



## Ambiguous Symbols: Cocteau's and Verlaine's Strategies for Defamiliarisation

by Alison Frank

In 1920s France, Impressionist filmmakers such as Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein and Marcel L'Herbier were making films based on a notion inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic and Symbolist tradition: namely, that art should communicate its creator's 'personal vision', and that this personal vision should make its impression on the audience 'not by making direct statements but by *evoking* or *suggesting*' [my emphasis].<sup>i</sup> With the introduction of sound in 1929, it became difficult for these directors to pursue their visual experiments: the cost of sound film production obliged them to move towards commercial, narrative-driven filmmaking.<sup>ii</sup> Some Impressionists believed, in any case, that dialogue would necessarily distract from the image and that the takeover of the talkie had permanently spoiled cinema's poetic capacities. In 1930, however, Jean Cocteau received funding from the Vicomte de Noailles to make *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930), the first film in what would be known as his Orphic trilogy, which would also comprise *Orphée* (1950) and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1960). In these three films, Cocteau developed his own approach to poetic cinema, one which would rely on both sound and image.

Cocteau's visual style was less impressionistic than that of the 1920s filmmakers but his practice built on their Symbolist-inspired concept of the poetic function. Objects in his films act as symbols but the meaning of these symbols is plurivalent: rather than a single object being connected to a single idea, one object will be the locus of many different associations. In this respect, it is of interest to compare Cocteau's films with the poetry of Paul Verlaine, one of the leading practitioners of Symbolism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, the atmosphere of Cocteau's films and Verlaine's poetry is quite different: this is a natural result of the different eras in which they lived. However, both create a

surprisingly similar impression of mystery and wonder through their placement of objects with ambiguous meaning.

The Russian Formalists, most notably Roman Jakobson and Viktor Shklovsky, argued for the similarity between poetry and film. In 'Décadence du cinéma', Jakobson quotes Lev Kuleshov, who said that 'Un plan doit agir comme un signe, comme une lettre'.<sup>iii</sup> Jakobson goes on to explain that both language and cinema will be orientated towards either prose or poetry according to the writer or filmmaker's stylistic choices: a greater emphasis on metonymy results in prose, while a preference for metaphor results in poetry.<sup>iv</sup> Rather than rehashing the Formalists' argument for the validity of the comparison between poetry and cinema, this article will demonstrate it by comparing the work of Verlaine and Cocteau: in particular, selected poems from three of Verlaine's collections, *Poèmes saturniens* (1866), *Fêtes galantes* (1869), and *Romances sans paroles* (1874), and Cocteau's Orphic trilogy, with particular emphasis on the most self-conscious film of the three, *Le Testament d'Orphée*.

As it looks at Verlaine's and Cocteau's use of symbols, this comparison will rely less on Jakobson's work treating cinema specifically, and more on the Formalists' notion of 'defamiliarisation'. In 'L'Art comme procédé', Shklovsky argued that the routine familiarity of our everyday surroundings and activities anaesthetises us to the sensations of life. The role of art, in Shklovsky's view, is to render the familiar unfamiliar, and it does so by abandoning clichéd expressions which the audience can absorb quickly and unthinkingly. Poetic techniques which draw attention to the means of expression and represent the world in a new way through unusual associations, crucially force the audience to stop and think in order to understand.<sup>v</sup> Through their attention to form and through symbols that bring together many different and often unexpected ideas, both Cocteau and Verlaine trouble our perception of meaning. This results first in defamiliarization, and ultimately in a powerful impression of mystery when competing meanings cannot be resolved into one clear interpretation. This article will examine three aspects of symbols present in the work of Cocteau and Verlaine: plurivalence (that is, many meanings associated with one object), defamiliarization and uncertainty.

**Plurivalence.** At the end of *Le Testament d'Orphée*, Cocteau's voice directly affirms the central significance of a flower that reappears throughout the film: 'Ma vedette est une fleur d'hibiscus'. Other characters in the film also make it clear that the hibiscus is not just a hibiscus, but stands for something else: the flower has a decidedly symbolic function. Close study of the flower's recurrent appearances in the film reveals that it represents many possible ideas: in other words, it is 'plurivalent'.

Just before he identifies the hibiscus as his 'vedette', Cocteau says, 'Et voilà. Une vague joyeuse vient de balayer mon film d'adieu'. In the immediately preceding scene the hibiscus, lying in the middle of the road, is swept away in the dust raised by a passing car full of cheering youths. Cocteau's statement, then, leads viewers to identify the hibiscus with the film. Cégeste's explanation of the hibiscus suggests further possible meanings: he says to Cocteau, 'Cette fleur est faite de votre sang. Elle épouse le syncope de votre destin'. His statement evokes the title of *Le Sang d'un poète* and associates the poet's blood with his artistic oeuvre, his death, or his fame. In a sense, all of these possible connotations are interdependent. The poet's blood is both his life (inside his body) and his death (when blood is shed). As his work, the poet's blood offers him immortality: he has put his blood, as a metaphor for his self, into his art which in turn offers the potential of lasting fame. That lasting fame, however, requires his death: many poets only receive recognition posthumously, and as Cocteau says in *Le Testament d'Orphée*, works of art 'rêvent de tuer leurs pères et mères'. No wonder, then, that when he first encounters the hibiscus, Cocteau says, 'Je n'aime pas cette fleur'.

