Orpheus in a Gray Flannel Suit:
George Nolfi’s *The Adjustment Bureau* (2011)

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*The Adjustment Bureau* (2011), written and directed by George Nolfi, draws on ancient and modern versions of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to dramatize a conflict between devotion to career and personal fulfillment. In this film, David Norris (Matt Damon), a rising political figure in New York, finds that the mysterious Adjustment Bureau is working to sabotage his relationship with Elise (Emily Blunt) in order to direct him toward a political future of great national consequence. Nolfi dramatizes this conflict by combining the Orpheus myth’s themes of love, loss, and the limits of individual agency with the U.S. myth of the post-World War II company man, whose successful career imperils his domestic happiness.

The core elements of the Orpheus myth derive from the canonical versions that emerge from Greco-Roman antiquity. According to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the best-known version, on the day of their wedding, Orpheus’ wife Eurydice falls prey to a lethal snakebite. Orpheus, a supremely talented singer and lyre-player, enters the Underworld and, through the persuasive power of his music, gains permission to return with Eurydice to the upper world—on the condition that he not look back at her until they reach their destination. Just before completing this journey, Orpheus panics and looks back; Eurydice is then reclaimed by the Underworld. In its classical versions, a defeated Orpheus retreats into song and is torn apart by female worshippers of Bacchus. In post-classical iterations of the myth, especially in opera, husband and wife sometimes triumph over death.
Nolfi engages the myth’s themes by making Norris an unrealized Orpheus figure, who begins to fulfill his identity only upon meeting his Eurydice. The supernatural Bureau wishes to prevent this fulfillment in order to safeguard their Chairman’s plan for Norris’s political career. Resonance with two major adaptations of the Orpheus myth, Marcel Camus’s *Black Orpheus* (1959) and Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée* (1950), underline the place of *The Adjustment Bureau* within the Orphic cinematic tradition. To dramatize this conflict between devotion to career and personal fulfillment, Nolfi also draws on Nunnally Johnson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), which chimes with philosopher Herbert Marcuse’s reading of Orpheus in the context of modern-day man.

No Orpheus without Eurydice: David Norris’s incomplete identities

A basic element of the Orpheus myth invoked by *The Adjustment Bureau* is Orpheus’ power to win over an audience: not only animals, trees, and seas, but even Hades and Persephone, the impenetrable king and queen of the Underworld, who grant him the exceptional favor of letting the dead Eurydice return to the land of the living. As a politician, Norris has the vocal gift of persuasive rhetoric. Orpheus’ music in myth primarily evokes longing and suffering, but Norris’s rousing political speeches have a basis for comparison in classical authors’ use of Orpheus as an analogy for persuasive, even seductive speech. Plato (*Protagoras* 315b), for example, compares the philosopher Protagoras to Orpheus for the way his voice casts a spell over his followers.⁴

Yet in spite of his public confidence, Norris suffers from an identity crisis. In the DVD commentary, Nolfi notes that an early shot of Norris standing alone and looking lost, immediately prior to delivering an enthusiastic public address, registers the character’s
uncertainty over why he is in politics at all. Norris’s sense of his unresolved identity is in fact the
basis for his role as an Orpheus figure. Elise becomes the key to this self-realization, but in a way
that risks the Chairman’s plan.

Key to the mythology of *The Adjustment Bureau* is a mysterious and supremely powerful
figure called The Chairman, who has written out destinies for all people’s lives; in other words,
their fates. The eponymous Bureau deploys operatives, endowed with supernatural powers, to
ensure that these plans are carried out. For Norris and Elise, this means extracting the full
measure of their professional talents – in politics and modern dance, respectively. The Bureau
works to prevent their relationship because its all-consuming nature would mean the collapse of
the destinies set out for them, and thus deny the world their important contributions. While the
Bureau is open to Judeo-Christian interpretation—an agent acknowledges that the term “angel”
is among the “many names” by which they have been called— it is also identifiable with the
Underworld of the Orpheus myth, insofar as the infernal divinities are Orpheus’ major blocking
figures.

