) [hope for our turning back (*SL*: 138)] from bad interiority. The term intimacy has a specific meaning within Blanchot’s œuvre. It refers to the instant in which distance and contact reach such an extreme point that they cannot be distinguished from one another because “[q]uand l’absolu de la séparation s’est fait rapport, il n’est plus possible d’être séparé” (*EI*: 221) [[w]hen the absolute of separation has become relation it is no longer possible to be separated (*IC*: 192)]. The transition from bad interiority to intimacy constitutes “le gauchissement extrême, l’excès de courbure, le point-limite au-delà duquel tout se renverse, tout se retourne” (*EL*: 151) [the crook of the turn, the extreme of its curvature, the end point beyond which everything reverses itself, everything turns back (*SL*: 147)]. This turning reaches its climax, in *Paris, Texas*, when, at the end of Travis’s storytelling, he turns around to look at Jane, performing an Orphic gaze. As Travis gazes through the mirror, his and Jane’s faces are superimposed, privileging not their individual reflections but, rather, the reflective surface of the mirror which simultaneously unites and separates the couple. In this way, as Pagès writes, Wenders unveils:

a missing element in the visible domain [...] In the overlapping reflection of the images on the glass, the viewer cannot tell who is who, whether the shape is Travis or Jane. But the viewer can grasp what is not being seen: their love for each other, their loss, their desperate hope for Paris, Texas [...] This is exactly the moment of a split in the image (Pagès, 2021: 759)

In this moment of intimacy, the pair touch one another by virtue of the barrier that prohibits touch. Blanchot writes that to move towards intimacy is to move “vers le plus intérieur et le plus invisible” (*EL*: 141) [toward the most interior and the most invisible (*SL*: 138)] where “l’intérieur et l’extérieur se ramassent en un seul espace continu” (*EL*: 141) [interior and exterior gather themselves together into a single continuous space (*SL*: 138)]. The characters encapsulate this notion, staring blindly and effacing the opposition between interior and exterior by piercing each other's gaze. Travis’s face penetrates that of Jane while she sees herself on the opposite side of the mirror, knowing that his eye-line lies behind it. The resulting uncanny image of Travis’s face on Jane’s head, captures the nature of Blanchotian intimacy as that which renders lovers estranged and *dépaysé*, “les attir[ant] dans l’étrange, là où ils deviennent étrangers à eux-mêmes, dans une intimité qui les rend, aussi, étrangers l’un à l’autre” (*EI*: 219) [*pull*][ing] them into the space of the strange where they become strangers to themselves in an intimacy that also makes them strangers to each other (*IC*: 190)]. This mutual estrangement effaces the subject/object relation that the one-way mirror, at first glance, promises, and the two are brought together through the impossibility of their relation. This double tearing away into strangeness allows us to understand the fascinating character of the preceding primal scenes. In them, the viewer is not afforded self-affirmation or identification because they do not learn anything about Travis. These scenes are, nevertheless, striking and memorable because the viewer is drawn in by the dissociative fascination of the image and enchanted by the fragmented reflections of Travis’s mirrored withdrawal.



Figure 8: Travis, in the peep-hole bar, turns his back to Jane to tell his story. Wim Wenders, 1984.



Figure 9: Travis looks round at Jane through the one-way mirror. Wim Wenders, 1984.

Blanchot states that, in intimacy, lovers “prennent et donnent corps à l'écart de la séparation absolue” (*EI*: 219) [give body to the distance of absolute separation [...] neither merged nor united in it but forever dispersed by it (*IC*: 190)]. This notion of giving body to distance can be understood through the scene in the first version of *Thomas l'obscur*. Here, Anne and Thomas, who have been married for 10 years, enter the cinema and, after a period spent watching a film, witness the formation of an invisible, untouchable body outside of them. While Blanchot does not suggest that this experience is unique to cinema, as there is a sense of estrangement between the couple before the film commences, Watt argues that cinema “perpetuates and maintains this strange, protracted experience” (Watt, 2017: 8). Blanchot opposes this experience to narcissistic identification, comparing it to “la cause angoissante, vertigineuse d'un anéantissement cherchant par un effort désespéré à se faire prendre pour une existence complète” (*TO*: 177) [the agonizing, vertiginous cause of an annihilation, seeking desperately to be taken for a complete existence (my translation)], which touches the “zones profondes que seul le périscope des bacilles permet de voir” (*TO*: 135) [profound zones that can only be seen through a bacillus periscope (my translation)]. In other words, the cinema comes into contact with those obscure parts of existence that can only be viewed indirectly or blindly which, like Blanchotian fascination, robs the subject of centrality. Indeed, Anne observes that “la fantasmagorie des images l'eût projetée en dehors d'elle-même” (*TO*: 177) [the phantasmagoria of images projected her outside of herself (my translation)] and causes her to perceive Thomas as an independent person with his own troubles and concerns, as if for the first time (*TO*: 178). Then, an absent presence, embodying the separation that unites the couple, begins to form. It is as though Anne perceives the traces of the perpetual exteriorisation that bond the two in a mutual understanding of their inaccessibility to one another. The absent body is closer to a superimposition than a merging of distance and proximity, as a sense of separation is retained. This reflects the power of superimposition in cinema, captured by Derrida's understanding of the cinematic image as undecidable: *both* absent *and* present, visible *and* invisible, and dead *and* alive. Crucially, cinema does not consist of a fusion of two components of a binary pair, but a paradoxical coexistence of incompatible attributes. This is demonstrated by *Paris, Texas*, in which the body of intimacy takes the form of the reflection on the one-way mirror as a “présence qui fait coïncider en une simultanéité sensible des moments