Other scenes in the film also associate the hibiscus with notions of death and rebirth. Cégeste twice tells Cocteau to bring the flower back to life, and Cocteau finally does: a considerably long take captures the director's hands magically repairing the hibiscus that he had just torn apart. Later, when Cocteau approaches Athena, flower in hand as an offering, she rejects both flower and poet. Cocteau observes that 'Lazare non plus ne sentait pas très bon'. The fact that Cocteau is making reference to a resurrected human suggests a parallel between himself and Lazarus, but the reference to scent supports a comparison between the hibiscus and the biblical figure.

In fact, the flower is associated with rebirth from the moment it first appears in the film, coinciding with Cégeste's first appearance. Cégeste appears to leap out of the sea, hibiscus in hand. Next, there is a close-up of the flower in his hand, and the camera pans to follow the flower as he presents it to Cocteau. During this shot, three vibrato musical notes add sonic emphasis to the close visual focus. The flower as a symbol of rebirth, then, connects Cocteau and the character he has created. The connection between them actually extends beyond this film: the character of Cégeste is revived from *Orphée*, and the actor who plays him is Cocteau's adoptive son. In this way, there is not only the suggestion of rebirth in the relationship between the artist and his creation but also in a father surviving through his child. This makes it easier to understand the gravity of Cégeste's accusatory 'N'avez-vous pas honte?' when Cocteau tears the flower apart.

The flower can also represent the poet himself, as illustrated in the greenhouse scene: Cocteau tries to draw the hibiscus but draws his own portrait instead. As he does so, the paleness of his head and the darkness of his tie seem to echo the flower's pale petals and dark stem, supporting the analogy between artist and flower. The film's ending reinforces this link as Cocteau's identity papers transform into a hibiscus.

Thus the flower's plurivalence in *Le Testament d'Orphée* is extensive. The depth of meaning that the flower represents is only accessible, however, by thinking closely about the symbol's multiple associations.

Ekphrastic<sup>vi</sup> symbols in Verlaine's 'Le Faune' and 'L'Amour par terre' also encourage careful reflection. Even more than the hibiscus in *Le Testament d'Orphée*, the central symbolic objects in these poems suggest different points of view and different ways of seeing. Both poems foreground statues, which feature in the title and constitute the poem's initial focus. Readers who come to the poem with preconceptions about the object in question, or think the symbolism is obvious at first, will be surprised to find more than one possible meaning associated with the object.

In 'Le Faune', the title object '[r]it au centre des boulingrins, / Présageant sans doute une suite / Mauvaise à ces instants sereins'. The fact that the faun is specified as being 'vieux', its connotations of rampant sexuality, its goat-like features biblically associated with evil, as well as its permanently frozen laugh,

might make the reader feel that this pagan figure in the midst of the manicured 'boulings' (lawns) symbolises a threat to the 'instants sereins' that the narrator and the addressee are spending together. Indeed, the fact that the statue is '[p]résageant sans doute une suite / Mauvaise' implies that the figure's predictions might even be responsible for the approaching misfortune.

However, the faun may not be associated with destruction in such a cruelly calculating way after all. The poet observes that the statue is 'de terre cuite': this is a perishable material, not one used for high art or statues of lasting significance. One might be surprised that such a statue should be a worthy of a poem. The faun's laughter being only as durable as the material of which the faun itself is made, this laughter is ultimately as temporary as the fleeting 'instants sereins'. The faun effectively participates in the melancholy of the elusive moment, rather than being a mocking figure of triumph over the passage of time.

There is a notable juxtaposition between the pagan nature of the faun and the religious allusion in the word 'pèlerins'. Again, the two seem to be in opposition at first, but the pagan and Christian spheres are drawn together in the final line by a reference to an hour's 'fuite' that '[t]ournoie au son des tambourins'. The fleeting hour is connected with the poet, while the tambourines' association with nature worship and the uncontrolled connotations of the verb 'tournoyer' connect them with the faun. Although the faun is laughing and the pilgrims are '[m]élancoliques', neither the religion of nature nor more conventional forms of religion are immune to the fleeting moment. This unexpected connection may make readers revise their notions of permanence and impermanence, or even question the idea of a hierarchy of religions.

Although a marble statue is a more conventional object of ekphrasis than a terra cotta faun, the symbolism in 'L'Amour par terre' also overturns the reader's expectations, specifically regarding art's timelessness and unchanging meaning. The poem begins, '[l]e vent de l'autre nuit a jeté bas l'Amour'. This statement is surprising, and becomes more so as it is repeated, almost identically, at the beginning of the second stanza, where the speaker adds that it is a marble statue that has been knocked down by the wind. The threat to the permanence of art, specifically to the artist's immortal fame, is evoked by the lines, 'le nom de l'artiste / Se lit péniblement parmi l'ombre d'un arbre'. In

separating the statue from its pedestal, the wind has already broken the essential link between the work of art and the artist, a separation echoed by the poem's structure. Particularly in the second and third stanzas where there is specific reference to the separation, the combination of caesuras and enjambements create jarring line breaks to emphasise this idea.