Despite the existence of this larger plan, until Norris meets Elise, he feels uninspired. In
the beginning of the film, Norris is practicing his concession speech on the eve of a humbling
electoral defeat, precipitated by the publication of college photographs of him mooning friends at
a party. Thinking himself alone in the men’s room of the Waldorf Astoria hotel, Norris finds
Elise hiding from hotel security after crashing a wedding (*Figure 4*). In this brief encounter, she
emerges as a perceptive observer of his character, discerning his need for the adoration of crowds
and how poorly suited he is to a carefully groomed political style. Elise recognizes that Norris’s
motivation in running for office stems from emotional wants rather than a particular political
vision. By seeing his true nature, she inspires him and establishes their innate complementarity.
In a mythic sense too, these modern characters are complementary. Ancient Greek lyre-players such as Orpheus sang as they played, and were commonly accompanied by the performance of dancers. Norris represents the power of vocal performance, albeit political, while the professional modern dancer Elise more clearly represents the arts. Together, they constitute a complete Orpheus. Apart, they represent the fragments of that identity.

Inspired by Elise, Norris discards his dull concession speech and delivers instead a wildly popular denunciation of the politics of image-control in which his campaign had become mired. He completely restores his positive image, which positions him well to run for an open Senate seat in four years. The very public nature of Norris’s return to authentic selfhood, however, creates another image with which he will next be sold to voters – as the Bureau no doubt intends. Thus, his attempt to banish the inauthenticity of his public life only prolongs it. Norris’s identity remains a problem to be solved; although a successful performer, he remains unfulfilled. Norris’s recognition of Elise as a possible solution to his emotional need, a way to complete his Orphic role, imperils the Chairman’s plan that Norris should prioritize his career over all else.

Despite the risk, the Bureau had contrived this meeting so that Elise would inspire Norris to deliver a speech equal to his potential; this tactic seems their only option to salvage Norris’s political career. But agents thereafter strive to keep them apart. The Bureau wanted to quickly assemble the whole Orpheus by connecting Norris to the one person who can accomplish that transformation—by making him feel understood—and then quickly disassemble him. For the Bureau, Elise is a means to an end; for Norris, she becomes the end that he seeks.

Despite the Bureau’s efforts to keep the two apart, Norris unexpectedly catches a bus that allows him to meet Elise once again, and they seem poised to begin a romantic relationship. But his unexpectedly timely arrival at work also allows him to witness Bureau agents altering the
thoughts of a colleague. Startled, the agents reveal their identities and swear Norris to silence on pain of lobotomy. Without explaining why, they deprive him of any way to contact Elise and forbid him to try. Norris searches for her nonetheless, riding the same bus every day for three years, until finally he glimpses her in rehearsal for an upcoming performance and is captivated. Their romance is rekindled, and Elise takes him dancing at a club before the Bureau returns to pressure him into abandoning this relationship. In these sequences, Norris enacts the loss of the beloved that characterizes an Orpheus figure.

Becoming Orpheus

An Orpheus figure’s most wondrous deed is the recovery of his lost Eurydice, in spite of supernatural obstacles. Norris cycles through the loss of Elise several times, each more serious. Now that they are a couple, Norris is endangering the Chairman’s plan for him to undertake the arduous trials that will lead to the presidency, and not to pursue love instead of the leadership of the country and the world. Therefore, the Bureau dispatches Thompson (Terrence Stamp), a formidable senior Bureau agent, to separate Norris from Elise more definitively.

Thompson is a figure of enormous menace, who sees himself as an enforcer of the fates prescribed by the Chairman’s plan. He threatens the new relationship, but also Elise specifically. He tries to reason with Norris, telling him that Elise’s impulsiveness will exacerbate his already imperfect self-discipline and ruin an important political destiny, while life with him will effectively end her career. When Norris ignores him, Thompson contrives to have Elise fall and injure her ankle during a dance performance, and reiterates his threat to Norris while he waits at the hospital. Fearful of his impact on Elise’s dreams for her future, Norris abandons her there, unable to explain his actions.
Thompson proves initially successful, but in a limited sense. Free from the distraction of his emotional focus and without the increased self-knowledge that a relationship with Elise would bring, Thompson’s non-Orphic Norris would gain an ever more powerful voice, as he ascends the ladder of government. Yet, it would never be his authentic voice – not only because of the Bureau’s scrutiny, but because he himself is incomplete. When threatened with proof of his loss of her affections, Norris enters fully into his role as Orpheus: eleven months later, Norris learns that Elise plans to marry someone from her dance troupe. Confronted with the consequence of abandoning Elise – namely, that she will “abandon” him in return—he embraces the energizing conviction that his life only makes sense with her. In this phase of the Orpheus myth, Norris undertakes his katabasis, or descent to the Underworld, desperate to reach his Eurydice before she is lost to him, emotionally, forever. To do so, he will ultimately have to risk both of their lives by revealing to her the truth about the Adjustment Bureau.