incompatibles, séparés par tout le cours de la durée” (Blanchot, 1959: 12) [one single presence that causes incompatible moments, separated by the entire course of lived life, to coincide in a palpable simultaneity (Blanchot, Mandell, 2003: 12)]. The cause of Travis and Jane’s separation can be reduced to their irreducible difference: the fact that they occupy different bodies, that the one is not inside the mind of the other, and that the gaze of the other person originates on the opposite side of “un autre point zéro de l’apparaître” (*EF*: 138) [another degree zero of appearing (*EE*: 123)]. The mirror reflection of the couple epitomises Blanchotian intimacy by causing these two incompatible, unexchangeable gazes to coincide in a single instant whilst also illuminating the barrier between them. This instant explains Travis’s previous failure to love Jane when he, in ‘[g]iving up work so he could be close to [her], confusing love with possession, [...] attempts to construct a "home" *where distance did not count*’ (Bromley, 1997: 112 [my emphasis]). In the moment of his Orphic gaze, Travis, rather than attempting to enclose the distance that haunts him, finds the point at which it becomes relation. This space is repeatedly contemplated throughout the film, seen in the way that Travis only succeeds in connecting with his family members when the distance between them is brought to the fore, or given body. This is seen in the numerous phone calls that the characters share, the disparate reminiscences of Travis’s mother in the characters of Jane and Anne, the screen that separates him from the Super-8 film, the walkie-talkies that the father and son communicate through during their search for Jane, the tape recording that Travis leaves for Hunter before he reunites him with Jane, the final scene in which Travis watches the two reunite through their hotel window, and, of course, the one-way mirror that offers a visible, but intangible, manifestation of contact at a distance.

#### 4.6.3 Responsibility: A Second Turning

Travis’s turn towards intimacy can be understood through Blanchot’s conceptualisation of responsibility which he develops in unison with his critique of narcissism in *L’Écriture*. He explains that responsibility usually denotes “prosaïquement et bourgeoisement, un homme mûr, lucide et conscient, qui agit avec mesure, tient compte de tous les éléments de la situation, calcule et décide” (*ED*: 45) [in a prosaic, bourgeois manner - a mature, lucid, conscientious man, who acts with circumspection, who takes into account all elements of a given situation, calculates and decides (*WD*:



25)]. According to this definition, the responsible man upholds and perpetuates pre-established codes of responsibility by mirroring a preexisting model of the responsible person. In other words, responsibility is contingent on the will and agency of the subject. Blanchot contests this, arguing that responsibility begins not with the self but with the other person, voiding the subject of identity and power. This precludes mastery because “[I]a responsabilité dont je suis chargé n’est pas la mienne et fait que je ne suis plus moi” (*ED*: 28) [[t]he responsibility with which I am charged not mine, and because of it I am no longer myself (*WD*: 13)]. This is reminiscent of the spectre’s demand for justice, according to which “l’autre est *avant* moi devant moi qui suis devant lui” (*EF*: 137), [the other comes *before* me, I who am before [*devant*] him [...] owing [*devant*] to him (*EE*: 122)], and “me demande de répondre ou d’être responsable” (*EF*: 139) [asks me to respond or to be responsible (*EE*: 123)]. Responsibility, then, would be the cause of “une forme de renversement du mythe [d’Orphée]” (Hoppenot, Rabaté, Blanchot, 2014: 23) [a kind of reversal of the myth [of Orpheus] (my translation)] that Blanchot proposes, in a letter to Robert Antelme (Blanchot, 2010). In this revised ending to the myth, Blanchot places Eurydice before Orpheus, who follows her, demonstrating the displacement that responsibility exerts. Derrida’s formulation of the spectre, which renders him “moi qui suis devant lui”, which can also be translated as “I who *follow* [him], in front of him” (my translation [my emphasis]) captures the paradox through which Orpheus and Eurydice, at once, follow and lead each other, via responsibility. This same second turn occurs in *Paris, Texas* when Travis asks, “if you turn on the light in there, will you be able to see me?” (*PT*: 93). Jane does so, while Travis turns a lamp toward his face, allowing her to look at him. Then, Jane turns her back to Travis and looks ahead of her as she begins to recount her side of the story. Now, Travis is brought “au jour” (*EL*: 179) [back to the light of day (*SL*: 171)] as Jane constructs her image of him, through language. She explains that, following their separation, she would constantly talk to Travis and would invent his responses, stating that “it was easier when [she] just imagined [him]” (*PT*: 95). This reiterates the ease and comfort that the power of representation affords its user. However, her image eventually and slowly disappears, becoming the appearance of disappearance, through her gradual surrender of it. One day, she “just gave [it] up” and “[e]verything stopped. [Travis] just... disappeared” (*ibid*). Jane makes the devastating revelation that, after beginning her work in the peep-hole bar, she “hear[s Travis’s] voice

all the time. Every man has [his] voice” (ibid). The masterful voyeuristic male gaze, exemplified by Travis and the patrons of the peep-show is revealed, through the reversal of responsibility and the turning of the Orphic gaze, not as power or presence, but as a ceaselessly reverberating echo of violence and death.



Figure 10: Jane turns her back to Travis to tell her story. Wim Wenders, 1984.

Jane’s Orphic gesture is sealed in her giving up of Hunter to Anne and Walt. Anne had told Travis that, following their violent separation, Jane felt unfit to raise Hunter (*PT*: 53). As time passed, she, nevertheless, loved and desired to see him, even if only through photographs. However, as she tells Travis, she eventually asks Anne to stop sending her pictures of him because she “couldn’t stand the pain of seeing him grow up and missing it” (ibid). The oxymoronic formulation of both seeing and missing his youth foregrounds the haunting coexistence of vision and invisibility, touch and exclusion, proper to the photographic and cinematic image. When asked why she didn’t keep Hunter, Jane answers: “I couldn’t, Travis. I didn’t have what I knew he needed. And I didn’t want to use him to fill up all my emptiness” (ibid). In this way, Jane refused to subordinate Hunter’s life to serve her identity as a mother, instead, putting Hunter *before* her and adopting a decentred and Blanchotian position of responsibility. It may seem as though Hunter and Jane enact the separation between mother and son,

seen in the Freudian primal scene, which is said to occur around Hunter's age when Jane left. However, Hunter did not cast away the mother to affirm his identity. Rather, he was implicated in a disaster from which he was excluded, as he does not will it, will against it, remember it, or recall what preceded it. This is emphasised by the fact that this event is not seen in the film. Hunter, thus, foregoes the Freudian primal scene in favour of a Blanchotian primal scene which, as we know, occurs around the ages of seven and eight; Hunter's age when he meets Jane for the 'first' time. As Kuzma remarks, this age is generally considered to be the "age of reason", when the child becomes aware of the feelings of others and "[t]he other person and society-at-large become worthy of consideration" (Kuzma, 2019: 188). In other words, the child begins to become responsible. Therefore, the dramas through which Hunter is separated from and reunites with his mother are not structured around a struggle to subordinate otherness but, rather, an Orphic turning away from subjectivity and toward responsibility.