'L'Amour par terre' is reminiscent of Shelley's 'Ozymandias', which centres on a statue of a king once powerful, now obscure: the remains of the statue are described first as 'two vast and trunkless legs of stone', 'a shattered visage', and finally 'these lifeless things'. The statue's form is similarly negated in Verlaine's poem. There is a shift from the full detail of the first stanza, which describes a fallen figure that '[s]ouriait en bandant malignement son arc', to the purely material 'marbre / [qui] Au souffle du matin tournoie, épars' in the second stanza. Finally, the last stanza demotes the broken art work to 'débris dont l'allée est jonchée'.

The statue of 'Amour' is not only a symbol of love (the capital used for the name of the god also suggesting a reference to all love, or love in general), but specifically of past love: the broken statue is already associated with the 'songe[s]' it evoked in the speaker and his companion at the time (the use of the *passé simple* emphasising that the events are long past). In the final stanza, the narrator's 'est-ce pas?' suggests that he is not at all certain that the addressee *is* 'touchée / D'un si dolent tableau' that the statue represents for him. Instead, her eye follows the 'papillon de pourpre et d'or', its joyful colour and present movement in stark contrast to the speaker's melancholy fixation on the past. As in 'Le Faune', the symbol of the statue forces readers to revise their initial impressions, understand that art is not necessarily solid or immortal, and recognise that art's meaning will not be the same for everyone.

**Defamiliarization.** In both Verlaine and Cocteau, the notion of defamiliarization is introduced self-reflexively: within the work itself, there is reference to characters who see the world differently, either through a fresh or visionary perspective, through their status as different or out of place, or through an attempt to overcome the normal boundaries of everyday existence.

In the fourth of the 'Ariettes oubliées' Verlaine's speaker employs imagery associated with femininity and childishness, which were closely related in the

general imagination at the time Verlaine was writing. The poem's central conceit of returning to a state of lost innocence requires not only the speaker and addressee to become 'deux enfants', but specifically 'deux jeunes filles'. In the first stanza, the poet feminises himself along with the addressee, describing them as two 'pleureuses' (mourners). In the second stanza, they are referred to as 'âmes soeurs', a common expression but nonetheless one that implicitly feminises. The adjective 'puérile' in the following line, although it has its root in the Latin word for 'boy', takes on the feminine ending to agree with the noun it modifies.

The desire to 'cheminer loin des femmes et des hommes, / Dans le frais oubli de ce qui nous exile' is reminiscent of Baudelaire's 'L'Invitation au voyage' which also offers escape to an ideal fantasy location. The difference, however, is marked: Verlaine's proposed escape features 'chastes charmilles' (chaste tree-covered walks)—no 'luxe' or 'volupté' here. Rather, poet and speaker are '[é]prises de rien et de tout étonnées', the negation of the adjective '[é]prises' serving to entirely desexualise the context. The chiasmus of that line emphasises an opposition between 'rien' and 'tout', evoking a childish binarism that flees from the uncertainty of nuance to take comfort in the certainty of absolutes. In Verlaine, however, nuance is integral, and readers who know his work will not be fooled by professed aspirations to simplicity, or phrases suggesting a pure and happy ignorance ('frais oubli', '[s]ans même savoir').

The poet is well aware that the state of innocence he describes can only ever be a dream. There is more to the poem than infantilisation or desire for an impossible return to childhood. Although the phrase 'de tout étonnées' may evoke an image of brainless wide-eyed astonishment, from a poet's point of view there are clear advantages to seeing everything through the eyes of a child. 'Frais oubli' can thus connote freshness of vision rather than simple amnesia. It is worth noting that the *Ariettes oubliées* belong to a collection that Verlaine wrote when he fled his conventional married life in Paris and travelled through Belgium and England with his younger lover, the poet Arthur Rimbaud. From a biographical perspective, then, the fourth 'Ariette oubliée' may reflect the poet's own sense of seeing the world differently, in terms of a departure from the heteronormative.

More generally, for a poet, freeing oneself from pre-conceived notions and clichéd associations is a key method of escaping from the banality of everyday perception and finding new meaning. The Russian Formalists believed that this was one of the most important functions of art, to 'rendre la sensation de la vie', lost to most people through everyday habits and routine. By slowing down perception, art restores the process of perceiving the object in detail, the object in all its particularity.<sup>vii</sup>

One way in which poetry slows down perception is by drawing attention to the sign. Poetic images are not assimilated automatically, like simple prose: instead, they are savoured, experienced and understood little by little.<sup>viii</sup> Jakobson speaks of poetry's characteristic 'direction de l'intention non pas sur le signifié mais sur la signe lui même'.<sup>ix</sup> Poetry and film both draw attention to the sign. Poetry does so through rhyme and line divisions, and by making readers consider many possible meanings associated with one word. Film draws attention to the sign by turning every object into a sign:<sup>x</sup> it leads viewers to ask why the director chose to include a given object and what significance that object may have beyond its practical function in the film (particularly if there is no clear practical function).