Katabasis and return

The Underworld journey so crucial to the myth of Orpheus is made possible by Harry (Anthony Mackie), a sympathetic Adjuster assigned to Norris, who tells him how to escape the notice of Bureau agents and move through supernatural portals throughout the city. The first space through which Harry leads Norris is the Museum of Modern Art, which offers a liminal zone where the living and the dead intermix. The pair move through a brightly lit area where Gabriel Orozco’s exhibit Mobile Matrix (2006), a life-sized skeleton of a gray whale, hangs from the ceiling. Modeled to the smallest detail on a real whale’s skeleton, but constructed from artificial materials, this gargantuan symbol of death and art watches over them as they pass, marking their descent.
This skeletal sea creature also signals the role of water in the mythology of the film, and its connection to the aquatic geography of the ancient Greek Underworld. Nolfi notes in the commentary that the fact that the human body consists primarily of water inspired him to make it the element that protects humans from Bureau scrutiny. In the film, Harry notes that water inhibits the Adjusters’ ability to detect goings-on, so their secret meetings happen in the rain, on a ferry, and so forth. Passing under this simulacrum of a creature native to the element that blinds the Bureau’s gaze suggests that Norris’s journey takes him to a sphere where he will no longer be defenseless against the Adjusters. As a tour through the symbolic geography of the Orpheus myth, Norris’s *katabasis* empowers him against those who wish to separate him from his Orphic identity. Using water to enter a forbidden realm recalls how Orpheus crossed the River Styx, the boundary between the world of the living and the dead, in defiance of the rules separating the worlds.

Once in the literal underworld of the dark tunnels of the underground water-pumping station for Downtown Manhattan, Harry instructs Norris on how to elude the Adjusters and find Elise. Their conversation is intercut with foreboding scenes of Elise dancing with great intensity alone on a darkened floor, a scene evoking not only Eurydice’s isolation in the gloom of the Underworld, but Elise’s isolation in her life without Norris—an isolation heightened, rather than alleviated, by her impending marriage to another man. The Museum and Elise’s dance in the dark also mark a journey into the symbolism of the arts, connecting Norris with the traditional aspects of the Orphic persona that he lacks.

Norris’s journey leads him to City Hall, where Elise prepares to enter her joyless union. He sequesters a shocked Elise in the men’s restroom, and then persuades her to come with him. At the beginning of the film, Elise crashes a wedding at the Waldorf and inspires Norris to
transform his concession speech into a reassertion of identity. At the film’s conclusion, Norris crashes Elise’s wedding and persuades her to commit to him – affirming Elise as a Eurydice figure, but with a modern twist.

*The Adjustment Bureau* is conventionally male-centered in that Norris has critical knowledge of the plot that Elise does not, and makes decisions of vast consequence for her without consultation, while she remains continuously amenable to a relationship with him under ever more questionable circumstances. The film attempts to offset this aspect somewhat by endowing Elise with essential Orphic qualities of her own and providing her with agency and desire that go unremarked in the myth’s account of Eurydice. Moreover, the film suggests that Norris’s actions are the result of his finally acquiring the boldness and symbolic attributes that define her, and now make him a worthy match for her.

Together the couple embarks on a headlong flight from the Adjusters in a sequence that corresponds to Orpheus’ attempt to bring Eurydice back to the upper world, beginning with the imagery evocative of death and the Underworld. Dashing through a portal, they find themselves at the foot of the Statue of Liberty. Like Orozco’s “Mobile Matrix,” it is a gargantuan art object that is – by virtue of its location – associated with water. In the context of the film, the statue emblematizes freedom of choice. Under its auspices, Elise stops, demanding an explanation from Norris. He declares his commitment to her and she, in an updating of the silent, passive Eurydice of myth, chooses to go with him. In the ultimate act of gate-crashing as free will, the two head into the headquarters of the Bureau itself.