## 4.7 The Window Scene

### 4.7.1 The Disaster and the Time-Image

This section will compare Blanchot's notions of disaster and hope to Deleuze's theorisation of the crisis of thought and belief in the time-image before applying them to the ending of the film. This will elucidate the traces of the Orpheus complex the ending bears. Its meta-cinematic, self-reflexive character will allow for some wider conclusions to be drawn about the medium of cinema. The term "désastre" [disaster] is another whose meaning is charged within the context of Blanchot's *œuvre*, referring to an event that "ruine tout en laissant tout en l'état" (*ED*: 1) [ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact (*WD*: 1)]. Blanchot states that responsibility is utterly "désastreuse" (*ED*: 47) [disastrous (*WD*: 27)] which, indeed, describes Jane's separation from Hunter and Travis's relinquishment of the two. It has also been likened to Blanchot's primal scene, as an occurrence produced in and of destruction and traced retroactively in the forgetting that shrouds it. The disaster may cause the sky to open up, but it opens up onto "le même ciel" (*ED*: 117) [the same sky (*WD*: 72)]; everything and nothing has changed. This is reinforced by Cixous who, recalling the starless sky from

the primal scene, writes, “[w]e see here a disaster, as dis-aster (des-astre), as that which is without astres, without stars” (Cixous, 1991: 20). Blanchot states that the Holocaust exemplifies the disaster, being the “*événement absolu de l’histoire [...] cette toute-brûlure où toute l’histoire s’est embrasée, où le mouvement du Sens s’est abîmé*” (ED: 80) [absolute event of history [...] that utter-burn where all history took fire, where the movement of meaning was swallowed up (WD: 47)]. The Holocaust cannot be evoked, captured, or given justice by language or representation. This incomprehensible crisis offers no revelation, no higher truth. Yet, like the visor effect or the primal scene, the disaster urges one to respond and, like the outside engendering thought or the Orphic gaze in trying to see Eurydice, it invokes a will to know and understand. As Blanchot states, “[l]e vœu de tous, là-bas, le dernier vœu: sachez ce qui s’est passé, n’oubliez pas, et en même temps jamais vous ne saurez” (ED: 131) [the wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know (WD: 82)]. We may understand the relation between this demand for responsibility and cinema through Deleuze’s notion of the time-image. In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze explains that the time-image reflects a “crisis of thought” in the cinema of post-war Europe, caused by the physical and psychological destruction of WWII. Until this point, cinema was in its classical period, characterised by the movement-image, in which movement is subordinated to time, causality, and chronology. Deleuze states that in the time-image “time ceases to be the measurement of normal movement, it increasingly appears for itself and creates paradoxical movements. Time is out of joint” ([Deleuze, 1988] C2E: xi), recalling Derrida’s appropriation of Hamlet’s phrase to explain the temporality of spectrality. In other words, following the disaster of WWII, audiences are haunted by it, through the time-image. In the preface to the English edition of *Cinema 2*<sup>15</sup>, Deleuze states that the purpose of the time-image is “to make perceptible, to make visible, relationships of time which cannot be seen in the represented object and do not allow themselves to be reduced to the present” (C2E: xi). Thus, the time-image superimposes paradoxical temporalities and does not represent a privileged present, recalling Derrida’s notion of ‘« greffes » de spectralité’ (CF: 78) [“grafts” of spectrality (CP: 25)], in cinema. While techniques such as flashbacks, dream sequences, slow-motion, and other

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<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the quotation only exists in the English form, as it has been cited here. The same applies to the citations, from the same passage, that follow.

subjective experiences had been deployed before the war and within the movement-image, in the time-image, a certain impotence is drawn forth through a lack of subjectivity or fixed centre. In this way, Deleuze contradicts Eisenstein's philosophy that cinema should "rendre la pensée visible" (C2F: 219) [make thought visible (C2E: 168)] stating that it should point "à ce qui ne se laisse pas penser dans la pensée, comme à ce qui ne se laisse pas voir dans la vision (C2F: 219) [to what does not let itself be thought in thought, and equally to what does not let itself be seen in vision (C2E: 168)]. Deleuze draws on Blanchot to highlight this phenomenon, stating that "[c]e que Blanchot diagnostique partout dans la littérature se retrouve éminemment dans le cinéma : d'une part la présence d'un impensable dans la pensée, et qui serait à la fois comme sa source et son barrage ; d'autre part la présence à l'infini d'un autre penseur dans le penseur, qui brise tout monologue d'un moi pensant" (C2F: 218-219) [[w]hat Blanchot diagnoses everywhere in literature is particularly clear in cinema: on the one hand the presence of an unthinkable in thought, which would be both its source and barrier, on the other hand the presence to infinity of another thinker in the thinker who shatters every monologue of a thinking self (C2E: 168)]. The experience of WWII, understood as the disaster or a primal scene, struggles to be ontologized or historicised, revealing the unthinkable while engendering thought. The time-image can be understood as a response, aligned with the Blanchotian notion of responsibility, incited by the disaster of the war and the ungraspable emptiness that it leaves. In this way, the shift between the movement-image and the time-image parallels Orpheus's backwards gaze which moves from day to night, from representation to the outside, from identity to responsibility, from narrative movement to suspended time, and from thought to its impotence. Moreover, according to Deleuze, the time-image goes hand in hand with a particular gaze. This is because post-war Europe frequently presented 'situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe. These were "any spaces whatever", deserted but inhabited, disused warehouses, waste ground, cities in the course of demolition or reconstruction' (C2E: xi). These locations, more comparable to a withdrawing space than a place imbued with meaning, were engendering a new type of character that "saw rather than acted, they were *seers*" (ibid). The impossibility of rationalising these spaces paralysed characters in a look of fascination that