When readers/viewers are presented with objects that are evidently symbolic, they are made aware of the interplay of identification and distinction between sign and object.<sup>xi</sup> For example, in the poem just considered, readers will first envision the images literally. Ultimately though, rather than simply accepting that the poet wants himself and his companion to be as innocent as 'deux jeunes filles', readers will wonder why the poet selected such imagery and what broader significance the poem may hold on a symbolic level. By drawing attention to particular objects and creating symbols, making it clear that there is further meaning beyond surface appearances, poets and filmmakers help their audiences to renew their powers of perception and drop their usual, automatic ways of looking at objects.<sup>xii</sup> The audience is encouraged to explore new ways of thinking about these objects and the ideas that they represent.

At the end of *Le Testament d'Orphée*, Cégeste says to Cocteau, 'la terre, après tout, n'est pas votre patrie!' The poet is, in essence, at home nowhere, and in this sense will always possess the freshness of vision of Verlaine's 'deux jeunes filles'. Throughout, the film also emphasises the artist's ability to see



beyond everyday appearances: this idea is formulated most explicitly during the judgement scene when Cocteau is accused by Heurtebise of having continually tried to enter a world to which he does not belong—not the everyday world of 'la terre' this time, but a mysterious world beyond. Cocteau accepts that he is guilty of having wanted to jump over 'ce quatrième mur mystérieux sur lequel les hommes écrivent leurs amours et leurs rêves'.

In *Le Testament d'Orphée*, as in *Le Sang d'un poète*, Cocteau believed that he rendered poetry on screen;<sup>xiii</sup> in this fusion of two modes of expression one should therefore always look for a visual counterpart to the symbolism in the poetic dialogue. In *Le Sang d'un poète* the poet was trapped in a room without windows or doors: he had to pass through a mirror in order to escape. *Orphée* also showed its title character using a mirror as a gateway to another world. In *Le Testament d'Orphée*, then, Cocteau's reference to the fourth wall may be intended to evoke the last wall that shuts people inside the box of everyday existence: others have written their stories and poetry on this wall, as though drawing windows and doors by which they might escape. Cocteau's crime is, similarly, to have wanted to overcome this wall. We should also recall that the original word for the movie camera, the 'cinématographe', was based on the notion of cinema as a form of 'writing of movement'. When projected on the fourth wall of the cinema (*i.e.* the screen), this 'movement-writing' also creates a door through which the audience can escape from their everyday lives, to a world of true wonder and discovery in the case of the best films.

Of course in cinema, the term 'fourth wall' most commonly refers to the space behind the camera: the camera's field of vision can only ever encompass three walls of a room at once, thus the 'fourth wall' behind the camera will always hold a degree of mystery. The 'fourth wall' can even be likened to the unconscious, because in order to participate in the film's illusion, viewers must repress their knowledge of the camera and the creatives working behind it. Cocteau's film also incorporates this notion of the 'fourth wall' as any space normally hidden from the audience's view: *Le Testament d'Orphée* actually attempts to overcome the repression. Like the film's opening sequence, the judgement scene takes place in a part of the studio that audiences are rarely allowed to see: behind the sets. The props required for these scenes are placed at the centre of the studio, but unrelated props are in plain view in the

background. Cocteau has effectively removed all walls, so that the audience can see beyond the surfaces of the conventional studio film. Through this denuding of sets, as well as the use of camera tricks, actors who play themselves in addition to their fictional roles, and references to the film itself and the artist's creative process, Cocteau perpetually draws attention to the status of his film as *film*. Cocteau thus creates defamiliarization by making the audience more acutely aware of the medium and its constructedness.

There is a similar sense of pushing limits and transcending surfaces through defamiliarization in Verlaine's 'Crépuscule du soir mystique'. As the title implies, that which is attained will remain veiled in mystery. The poem itself has a circular structure: with its first line identical to its last, it gives on the one hand an impression of having gone nowhere, but on the other an impression of having experienced something that cannot quite be formulated in words. An additional sense of spiralling is created by the relentless enjambements, the only significant pause coming in the line '[d]ahlia, lys, tulipe, renoncule': as this line is repeated, it too ultimately adds to the circularity. The structure reflects a giddiness in the content of the poem: in the reference to 'mainte floraison.../ [qui] S'élançe autour d'une treillis, et circule / Parmi la maladive exhalaison' there is a double circular movement, both of the flowers winding around the trellis, and of the vortex of their scents intermingling in the air, a combination that overwhelms the narrator.