In a twist on the myth’s clear reversal of Orpheus’ *katabasis* with his and Eurydice’s *anabasis*, or ascent, to the upper earth upon receiving Hades’ conditional pardon, Norris and Elise’s continued use of the Bureau’s portals even as they move into open-air spaces keeps them
within the Bureau’s realm. This twist derives from the source of Norris’s conditional pardon: not at first from the highest authority in the realm, but from his rebellious functionary: in the underwater pumping station, Harry decides to tutor Norris in how to evade his fellow agents in order to find Elise and enact their ascent. Even as Norris and Elise move through the terrestrial landscapes of the upper world, they must use the Adjustment Bureau’s occult portals to progress. Norris and Elise’s ascent up flight after flight of stairs through the Bureau most clearly reenacts the anabasis of Orpheus and Eurydice from the Underworld. Their sudden emergence together onto the roof suggests a safe arrival from the Underworld to the clear light of day in the upper world.

However, the danger of their separation is renewed when Thompson captures them and threatens the dreaded lobotomies—until Harry hands him a memo and, having read it, Thompson departs. Harry explains that the couple’s display of autonomy inspired the Chairman to write a new plan that accommodates their choice to be together. Together they inspire the Chairman, as Elise did Norris. The Chairman’s ultimate decision to allow Norris and Elise to remain together recalls a triumphant version of the Underworld’s amnesty, allowing the conditional return of Eurydice to become a victory. At the same time, the Chairman emerges as much more than a Hades figure, transcending the supernal and infernal, possessing the power to alter prescribed outcomes, while fallible enough to allow Norris and Elise’s challenge to his plan.

Invoking other Orpheuses: Black Orpheus and Orphée

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice turns on the tension between their eternal bond, and the necessity of their separation. So too The Adjustment Bureau reveals that Norris and Elise were always already meant to be together, according to earlier versions of the Chairman’s plan,
and that their separation is the result of a recent rewriting. Their attraction to one another is therefore a product of the combined pressure of so many earlier iterations of the plans in which they become a couple. This in turn serves as a meta-drama for the victory of the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice over the modern challenge of lovers contending with divergent, all-consuming career paths.

The use of mythic tradition to create a plot that turns strangers into fated lovers connects *The Adjustment Bureau* to one of its most famous predecessors: Marcel Camus’s *Black Orpheus*. That film turned on the confrontation between its characters’ sense of their own identities, and the destinies that the mythic tradition imposes upon them through their names. Naive Eurydice (Marpessa Dawn) arrives in late-1950s Rio de Janeiro knowing nothing of the singer-guitarist Orpheus (Breno Mello), who is preparing to marry his fiancée Mira (Lourdes de Oliveira). When the clerk at the marriage license office hears Orpheus’ name, he says to Mira that she must be Eurydice, and defends himself from her angry reaction by saying that Orpheus and Eurydice belong together in an old story. When Orpheus presently meets Eurydice and is immediately attracted to her, he playfully repeats to her the clerk’s explanation. Fredricksmeyer notes how unusual it is in modern film for characters to have knowledge of the myth that they embody, while observing that Eurydice’s death nonetheless shocks Orpheus. But his unfamiliarity with the myth’s details deepens the irony, as the film frames the shift in Orpheus’ desire from Mira to Eurydice as realignment with mythic tradition.

So too in both films, dance is a crucial component in the complete Orphic identity, and thus allusion to *Black Orpheus* is an important element of *The Adjustment Bureau*. Camus’s film takes place in the days leading up to the Carnival, and the climax features all major characters involved in the spectacular dances of the parade. Orpheus is not only a musician and singer; he is
a dancer and leader of the United Babylon dance troupe. His rehearsals and performances, in which the other major characters are involved as performers or spectators, punctuate the plot. Eurydice, played by professional dancer Marpessa Dawn, takes on her cousin’s role as a star dancer in her troupe to bring her closer to Orpheus.11

