

Orfeo Negro
Black Orpheus

International Cinema
16 September 2008

Roger T. Macfarlane
Classics

Orfeu Negro

*Marcel Camus, director
Breno Mello and Marpessa Dawn
(d. 5 Sep 2008)*

*based on Orfeu da Conceição by
Vincius de Moraes
Cannes 1959, Palme d'Or
Academy Award, 1960*



critical acclaim

- “Black Orpheus is perhaps the most impressive can of film so far cast up on U.S. shores by the New Wave of creation that has swept across the French movie industry. It is an amazing creation.”

— *Time* 19 Nov 1959

- “Swarms of sinuous girls and children shimmy and race to the samba beat... That’s what makes the picture alive.”

— *NYTimes* 22 Dec 1959

praise not universal

- “The praise... is wholly undeserved. It results, I suspect, from such adventitious things as the impulse to be kind to negroes and to a film made in Brazil, and the current lavender cult of Orpheus.”
- “Camus’ direction is amateur on a crude burlesque-show ... a confusion and a bore.”

— Joao de Fragoso, *Films in Review* Feb. 1960

mixed praise

‘*Black Orpheus* is also one of those movies that bled from one kind of art into another. Marcel Camus didn't inspire the kind of devotion among filmmakers that Tarantino did. But *Black Orpheus* changed the music world, introducing the west to Latin American music. So when that cover band stops playing Dick Dale and goes into "The Girl from Ipanema," you've got Camus to thank (or curse). *Black Orpheus* is filled with music from the first frame to the last. The songs were written by Luiz Bonfá and Antonio Carlos Jobim, and they still show up in movie soundtracks... As far as their bossa nova credentials go, try this: Jobim's the guy who actually wrote "The Girl From Ipanema." So the movie's worth seeing for the music alone, which is good, because I wasn't blown away by the rest of it.’