Although in its subject matter, circularity and repetition the poem is similar to Baudelaire's 'Harmonie du soir', its approach and effect are fundamentally different. Baudelaire's poem gives readers a feeling of giddiness but allows them to maintain their sense of reason. The poem's alexandrines are self-sufficient, not making use of enjambement. In 'Crépuscule du soir mystique' by contrast, Verlaine presents his images in such a way that readers become disorientated, as though experiencing a 'pâmoison' (swoon) themselves. Some have wrongly implied that Verlaine did not employ a method as 'consciente et réfléchie' as Baudelaire,<sup>xiv</sup> but in this poem Verlaine uses numerous techniques contributing to an effect different from that of Baudelaire's poetry but equally intentional. Through enjambement and circularity of form, Verlaine's poem reflects a sense of the incessant cycle of days and memories, but his most impressive and distinctive technique is his layering of impressions. If readers

are to progress smoothly through the poem (as the enjambements would have them do), it is necessary to renounce any effort to separate the layers of images and associations: instead, they should allow these layers to wash over them so that their senses, like the narrator's, 'drown'. For the purpose of analysis, however, it is worth examining more closely exactly how that wave of sensations is created, and studying the interplay of symbols.

One notable characteristic of this poem is that words for abstract concepts such as 'Souvenir' and 'Espérance' are capitalised. 'Crépuscule' is also capitalised: is this because the word is associated with 'Souvenir' and therefore holds equal importance? By contrast, 'horizon' is not capitalised although it is even more closely associated with 'Espérance'. The poem appears to capitalise only abstract entities. While 'horizon' is something that can be located at any time, 'Crépuscule' is more fleeting and elusive, and in this way is more similar to the concepts of 'Souvenir' and 'Espérance', which need to be capitalised in order to emphasise their active role in the poem.

Abstract entities having been given a weight that is equal to their concrete counterparts, the poem combines 'Souvenir' and 'Crépuscule'. Although both memory and sunset are arguably intangible and in this sense abstract, it is not easy to visualise '[l]e Souvenir' reddening on the horizon. The next challenge is to understand the meaning of 'l'ardent horizon / De l'Espérance en flamme'. It is difficult to decide which words should go together: is one to imagine a 'horizon / De l'Espérance' or 'l'Espérance en flamme', and what would this imply about 'l'Espérance' in each case? To what exactly are 'Souvenir' and 'Espérance' being compared and what is their relationship? It becomes impossible to understand the complex symbolism of the poem with any certainty. Nonetheless, when one reads the poem without stopping to unravel the complexities, one receives a powerful impression in terms of its tone and the emotion underlying the poem. It is a poem that seems languid and fainting, overwhelmed by physical and emotional sensation. This impression is created not only by the poem's structure, but also through a rich *champ lexical* including such words and phrases as 'tremble', 'ardent', 'en flamme', 'maladive exhalaison', 'parfums lourds et chauds', 'poison', 'noyant mes sens, mon âme et ma raison', and 'pâmoison'.

More than languidness, by the end of the poem there is a sense of noxiousness and unhealthy growth: the flowers' scents at first seemed to mingle '[p]armi la malade exhalaison' of an unspecified source, but finally they are identified as the source of 'le poison' of these 'parfums lourds et chauds'. The reader realises that it was the flowers releasing toxins into the air from the very beginning, and thus there is again a sense of circularity as readers are forced to revise their initial impressions. In relation to the flowers' toxicity, the 'Espérance' that 's'agrandit' as it 'recule' now evokes a pullulating degradation: something that grows larger as it decays. By the end of the poem all of the visual and olfactory impressions dissolve into each other and the reader is left with a confused but very strong impression, the source of the poem's disorientating effect: a bewildering build-up and dissolution of concrete and abstract sensations that perfectly communicates the speaker's experience.

The dense symbolism of the poem means that no object can be innocent; the reader is led to search for additional meaning in every item mentioned. It is difficult to resist interpreting the types of flowers Verlaine chooses to mention, particularly as they are mentioned twice and set off from the rest of the poem with dashes. Dictionaries of flower symbolism yield trite and uninteresting results. There will not be a single answer to the significance of the four types of flower mentioned, but it is worthwhile noting that the first and last, the dahlia and the ranunculus, are remarkably dense flowers: they have multilayered petals, rather like the dense and multi-layered poem. The tight ball-like ranunculus and the radiating petals of the dahlia could easily be compared to the sun mentioned in the poem. The lily and the tulip can be associated with death (funerals) and rebirth (springtime) respectively, relevant concepts if the poem is read in terms of what the poet is losing and what he is gaining.

The wall against which the flowers grow makes for a compelling comparison with the 'fourth wall' mentioned in Cocteau's film. If 'l'Espérance' represents the sky, its comparison to a 'cloison' would make the sky into a wall, the limit of earthly existence. In this sense, all of the images of decay and degradation could represent the collapse of the world that the narrator knows, so the 'soir' that follows will undoubtedly be 'mystique'.

By creating symbolic associations that force readers to think about objects in a different way, Verlaine makes these objects unfamiliar. Although that which

is discovered remains ambiguous, the process of discovery and transcending familiar surfaces motivates both poet and reader. Referring to Sir William Empson, Jonathan Culler identifies this 'exploratory process' as more worthwhile than 'any semantic conclusion' that may result.<sup>xv</sup> Similarly, Shklovsky's writings on defamiliarization stress that the aim of art is to encourage a certain way of seeing objects rather than simply to create images of the objects themselves; 'créer [l]a vision . . . de l'objet' is, specifically, to defamiliarize perception.<sup>xvi</sup> Verlaine successfully meets the requirements of the best poetry, presenting objects in such a way that they appear unfamiliar to the reader.