seized them. Deleuze presents Italian Neo-Realism as exemplary of this<sup>16</sup>, drawing on Bazin's argument that it is not the political content of these films that designates them as Neo-Realist. Rather, they are characterised by a certain approach to the gaze, which seeks to reconnect with the world, following destruction, injustice, and disaster. In this way, 'le réel n'était plus représenté ou reproduit, mais « visé ». Au lieu de représenter un réel déjà déchiffré, le néo-réalisme visait un réel à déchiffrer, toujours ambigu' (*C2F*: 7) [[t]he real was no longer represented or reproduced but "aimed at". Instead of representing an already deciphered real, Neo-realism aimed at an always ambiguous, to be deciphered, real (*C2E*: 1)], resulting in the necessity of seeing. These types of characters, in witnessing an absent-present that withdraws as it is perceived, undergo an Orphic gaze and can be compared to Wenders's "afterimages of the movie star" (Cook, Gemünden, 1997: 232), epitomised by Travis, who stare out of windshields and through frames, onto "objects that [...] seem indifferent; they do not return the gaze" (ibid: 226). Within the context of this transition, from the movie star to the nomadic seer, the notion of the disaster as that which is without stars takes on a very literal meaning.

#### 4.7.2 A Glimmer of Hope

We may identify various reasons for the emergence of the time-image, such as a post-war crisis of thought and the subsequent need to see and understand the destruction it left. However, there is a deeper compulsion that drives the emergence of this type of image: "la poussée intérieure d'un cinéma renaissant, recréant ses conditions, néo-réalisme, nouvelle vague, nouveau cinéma américain" (*C2F*: 357) [the internal push of a cinema being reborn, re-creating its conditions, Neo-realism, new wave, new American cinema (*C2E*: 272)]. In this way, while cinematic movements and filmmakers grapple with the meaninglessness of the disaster, they are part of radical and inventive revolutions of the image, reflecting the notion that "la pensée, au cinéma, est mise en face de sa propre impossibilité, et pourtant en tire une plus haute puissance ou naissance" (*C2F*: 219) [thought, in cinema, is brought face to face with its own impossibility, and yet draws from this a higher power of birth (*C2E*: 168)].

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<sup>16</sup> While Italian Neo-Realism constitutes one example of the time-image, Deleuze also evokes a wide range of directors, from various time periods and nations, in whose films the time-image takes precedence, such as Bergman, Bresson, Tarkovsky, Herzog, and Kurosawa (ibid:128-129).

This reflects a glimmer of hope at the heart of powerlessness, reminiscent of the strange power of literature to which Blanchot dedicated his life and work. Deleuze writes that the impetus of this renovation of the image is the notion that “[s]eule la croyance au monde peut relier l’homme à ce qu’il voit et entend. Il faut que le cinéma filme, non pas le monde, mais la croyance à ce monde, notre seul lien” (*C2F*: 223) [[o]nly belief in the world can reconnect man to what he sees and hears. The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link (*C2E*: 172)]. Crucially, this believing, “n’est plus croire en un autre monde, ni en un monde transformé. C’est seulement, c’est simplement croire au corps [...] avant les mots, avant que les choses soient nommées” (*C2F*: 225) [is no longer believing in another world, or in a transformed world. It is simply believing in the body [...] before words, before things are named (*C2E*: 172-3)]. This belief reflects the hope, not for a better future, but of connecting and living in the present moment. This is comparable to the Orphic turning which, according to Blanchot, reflects a concern that “l’un ne soit jamais contemporain de l’autre” (Blanchot, 2010: 354) [one is never contemporaneous with the other (my translation)]. The other is either lost in representation or seen blindly as a spectral after-image and the fact that Eurydice is transformed into the latter signals that “Orphée veut vivre avec elle, dans la synchronie, dans le même temps” (ibid) [Orpheus wants to live with her, in synchrony, in the same time (my translation)]. Derrida’s hauntology shares this concern, which is contemplated in the exordium of *Specters of Marx*. Derrida writes that learning to live, is not simply a question for the present moment, because we cannot learn from life alone. To learn to live is to be both aware and naïve toward death; to acknowledge it, to experience it, albeit indirectly, to fail to understand it, and to attempt to live, in spite of it. Learning to live can occur “qu’entre vie et mort” (*SM*: 14) [only between life and death (*SME*: xvii)] and requires of us that we “apprendre à vivre avec les fantômes, dans l’entretien, la compagnie ou le compagnonnage, dans le commerce sans commerce des fantômes” (*SM*: 15) [learn to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts (*SME*: xvii-xviii)]. In this way, Derrida argues that we must learn to live without reducing death to an affirmation of life, without reducing the other to a reinforcement of the self, while tolerating the haunting of that which exceeds us. This is the unlearnable lesson that Travis evokes in his final decision to surrender his patriarchal position in his family with Jane and Hunter.

After being responsible by decentering himself, Travis must learn to endure his “séjour infini dans la mort” (*EL*: 181) [infinite sojourn in death (*SL*: 173)] as the absent presence of his family will indubitably haunt him for the rest of his life. His relinquishment of Hunter and Jane, an act of letting them live, is the most authentic expression of his desire to live alongside them and reflects what was referred to earlier, by Pagès, as Travis’s and Jane’s “desperate hope for Paris, Texas” (Pagès, 2021: 759).