— *CriterionCollectionBlogspot.com*

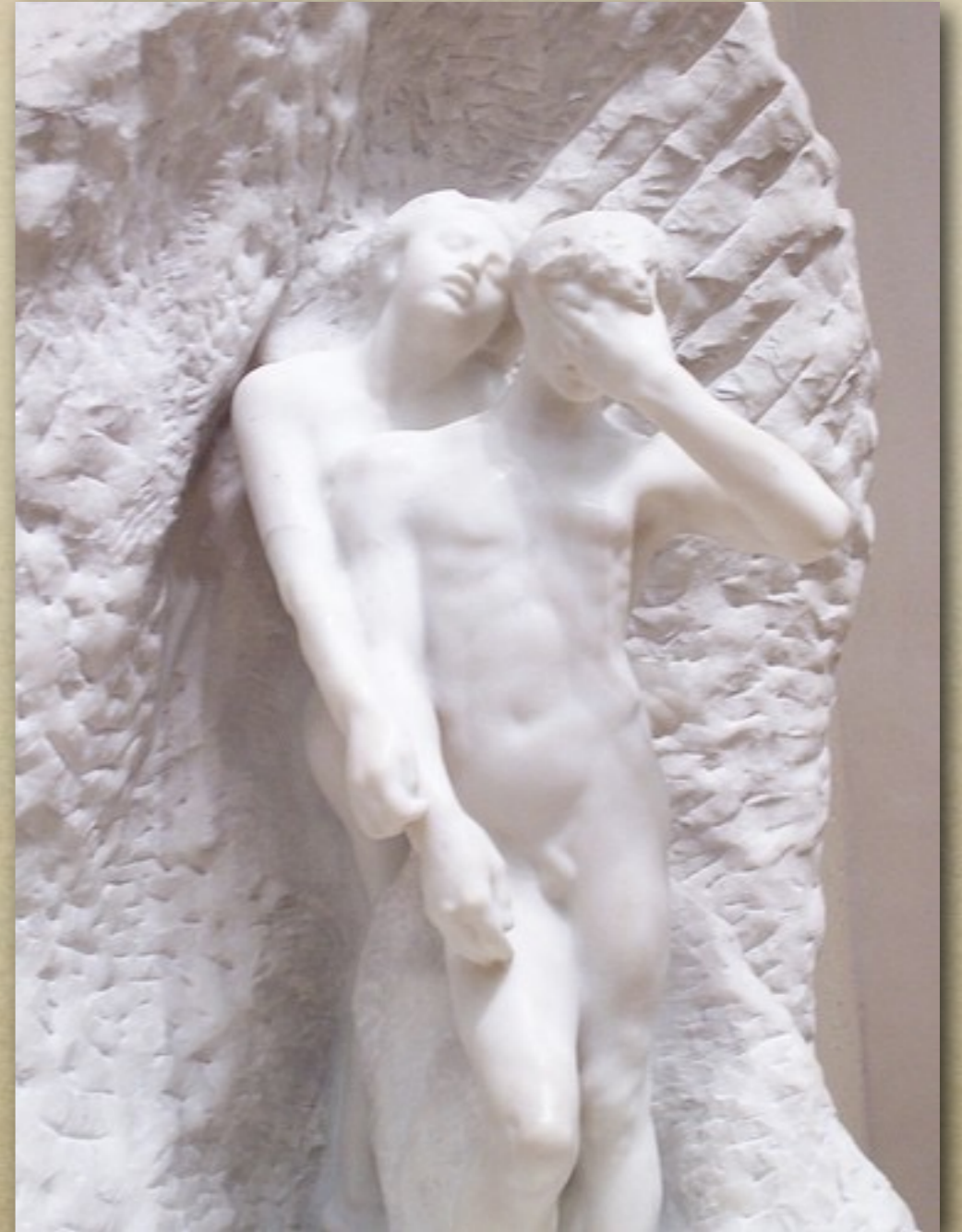
*Hermes,
Eurydice, and
Orpheus*

*relief sculpture,
5th Century BC,
Naples*





*G.F. Watts, Orpheus and Eurydice
(1872)*



*A. Rodin, Orpheus and Eurydice,
(1893)*

elements of Orpheus story

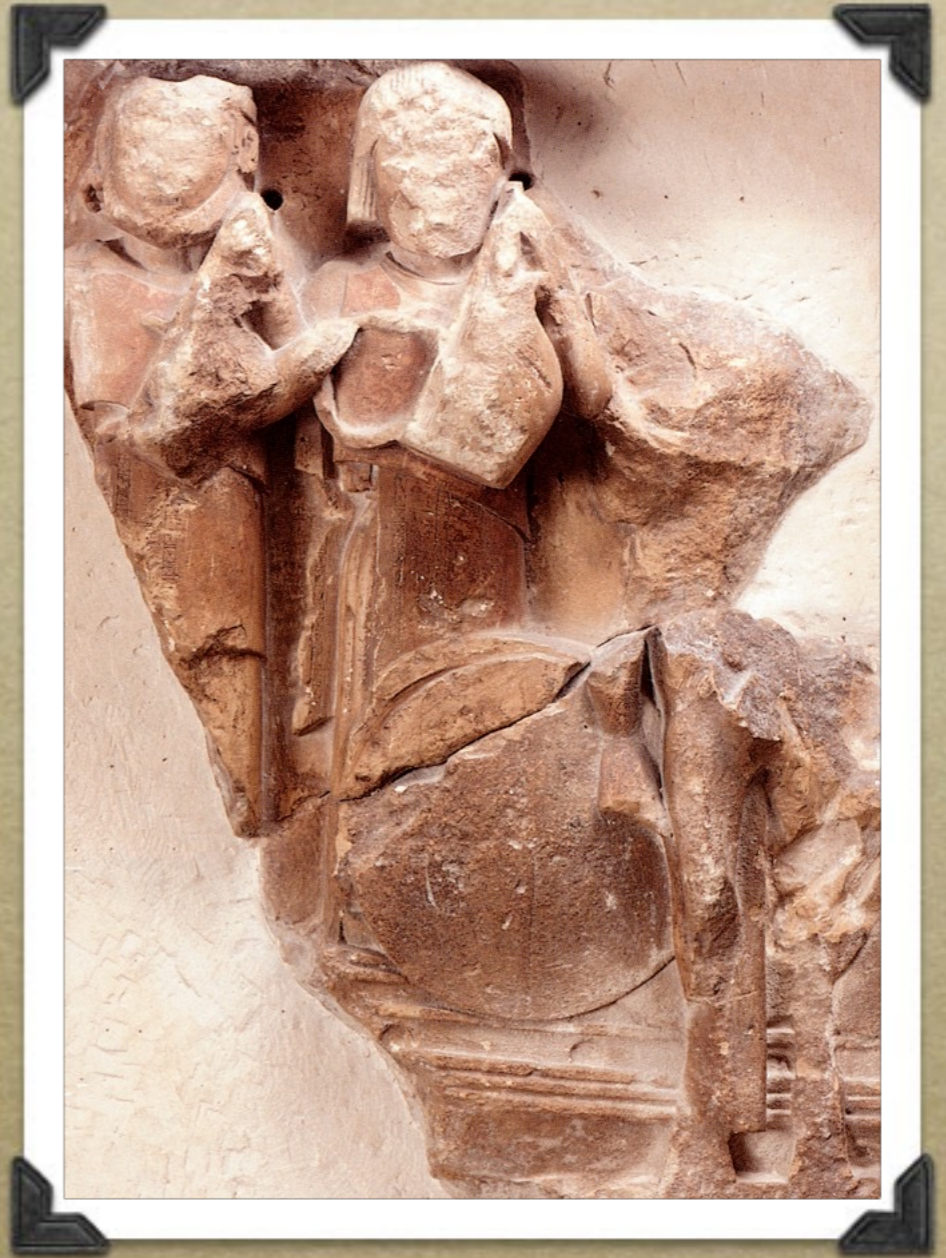