**Uncertainty.** Crucial to the notion of renewed vision is to see more than one would normally see, as opposed to reducing any symbolic object to a single meaning: for this reason, audiences should never feel that they have completely understood a symbol. However many meanings a symbol may have, overall meaning must remain veiled. To this effect, in *Le Testament d'Orphée* Cocteau is repeatedly chided for asking too many questions and wanting to know too much. This may be seen as an acknowledgement of the poet's power as a visionary, one who threatens the *status quo* precisely by questioning familiar, everyday appearances. Equally though, by thwarting Cocteau's curiosity the film affirms the importance of mystery. As Mallarmé said, 'Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu',<sup>xvii</sup>—note that the verb is 'deviner', not 'connaître'.

Whereas symbolism in everyday speech tends to consist of clichés which are understood instantly but have lost their vividness and become symbols without depth, art makes one hesitate before finding meaning in its symbols: this is the very basis of defamiliarization. As Shklovsky puts it, art 'prolongs perception', making it difficult, so that one is surprised and considers a larger range of meanings than usual.<sup>xviii</sup> The fundamental uncertainty surrounding the meaning of symbols in Verlaine's and Cocteau's work effectively serves to prolong perception indefinitely.

One of the first images presented in *Le Testament d'Orphée* is a slow-motion shot of a smoke-filled bubble being burst by a knife. Because the clip is played in reverse, the audience may not be sure exactly what they are seeing

the first time, and thus experience defamiliarization. The shot is obviously an important one however, as it recurs, played forward instead of backward this time, at the very end of the film. Is the audience to understand a comment on the nature of understanding, to the effect that experience and its accompanying knowledge come just after they are needed? It is necessary to watch the film at least twice in order to appreciate certain symbols within it. Similarly the poet, having the metaphorical privilege (as Cocteau says) of dying many times only to be reborn, has the advantage of the knowledge gained from each successive life. Nonetheless, it is not possible to fully comprehend every aspect of the symbolism in *Le Testament d'Orphée* even after multiple viewings. Like Cocteau in the film, the audience will be perpetually rebuffed in their efforts to understand completely. By the end, although viewers are better able to discern the image of the knife bursting the bubble, understanding its symbolism remains difficult.

The knife seems an ominous choice of implement for bursting the bubble; is it a symbol of death, the bursting of the fragile bubble of existence containing the immaterial smoke of the soul? Such an interpretation is consistent with one of the film's themes, focusing on the nature of existence, a theme that will necessarily involve uncertainty. The dispersing smoke from the burst bubble reappears, intercut between scenes of the film's opening sequence, where Cocteau fades in and out of different stages of a scientist's life. Here, the smoke may reflect the fluid, ethereal nature of time and existence: this is expressed in the narrative by both Cocteau's ability to travel in time and his difficulties in doing so with precision.

Smoke is again connected with questions of existence in the traveller camp scene. There, phoenix-like, a photo of Cégeste reconstitutes itself in the campfire. The photo then flies up out of the fire into the hand of one of the female travellers, who takes it to a table where she and two other women examine it. The oldest of the three women, seated at the table, smokes a cigarette in a holder; she blows smoke across the photo as she looks at it, and when she tears the photo up, she hands it to Cocteau using the same hand with which she holds the cigarette, so that smoke again blows across the photo. Here, smoke could symbolise the interplay between reality and representation,

as the photo of Cégeste becomes instrumental in bringing the character back to life.

One of the smoke-related shots in the traveller camp sequence is reminiscent of *Le Sang d'un poète*. Positioned behind the oldest woman, the camera looks over her shoulder as she examines the photo. Her cigarette holder appears as a strong diagonal silhouette, not unlike one of the guns that the poet sees through the first keyhole in the corridor sequence of the earlier film. There, the guns repeatedly shoot at a Mexican, who looks like the poet<sup>xix</sup> and springs back to life each time. Here, the cigarette smoking like a fired gun is also related to multiple deaths and rebirths. Like a phoenix, the photo is reborn through fire. The photo is then destroyed when it is torn up by the woman who is smoking. Later, when the pieces of the photo are thrown into the sea, Cégeste will be reborn and remind the poet that he, Cocteau, is 'expert en phénixologie'.

In the shot of Cocteau, near the end of the film, laid on his back as if at his funeral, the smoke slowly issuing from his mouth is also related to death and rebirth. The smoke might conventionally symbolise his soul leaving his body, but this cliché is brushed aside by Cocteau's own voiceover which intones, 'Faites semblant de pleurer, mes amis, car les poètes ne font que semblant d'être morts': at this, the poet springs back to life once again.