This movement is brought to its climax when Travis witnesses the reunion of Jane and Hunter from a shadowy car park below the window of their hotel room. In alignment with the nature of the Blanchotian primal scene, Travis is excluded. In this moment he must learn to be infinitely concerned and, yet, infinitely cast away. His desire for the origin, in the form of a union with the mother, is at once offered and denied to him, in the form of Hunter and Jane’s reunion. The two are a mirror image of one another. Their identical blond hair falls from a middle parting and they both wear emerald green shirts. The positioning of Hunter’s hands, on Jane’s lower belly, evokes Travis’s fantasy of finding his origin, in the place of his conception. This spectacle may afford Travis the dream of unity, but Jane is his Eurydice, not his mother. She represents the impossibility of the origin and the nature of the spectre as only ever returning in a different form. Jane looks down at Hunter, resembling Narcissus who looks down at his reflection. Hunter exclaims, “[y]our hair! It’s wet” (*PT*: 97), recalling the fluid reflection on the lagoon’s surface. However, below this mirror-image lies someone else, someone who is “déjà mort et cependant destiné à un mourir fragile” (*ED*: 193) [already dead and nonetheless destined to a fragile, attenuated dying (*WD*: 126)]. Here, Travis takes the form of anti-Narcissus whose gaze haunts the scene from the “sans-fond effrayant du souterrain” (*ED*: 193) [frightfully unfathomable underground (*WD*: 126)]. This primal scene, like the others in the film, is a reflection on cinema spectatorship. The rows of illuminated windows in highrise hotels, seen in the background through the hotel window, resemble stacks of television screens, mirrored by the television in the corner of Hunter and Jane’s hotel room. Travis takes the position of a viewer in the auditorium who looks up to an image that both instils him with tenderness and forbids him from entering it. Marking his exclusion, Travis drives away, bathed in the red glow of the street lights, as if



making yet another infernal descent. As he gazes out the windscreen, tears stream down his face and a small, almost unperceivable smile appears, as if he is experiencing “la souffrance, la jouissance non narcissiques” (*ED*: 50) [nonnarcissistic suffering, and joy (*WD*: 29)] of the child who gazes out the window, in Blanchot’s primal scene. The camera withdraws, the viewer exteriorised along with it, and undertakes a gesture of looking back. Travis’s centrality is undercut as his car follows the ever-displacing gaze of the camera. His decentred position is emphasised as his car passes a billboard advertisement for the bank where Jane would deposit money for Hunter, which ironically reads: “Together we make it happen”.



Figure 11: Jane and Hunter reunite in the Meridian Hotel. Wim Wenders, 1984.



Figure 12: Travis watches Jane and Hunter, from a car park below. Wim Wenders, 1984.

A discussion of hope may seem incongruous, in these circumstances. After all, it is well established that Travis is not capable of living with Jane and Hunter again and that doing so would diminish the reparative and liberating movement toward intimacy that he effectuated throughout the film. However, Blanchot argues that intimacy is cultivated in impossibility and that only in the irrefutable denial of wholeness can a hope for connection be maintained. He writes:

[i]l y a l'espoir, s'il se rapporte, loin de toute saisie présente, de toute possession immédiate, à ce qui est toujours à venir, et peut-être ne viendra jamais [...] Plus lointain ou plus difficile est l'objet de l'espoir, plus l'espoir qui l'affirme est profond et proche de sa destinée d'espoir: j'ai peu à espérer, quand ce que j'espère est presque sous la main (*EI*: 44)

[[t]here is hope when, far from any present grasp, far from any immediate possession, it relates to what is always yet to come, and perhaps will never come [...] The more distant or difficult the object of hope is, the more profound and close to its destiny as hope is the hope that affirms it: I hope little when what I hope for is almost at hand (*IC*: 41)]

This reflects the impetus of the Orpheus complex as a belief that is maintained in impossibility. This reconceptualisation of hope allows us to imagine that, for a split second, Orpheus believed that he could both save Eurydice and look at her. The viewer is made to feel this impossible hope through the film's lack of resolution which, undoubtedly, sparks the imagination of every viewer. While it would be difficult to prove that each spectator secretly imagines or hopes for a future in which Travis and Jane meet again, there is one hidden piece of evidence that testifies to the haunting of this impossible possibility. This is found in a deleted scene from the first draft of the screenplay for *Paris, Texas* which goes as follows:

Travis works on the house. He's got a long way to go.

Travis picks up some equipment he's ordered for the house. The MAIL CLERK stops him as he's leaving [...] The clerk goes back and brings out a hand-sized box. Travis takes it.

Travis stops in the middle of the lobby and inspects the small box. It has spaceships stuck all over it. He opens the box and slides out a plastic container of Super-8 film. That's all that's in the box.

Super 8

Images of Hunter and Jane travelling across the country. They pass the camera back and forth and wave.

Hunter says (without sound) “I love you, Dad.” Jane says (without sound), “I love you, Travis.”

THE END (Shepard, Wenders, 1983: 188).

The emotional intensity of this scene suggests that the family may reconcile, once Travis finishes building the house and Jane and Hunter return from their travels. This is, likely, why it was omitted. While Shepard wanted the film to end with the “father and son [...] continu[ing] their travels, affording them the opportunity to know each other more fully” (Luprecht, 1992: 116), Wenders ‘apparently less concerned with the father-son theme, argued that “any other ending [than that of the final cut]. . . [would] diminish the overall effect”’ (ibid). This fragment indulges in the hope for presence proper to the Orphic turning back and its omission renders this hope palpable. For this hope to be maintained, it is imperative that the film not end this way. The fact that a potential union between the pair has been thought, written, considered, and ultimately discarded, mirrors Orpheus’s attempt to see Eurydice and the uncontrollable hope that its impossibility engenders. Travis confirms this to Hunter over a tape recording that he leaves for the boy, stating “the biggest thing I hope for can’t come true” (*PT*: 86). Travis’s Orpheus complex reflects that of the viewer, in that their belief is contingent on their exclusion and lack of agency over the film, revealed when the screen turns black.