shamanistic creator



Orpheus Mosaic, Paphos, ca. AD 200.

elements of Orpheus story

shamanistic creator
Argonaut



Sikyonian monopteros, Delphi ca. 510 BC

elements of Orpheus story

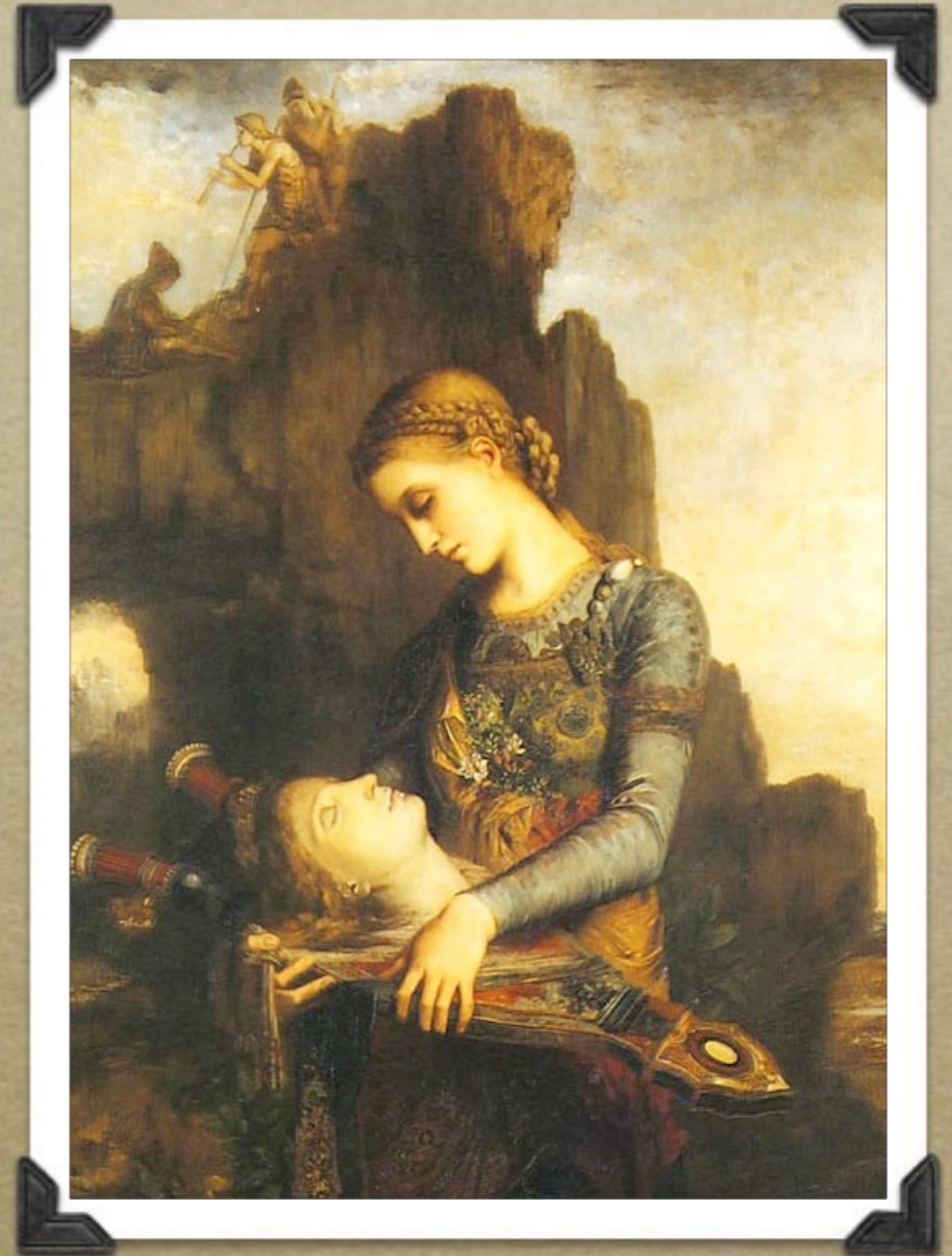
shamanistic creator
Argonaut
most faithful lover