Cigarette smoke, in particular, tends to be used in *Le Testament d'Orphée* to evoke the idea of things not being what they appear to be. This specific theme is introduced from the very first sequence where the scientist says that Cocteau has proven that he is not a 'fumiste' (denoting a 'fraud'). The scientist then asks him, 'vous fumez?', and lights a cigarette for him. As he begins to smoke the cigarette, Cocteau tells a story, explaining how in order to be able to smoke in 1770 he had to pretend to have invented the cigarette. This anecdote could be interpreted as nothing more than comic; however, it is also a first example of the crime that the poet will be accused of during the judgement scene: 'pénétrer en fraude dans un monde qui n'est pas le [sien]'. During that very judgement scene, the cigarette appears again, clearly more than just a casual prop as there is a break in the continuity of the film in order to include it. When the Princess opens her cigarette case and picks up a lighter, she is using objects which are not present from the beginning of the scene, but which

inexplicably appear partway through. The cigarette is most unmistakably foregrounded when, during one of the Princess's monologues, the camera focuses on her hands in an extended shot as she gestures with the cigarette holder between her fingers. In a preceding shot, there was a close-up of the princess's eyes with cigarette smoke passing in front of them as she said, 'Il n'y a pas d'ici où nous sommes'. This statement already suggested that the location they are at, although it appears to exist, actually does not, or exists in a way that the poet cannot understand. When the focus is on her hands and the smoking cigarette, the Princess goes on to explain to Cocteau that he cannot be certain of where he is, because any familiar objects he encounters might have been purposely placed there in order to create for him the illusion of being in a place that he knows. In general, in *Le Testament d'Orphée* smoke is used to suggest that that time and space are diffuse, and that one cannot trust one's empirical knowledge of them. As in Verlaine's poetry, the symbolism in Cocteau's film contains a challenge to our habitual manner of perception, dependent on certainties.

The first of Verlaine's 'Ariettes oubliées' is suffused with uncertainty as the poet sets up a comparison but defers revealing the crucial second half of it. In this way, Verlaine initially blocks the reader's efforts to perceive what is being described. The poem is one of immense delicacy, where the objects that are described seem barely to exist: in this way the reader's cognitive grasp of the poem is undermined. The fact that the poem's title refers to it as 'forgotten' serves to question its very existence. The rhyme scheme of the poem, too, with its dominance of *rimes plates* endows each stanza's single separated *rime croisée* with a sense of attenuation. The content of the poem is delicate in a different way, with its refusal to name its subject until the final stanza, as though needing to give a complete sense of the atmosphere and every facet of the comparison before even hinting at the tenor of these multiple vehicles.

The poem opens with an anaphora of '[c]'est' that does not specify what 'it' is, but compares the mystery subject first to two abstract entities ('l'extase langoureuse', 'la fatigue amoureuse') before comparing it to something more concrete that exists in nature ('frissons des bois / Parmi l'étreinte des brises')—but even here, the poem refers to movements and sensations that are elusive and exist only fleetingly. The next comparison again describes something that



can barely be perceived, '[l]e chœur de petites voix'. The faintness of this 'chorus' is insisted upon in the second stanza, as though the sound is the subject of the poem. What the second stanza actually contains, though, is a layering of comparisons, not as confusing as that of 'Crépuscule du soir mystique' but one that similarly creates an overall atmosphere in which the subject becomes temporarily lost in a whirl of intermingled sensations. Man and Nature become difficult to separate in the personification of 'frissons' and 'étreinte', 'l'herbe agitée' that 'expire' with a 'cri doux', and the introduction of a human subject in the second stanza ('[t]u dirais') after so many lines restricted to the natural world.

In the last stanza, the poem finally reveals its subject: a shared 'âme'. The attempt to describe something as abstract as 'âme' seems to justify so many comparisons, both abstract and concrete. When it comes to identifying the subject, however, the speaker seems to lose the certainty that existed at the beginning of the poem in the unspecified but adamant '[c]'est'. As in 'L'Amour par terre', the fact that the speaker defers to someone else by saying 'n'est-ce pas?', and that the poem ends with an additional question mark, lends an ambiguity to that which the poem describes and thus to the poem itself.

Verlaine's 'Après trois ans' also creates an ambiguous atmosphere by omitting the subject: in this case, though, that which is missing is never named. The poem is nonetheless rich in detail. There is a sense that every single object in the garden holds a particular meaning for the poet, and the importance of every object is emphasised by the restrictive, '[r]ien n'a changé. J'ai tout revu.' In spite of these absolutes, however, the reader suspects that things *have* changed. Did the gate always 'chancelle', and was the plaster of the 'Velléda' statue already beginning to 's'écailler'? In the third stanza the flowers are personified ('[l]es roses . . . palpitent', 'les . . . lys' are 'orgueilleux'), as are the birds ('[c]haque alouette' is 'connu' to the speaker): but these plants and animals will be a new generation, not the very same ones he saw three years ago. The speaker refers to the 'humble tonnelle' (humble arbour) and 'chaises de rotin' (cane chairs), then ellipsis points seem to represent absence. Where are the people? The speaker goes on to describe the 'murmure argentin' of the fountain and the 'plainte sempiternelle' of the tree, again employing personification. There is, finally, a statue at the end of the garden but no human