It is not coincidental that the couple’s intimacy, in the deleted scene, is maintained through the super-8 films that Jane and Hunter send to Travis. Cinema is the ideal medium to show that this hope consists of an impossible hope, like that which Derrida observes when he states that “[a]u cinéma, on croit sans croire, mais ce croire sans croire reste un croire” (*CF*: 78) [[a]t the movies, you believe without believing, but this believing without believing remains a believing (*CP*: 27)]. The spectrality of film carries belief beyond itself, into an ambiguous and undecidable territory because “c’est un élément dans lequel la croyance n’est ni assurée ni contestée” (*CF*: 84) [[i]t is an element in which belief is neither assured nor disputed (*CP*: 37)]. In the cinematic image, we are confronted with a paradox between presence and absence, certitude and uncertainty, and visibility and invisibility. This fascinates us; it forms the body of an irreconcilable distance, that cannot be ignored or understood. As a result,

we turn, infinitely, in response and responsibility, between that which is not present and a present moment that perpetually makes itself absent. In losing and displacing ourselves in this turning, we are put into contact with another mode of being, one in which subjectivity is dispersed along with the objects upon which it founds itself. This turning implies a hope that it leads somewhere, not somewhere else in the future, but to where we already are, in the present. As we have seen, cinema can incite this hope, in illuminating the distance between the fragmented way we experience ourselves to be, and the incoherent fragments of the world that our limited perception restricts us to. We do not feel whole in the image but neither can we grasp the present; the Orpheus complex can be understood as the turning between these two exilic spaces. Like Orpheus who loses himself in a gaze that witnesses the death of Eurydice, who is already dead, cinema can open up the sky... but it opens up onto *the same sky*. After having seen a film that moves us, pierces us, or fascinates us, we emerge from the auditorium. We return to a present that is nowhere to be found and, yet, towards which we may feel, both, a sense of estrangement and reconciliation. Upon exiting the cinema, it's as though everything is different and, yet somehow, nothing has changed. In this fleeting turning, nothing is proven, nothing is shown, except the revelation of the nothingness that permeates every living moment.

## 4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that *Paris, Texas* is structured around the arresting fascination of four Blanchotian primal scenes, constituting an illustrative example of the Orpheus complex. It has allowed us to view the interplay between narrative movement and arrest, in the film, as reflective of an Orpheus complex which calls for responsibility and, thereby, turns us toward intimacy. The various primal scenes examined were shown to be meta-cinematic commentaries on the filmic image, allowing for an elucidation of the nature of spectatorship. The first primal scene, shot in the Mojave desert, emphasises the impossibility of the origin, which the myth of Orpheus illustrates, by identifying in Travis a desire to return to the mother. That which haunts Travis is not the ghost of his mother, but the irreducible distance from his origin that he must live with. The notions of the *punctum*

and Blanchotian intimacy allowed us to understand this desire as the passion for the image, as it is the embodiment of this distance. To draw this analysis to a close, the notions of belief, in the Deleuzian time-image, and hope, as Blanchot conceptualises it, were utilised to understand the enduring nature of this passion, which is eternally renewed by its impossibility, due to the exilic nature of the image and the present moment. Drawing on the quasi-existence of a scene that was omitted from the film, the final section conceptualised the Orpheus complex as the hope that compels one to see and reconnect with the world while ceaselessly being estranged from it, by way of the cinematic image. In this way, the Orpheus complex was framed as the perpetual turning between an ungraspable image and a fleeting present, born of the impossible hope of reconciling with them, which was epitomised by the Super-8 Scene, the one-way mirror scene, and the window scene.

# Conclusion

## 5.1 Overview

This dissertation has shed light on the prevalence of the Orpheus complex in cinema, opening new avenues for understanding the medium. It is the most in-depth study of the Orpheus complex, to date. Often theorised as the satisfaction of specular identification, this dissertation has reframed the pleasure of cinema as reflective of a deeper, concealed fascination with, what Blanchot terms, the outside. This idea was inspired by Blanchot's interpretation of the myth of Orpheus and informed by his psychoanalytic writings on narcissism. It was brought into dialogue with cinema, using Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, Derrida's hauntology in cinema and Barthes's work on death and photography. This idea was, then, applied to *Paris, Texas*, framing the protagonist, Travis, as an Orphic figure. In an invisible, almost mythic, and non-diegetic past, Travis was a man who strove for identity, as a preventative measure against loss. He tried to assert himself as a father and a husband - a figure of the Law - while painting his wife alternately as a Madonna or whore, to control her. This was compared to Orpheus's quest to affirm his identity as a poet and resurrect Eurydice, through his song. However, like that of Orpheus, Travis's affirmation of these identities causes him to lose Jane and himself, foregrounding the absent-present, haunting nature of the image. As *Paris, Texas* is a meta-cinematic exploration of spectatorship, identity, and film, this case study demonstrated that the cinematic image has a strong capacity to perpetuate the Orpheus complex.

## 5.2 Blanchot, Orpheus, Cinema, and Hauntology

This dissertation unearthed and evaluated the links between Blanchot and three fields of study, which have, until now, been scarcely acknowledged. This included the relation between Blanchot and cinema, Blanchot and the myth of Orpheus, and Blanchot and Derrida's theory of hauntology. The comparison between Blanchot's work on Orpheus, his philosophy of literature, and his evaluation of narcissism, showed how his treatment of the former acts as a microcosm of his philosophy. This allowed us to see Blanchot's own fascination with the outside as reflective of an Orpheus complex, constituting a useful frame that can be applied outside of his work to identify a similar streak in other

thinkers and artists. This also shed light on the potential of Blanchot's Orpheus to facilitate a deeper understanding of Orphic cinematic histories. For instance, the use of Deleuze's concept of the time-image showed the relationship between Blanchot's Orpheus and certain societal and cultural circumstances, such as the disintegration of meaning, following disastrous events. This, in turn, foregrounded the link between the Orphic gaze and revolutions of the cinematic image. The Orpheus complex is, therefore, a concept that could be applied to understand political upheaval, contemplated in films such as those of the Italian neorealists or the post-war memorial films of France.

The relationship between Blanchot and cinema was positioned between two theorisations of subjectivity in cinema: Mulvey's theory of an identificatory male gaze and Derrida's conceptualisation of a decentred spectator, through the visor effect. Although Blanchot's reading of narcissism was contrasted against that of Mulvey, far from discrediting her thesis, this works to destabilise the gendered power that she denounces, opening new avenues for exploring the misidentification at the centre of the male gaze and films that subvert it. While the investigation of gender politics played a supporting role in this dissertation's exploration of mastery in cinema, this leaves scope for future scholars to unpack gender in cinema, through the notion of the Orpheus complex. This angle could be taken to better understand the power of the Orphic gaze to undermine misogynistic structures and traditions within representation, which can already be seen, more recently, in Sciamma's *Portrait d'une jeune femme en feu* which subverts the Orphic myth.