*Angolo Bronzino,
Portrait of Duke Cosimo de' Medici I (1539)*

elements of Orpheus story

shamanistic creator
Argonaut
most faithful lover
immortal artist



*G. Moreau, A Girl Reverently Gathers Up
the Head of Orpheus and His Lyre (1865)*

elements of Orpheus story

shamanistic creator
Argonaut
most faithful lover
immortal artist



*J.W. Mähler, "Beethoven with Lyre",
1804, Wienmuseum, inv. 104650*

elements of Orpheus story

shamanistic creator

Argonaut

most faithful lover

immortal artist

founder/object of religion



*anonymous, Orpheus with lyre and surrounding
beasts*



The mythic Orpheus is destroyed by Thracian bacchantes; in Black Orpheus, Mira is an enthused reveler with a meanstreak



Black Orpheus: Orpheus in the hellish Bureau of Missing Persons, in search of Euridice



Black Orpheus: the sun'll come up tomorrow

Orpheus and revolutionary art

- *Claudio Monteverdi, L'Orfeo (1607)*
“favola in musica”
- *C.W. Glück, Orfeo ed Euridice (1762)*
azione teatrale, revised 1774
- *J. Offenbach, Orphée aux Enfers (1858)*
opéra bouffe
- *... a natural starting place for nouvelle artists*

Nouvelle Vague *New Wave*

- *De Gaulle's postwar initiative: French Film Office*
- *30+ inexperienced directors in 1959*
- *low-budget, unknown actors*
- *“desperate struggle against mainstream”*
- *leftward leaning, rejection of commercialism, neo-realist*

Dance in Black Orpheus

- *natural element in Rio de Janeiro: cha-cha, samba, improvisation: “an entire city in rapture”*
- *“super-normal, musically attuned motion”*
- *“random, unprincipled, delirious”*
- *“seldom has the dance of life been imagined in such barbaric abandon of*

politics and the *Black Orpheus*

- *Camus' project rescued by Pres. Juscelino Kubitschek*
- *1957: "Vinicius de Moraes play, set in the wildly poetic mountains around Rio... thousands of Negroes live in conditions of infernal poverty among scenes of paradisaal beauty." Time*

movimento negro

- “The tale is a fitting parable of Afro-Brazilian politics, for it captures the problematic of culturalism, with its emphasis on genealogical excavation and “we too” history within the *movimento negro Brasileiro*.”
- “Historically, cultural practices (religion, music, dance, and other forms) have been one of the few vehicles of expression relatively accessible to blacks in Brazilian society.”
- — *M.G. Hanchard, Orpheus and Power: the movimento negro and Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1945- 1988 (Princeton 1994), 8 and 164*





Maurice Denis, Orpheus and Eurydice 1910