being apart from the speaker. Has something else changed in the space of three years, something that the speaker cannot bring himself to acknowledge? The poem ends with an implicit sense of diminishing, from the soft, light, feminine rhyme of 'Velléda' and 'réséda' to the diction of the last line (words such as '[g]rêlé' and 'fade'). Even if one does not detect a more serious loss than the passage of time itself, Verlaine nonetheless succeeds in creating atmosphere through a collection of objects, the exact significance of which the reader cannot know. As John Charpentier remarks of Verlaine, 'Il suggère; il ne formule pas; et le miracle c'est que nous croyons toujours nous trouver là où il est'.<sup>xx</sup> The poem only gains from its ambiguity, as it will remind readers of similar moments from their own lives, scenes where every object holds a particular and personal meaning for them, creating an experience which they would have difficulty communicating to others.

Bringing together the poetic cinema of Cocteau's Orphic trilogy and a selection of Verlaine's Symbolist poetry, this study has demonstrated that both filmmaker and poet develop symbolic objects in similar ways and with comparable effect. Objects in both Cocteau's films and Verlaine's poems are characterised by the variety of meanings that become associated with them, meanings which are never resolved into one over-arching or 'master' signification. Objects such as the hibiscus in *Le Testament d'Orphée* and garden statues in Verlaine were shown to take on numerous, sometimes contradictory associations. In addition, as the last section demonstrated, both director and poet incorporated objects which represent the state of mystery and ambiguity *per se*: smoke in Cocteau's film, and deferred subjects, tenuous states of being, and the element of the unspoken in Verlaine's poetry.

The personas which Cocteau and Verlaine create (characters in films and speakers in poetry) also self-reflexively point to the artist's own role as a visionary: one who sees the world differently and whose work serves to communicate this unfamiliar vision to a wider audience. As explained, this vision is communicated through unusual juxtapositions which create new associations for familiar objects. This new vision is also communicated by the way in which poetry and poetic films draw attention to the means of expression: in form, this means poetic style, and in content, references to the work of art or the creative

process. In their unusual juxtapositions, attention to form and self-conscious content, Cocteau's films and Verlaine's poetry correspond to the Formalists' definition of the role of art: to defamiliarize our perception of the world by rendering the process of perception difficult.<sup>xxi</sup> Poetic techniques draw attention to the specificity of objects, restoring the sensation of our everyday surroundings, which had been dulled to our perception by their very familiarity. The object-orientated way in which defamiliarization functions in both the poetry of Verlaine and the films of Cocteau lends weight to another Formalist theory, that poetry and film can function in a similar way.

Lucky enough to have had a benefactor at a time when his peers were abandoning their project for a poetic cinema, Cocteau was able successfully to pursue his own vision of poetry on film: his Orphic trilogy, *Le Sang d'un poète* in particular, is still readily available to watch, and continues to inspire audiences and filmmakers to this day. I hope that my study may lead other researchers to examine further the relationship between poetry and film, whether it be a continuation of the legacy of Jean Cocteau and Symbolist poetry, or the intersections of other poetic movements and poet-filmmakers.

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<sup>i</sup> Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, *Film History: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), 90.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>iii</sup> Roman Jakobson, 'Décadence du cinéma?', in *Questions de poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 106

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>v</sup> V. Shklovsky, 'L'Art comme procédé' in *Théorie de la littérature* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 83.

<sup>vi</sup> From the Greek for 'description', ekphrasis can refer to any vivid description of visual reality in literature; I use the term in its more restricted sense to refer to the description of a work of art (v. J.A. Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed [London: Penguin, 1999]).

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>ix</sup> Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague, 'Les Thèses de 1929', in *Le Cercle de Prague*. (Seuil: Paris, 1969), 39.

<sup>x</sup> Jakobson, 'Décadence du cinéma?', 107.

<sup>xi</sup> Roman Jakobson, 'Qu'est-ce que la poésie?', in *Questions de poétique* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 124.

<sup>xii</sup> Shklovsky, 'L'Art comme procédé', 94.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jean-Jacques Kihm et al, *Cocteau: L'homme et les miroirs* (Paris: Éditions de la Table Ronde, 1968), 377.

<sup>xiv</sup> John Charpentier, *Le Symbolisme* (Paris: Les Arts et Le Livre, 1927), 21.

<sup>xv</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, linguistics and the study of literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1975), 182.

<sup>xvi</sup> Shklovsky, 'L'Art comme procédé', 91.

<sup>xvii</sup> quoted in Robert-Benoît Chérix, *L'esthétique symboliste: Thèse présentée à la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Fribourg (Suisse)* (Fribourg: Imprimerie de l'Oeuvre de Saint-Paul, 1922), 37.

<sup>xviii</sup> Shklovsky, 'L'Art comme procédé', 83.

<sup>xix</sup> Jean Cocteau, *Le Sang d'un Poète* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1957), 41.

<sup>xx</sup> Charpentier, *Le Symbolisme*, 16.

<sup>xxi</sup> Shklovsky, 'L'Art comme procédé', 83.