On the other hand, this dissertation has not argued that this power and the potential for its subversion, through haunting, is exclusive to the male gaze. This could apply to numerous powerful and authoritative gazes, such as a colonial gaze which, as recent scholarship has shown, has been displaced in favour of haunting postcolonial gazes. Derrida's notion of the spectre, due to its intimate links with political responsibility and social justice, may allow future scholars to bring this sense of exclusion and responsibility to the fore, through the Orpheus complex. While the relation between Derrida and cinema has been analysed by existing scholarship, this dissertation constitutes an original contribution to this field in that it emphasised Blanchot's influence on Derrida, allowing for a deeper understanding of the roots of the latter's theory. Meanwhile, Derrida's thought acted as a bridge



between Blanchot and the cinematic image, opening its scope and applicability beyond the parameters that Blanchot worked within. This paves the way for interdisciplinary approaches to explore a common fascination or compulsion, across various media, to better understand the human concern with time, memory, death, and representation, while raising new questions about the experience of art.

This study also opened up new ways to understand the films of Wenders. *Paris, Texas* is often theorised as an oedipal drama (Cook, Gemünden, 1997: 252-254, Carveth, 1992: 8) and, while this dissertation has identified the oedipal undercurrents that inspire these theories, the use of the Blanchotian primal scene has opened up a radically new way of understanding these themes. This could certainly open up new ways to approach an analysis of Wenders's oeuvre, not to mention his most recent release *Perfect Days* (2024) which, by virtue of its contemplation of the elusive nature of the everyday, would lend equally well to a Blanchotian reading of the film and demonstrate the inexhaustible potential of an application of Blanchot to cinema. Not only did my choice of case study, a German film released in 1984, expand the application of Blanchot's work beyond the French mid to late 20th century cinema that it has, for the most part, been restricted to, but it also showed that there is the space for haunting in both narrative and experimental cinema. The dichotomy between degraded images and fascinating images, explored by Wenders, was not divided between specular and whole images and haunting, contemplative images. Even the images that claimed mastery were haunted by an inkling that this power was usurped. This can be seen in instances such as in Jane's description of every man having Travis's voice, in the Super-8 depicting a seemingly perfect family, and in the commercial billboards like those that Walt installs, such as the last one seen in the film. In this way, this dissertation showed that the Orpheus complex can tackle identity, in relation to images that self-reflexively contemplate spectrality and those that feign wholeness.

Equally, this dissertation has responded to the demand for psychoanalytic investigation of Blanchot's work and the concept of the Orpheus Complex could be used as a tool to expand the application of Blanchot's philosophy within this context. Not only could it inform theories of poetic creation, identity, and loss, but it also elucidates the significance of his work on narcissism and the image,

which could be applied to contemporary culture, in which narcissism is becoming an increasingly relevant object of study (Rees, 2020).

In regards to the key challenges highlighted in the introduction - namely, that an application of Blanchot's work to visual media may, at first glance, seem counterproductive - this dissertation has shown that there is scope within cinema to show the blind seeing of the Blanchotian Orphic gaze. In this regard, it is intriguing that the climax of this analysis was constituted by the invisibility of a piece of written work - the discarded draft of the film's ending - within which the haunting of cinema persists, in the form of unseen Super-8 shared between the characters. This fascinating unfurling of literary frames within cinematic frames, and vice versa, unveils a haunting and invisibility common to both media. This notion could be extended, by future scholars, to consider other media such as video, artists moving image, VR, and animation; an area in which academic interest begins to be shown (Tervo (2014), Feinstein, (2010)).

### 5.3 Living with the Orpheus Complex

Through the analysis in this dissertation, we may conclude that the Orpheus complex is a compulsion to perpetually lose and become lost which, paradoxically, is achieved through the hope and disbelief that what is lost will be reinstated. The ending of *Paris, Texas* reveals that Orpheus/Travis does not hold the power to resurrect, the triumph of poetry and love, or the ability to save Eurydice/Jane. The ending of the film marks the beginning of the interminable and inescapable loss that will haunt Travis, who is rendered an anonymous figure with no bearing on the world except the ghosts that surround him. To summarise this notion, it would be fruitful to acknowledge a passage in which Blanchot, himself, seems to be grappling with the notion of an Orpheus complex. Under the title "The Experience of Art" in *L'Espace littéraire*, Blanchot states that the command of the work, to 'sois toujours mort en Eurydice [...] a pour écho « toujours vivant », et vivant ne signifie plus ici la vie, mais, sous les couleurs de l'ambiguïté rassurante, signifie la perte du pouvoir de mourir, la perte de la mort comme pouvoir et possibilité" (*EL*: 255) [be dead evermore in Eurydice [...] is echoed by "alive forever," and here "alive" does not signify life, but -- in the guise of a reassuring ambiguity -- the loss

of the power to die, the loss of death as power and possibility (*SL*: 242)]. To elucidate this perpetual turning between death and a dying that does not die off, Blanchot writes:

Mouvement qu'on peut éclairer - non expliquer - en évoquant ces formes et ces crises appelées « complexes ». Leur essence, c'est qu'au moment où elles se produisent, elles se sont déjà produites, elles ne font jamais que se reproduire; c'est là leur trait caractéristique: elles sont l'expérience du recommencement. « A nouveau, à nouveau ! », c'est le cri de l'angoisse aux prises avec l'irréversible, avec l'être (*EL*: 256).

[One could bring this movement more sharply into focus -- but not explain it -- by evoking those forms and those crises called "complexes." Their essence is that at the moment they come about they have already done so: they only ever return. This is their characteristic feature. They are the experience of beginning again. "Again, again!" is the cry of anguish struggling with the irremediable, with being (*SL*: 243)]

Understood through this passage, the notion of an Orpheus complex does not systematically or formulaically explain the phenomenon of one. It does not bring the theory of a clear and defined malady to light. It does, however, act as a periscope, allowing us to momentarily and indirectly, glimpse the movement of repetition, impotence, and impossible hope that both permeates human life and escapes human understanding. This dissertation has shown that this periscope - the product of two diametrically opposed but allied reflections - could take the form of the imprint of the light on a strip of celluloid and the rays that project it into a dark cinema salle. The strange intimacy produced by such an image is something that Wenders has reflected on throughout his *œuvre*, reaching its climax in the character of Travis. Not only does Travis wander between empty images and struggle against a felt obligation to tell a meaningful story, but he loses himself in cinematic spaces to deal with this battle. He stares silently out of car windows, watches movies with his head in his hands, and looks through windows and one-way mirrors, only to be in turn looked at, haunted, and displaced. At the end of the film, Wenders's characters are as excluded from the work as we are, touched in a place that surpasses vision. Their fragmented musings do not amount to anything greater, and we are offered no identificatory relief. Yet, our relationship with the image is inexhaustible; our world is populated with them and our turning between them is becoming more and more ephemeral than the atemporal experience of looking at them. This is not because they offer us revelation, truth, or a greater

consciousness. It is because we are inhabited by a sort of Orpheus complex, rendering us susceptible to a fascination and strange intimacy with otherness.

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## Filmography

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- Alice in Cities*, 1974, Directed by Wim Wenders, Westdeutscher Runfunk (WDR), Filmverlag der Autoren.
- Alphaville*, 1965, Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, André Michelin Productions, Filmstudio, Chaumiane.  
*Allemagne Neuf Zero*, 1991, Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, France 2, Production Brainstorm.
- Black Orpheus*, 1959, Directed by Marcel Camus, Dispat Films, Gemma Cinematografica, Tupan Filmes.
- Deconstructing Harry*, 1998, Directed by Woody Allen, Sweetland Films.
- Derrida, Ailleurs*, 1999, Directed by Safaa Fathy, Gloria Films.
- Derrida*, 2002, Directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, Jane Doe Films.
- Detruire dit-elle*, 1969, Directed by Marguerite Duras, Ancinex, Madeleine Films.
- Force of Evil*, 1948, Directed by Abraham Polonsky, Robert Pictures Inc., Enterprise Productions.
- Ghost Dance*, 1983, Directed by Ken McMullen, Channel 4 films, Channel Four Television, Looseyard Productions.
- Hélas pour moi*, 1993, Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Les Films Alain Sarde, Vega Film, Périphéria.
- Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1988-1998, Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Canal+, Centre National de la Cinématographie, France 3, Gaumont, La Sept, Télévision Suisse Romande, Vega Films.
- Incidences of Catastrophe*, 1987-1988, Directed by Gary Hill, Collection SFMOMA.
- India Song*, 1975, Directed by Marguerite Duras, Sunchild Productions, Les Films Armorial.
- Je t'aime, je t'aime*, 1968, Directed by Alain Resnais, Parc Film, Les Productions Fox Europa.
- JLG/JLG: Autoportrait de décembre 1994*, Directed by Jean-Luc Godard, Gaumont, Périphéria.
- Kings of the Road*, 1976, Directed by Wim Wenders, Westdeutscher Runfunk (WDR), Wim Wenders Productions, Wim Wenders Stiftung.
- La Folie du jour*, 2010, Directed by Christophe Bisson.
- La Jetée*, 1962, Directed by Chris Marker, Argos Films.
- L'Amour à mort*, 1984, Directed by Alain Resnais, Les Films Ariane, Films A2, CNC, Ministère de la culture.
- L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961, Directed by Alain Resnais, Terra Film, Société Nouvelle des films, Cormoran, Precitel, Como Films, Argos Films, Les Films Tamara, Cinétel, Silver Films, Cineriz.
- Lecture du chapitre X de Thomas l'Obscur de Maurice Blanchot*, 1970, Directed by Benoît Jacquot.
- Le Sang d'un poète*, 1932, Directed by Jean Cocteau, Produced by Charles de Noailles, Tamasa Distribution.
- Le Testament d'Orphée*, 1960, Directed by Jean Cocteau, Les Editions Cinégraphiques.
- Malgré la nuit*, 2016, directed by Phillips Grandrieux, Mandrake Films, Epileptic, Ohmstudio.

- Marnie*, 1964, Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Geoffrey Stanley Productions, Universal Pictures.
- Mirror*, 1975, Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, Mosfilm.
- My Winnipeg*, 2007, Directed by Guy Maddin, Buffalo Gal Pictures, Documentary Channel, Everyday Pictures.
- Orfeu*, 1999, Directed by Carlos Diegues, Cine-Source, Globo Filmes, Rio Vermelho Filmes Ltda.
- Orphée*, 1950, Directed by Jean Cocteau, Films du Palais Royal.
- Paris, Texas*, 1984, Directed by Wim Wenders, Road Movies Filmproduktion GMBH, Argos Films S.A.
- Perfect Days*, 2023, Directed by Wim Wenders, Master Mind, Spoon, DCM, Bitters End.
- Portrait d'une Jeune Femme*, 2019, Directed by Céline Sciamma, Lilies Films, Arte France Cinéma, Hold Up Films.
- Rear Window*, 1954, Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Patron Inc. Paramount Pictures.
- Solaris*, 1972, Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, Mosfilm.
- Son of Saul*, 2015, Directed by László Nemes, Laokoon Filmgroup.
- The Fugitive Kind*, 1960, Directed by Sidney Lumet, Pennebaker Productions.
- The Matrix*, 1999, Directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski, Warner Bros, Village Roadshow Pictures, Groucho Film Partnership.
- The Metamorphosis of Birds*, 2020, Directed by Cararina Vasconcelos, Primeira Idade.
- The Wrong Move*, 1975, Directed by Wim Wenders, Albatros Produktion, Solaris Film, Westdeutscher Runfunk (WDR), Wim Wenders Stiftung.
- Une femme douce*, 1969, Directed by Robert Bresson, Marianne Productions, Parc Film.
- Vertigo*, 1958, Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions.
- Vous n'avez encore rien vu*, 2012, Directed by Alain Resnais, F Comme Film, StudioCanal.
- Wild Strawberries*, 1957, Directed by Ingmar Bergman, Svensk Filmindustri.