In *The Adjustment Bureau*, Elise’s identity as a professional dancer plays a major role in her character development, and in bringing Norris into the artistic sphere. After Norris watches Elise rehearse with her troupe, she takes him out dancing, where he is recognized and celebrated by the club’s adoring patrons. More than a nod to *Black Orpheus*, it points to Norris’s incompleteness as an Orpheus figure without Elise. She possesses a specifically artistic dimension, evocative of Camus’s film, which he possesses only through analogy between his rhetoric and music. When Elise later sprains her ankle as Norris watches her perform, her injury evokes the fatal snakebite to the ankle that kills Eurydice in Ovid’s account. Complementing the allusion to Eurydice in ancient myth, the pose in which Norris carries the injured Elise into the hospital where he leaves her mirrors that of Camus’s Orpheus carrying the dead Eurydice out of the morgue at the film’s conclusion.

In characterizing Norris as the Orphic figure and Thompson as the representative of supernatural necessity, Nolfi taps into another landmark adaptation of the Orpheus myth: Jean Cocteau’s *Orphée (1950)*. Cocteau’s Orpheus is a troubled celebrity poet of mid-twentieth century France, whose popularity has recently suffered due to the literary set’s current esteem for a new rival. Similarly, Norris is introduced as a wildly popular politician whose troubled past leads him to suffer a humiliating electoral defeat. Both are thwarted public figures who crave success and are given a path to it by a supernatural power that wishes to separate them permanently from the Eurydice figure. Underscoring such resemblances, Norris’s name even
bears a phonetic resemblance to Orpheus, while Elise recalls the name Eurydice in its French pronunciation (Eury-DEESE).

In Cocteau’s movie, the figure wishing to separate Orpheus from his wife Eurydice is the Princess, a ruthless emissary of death romantically obsessed with the poet. She desires Eurydice’s removal for her own ends, and is introduced spying on the sleeping Orpheus. Nolfi likewise introduces Thompson standing ominously at the foot of the bed in which Norris and Elise are sleeping. Unlike the Princess, Thompson has no feeling for Norris’s Orpheus and remains the couple’s unswerving antagonist. The part of the Princess that is sympathetic to the Orpheus-figure is embodied by the Adjuster Harry. Whereas the Princess sacrifices herself to reunite Orpheus with Eurydice, Harry risks the gravest penalties to help Norris defy the Bureau.

Nolfi also borrows from Orphée the conceit by which characters gain passage between realms. The uniforms of the Bureau’s enforcers resemble those of the Princess’s guards, and their hats recall the mysterious rubber gloves worn by death’s functionaries in Orphée, enabling them to pass through supernatural portals. In Orphée these portals are mirrors; in The Adjustment Bureau any door may become a portal to any other door in the world, or grant access to the Bureau’s central headquarters.

Orpheus in a gray flannel suit

In Eros and Civilization, first published in 1955, the Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert Marcuse reads Orpheus as the mythic champion of individual life lived for itself, rather than as an instrument in the service of collective progress. For Marcuse, Orpheus represents the will to oppose the repression of pleasure in the name of progress. Orpheus devotes himself to the cultivation of aesthetic pleasure and, when he does undertake hardship, it is to restore his
emotional life. The culture hero of the opposite side, on Marcuse’s reading, is Prometheus, who willingly endures suffering in the name of humanity’s collective progress. In terms of *The Adjustment Bureau*, Thompson tries to steer Norris toward Prometheus’ camp, whereas Elise draws him toward Orpheus by exposing him to the arts and provoking him to consider personal fulfillment.

Marcuse was by no means the only voice broaching such issues in the 1950s. Nolfi borrows significant plot elements concerning work-life conflict through allusive engagement with Nunnally Johnson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), an adaptation of Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel of the same name. Protagonist Tom Rath (Gregory Peck) is asked by his company president to take charge of a major project. The cause is just, the president is a good man, but the project would detract substantially from Rath’s time with his family. Ultimately, he turns down the opportunity, valuing family over professional success.

Likewise, Norris is offered the presidency in return for a single-minded devotion to its pursuit; the Chairman, until the very end, recalls the company president. But Norris’s feelings for Elise draw him away, parallel to Rath’s wish to preserve time for his family. Nolfi finds in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*’s exploration of the white-collar careerist’s travails a strain of U.S. myth that fits with his modern interpretation of Orpheus. Thus, the Bureau’s suit and fedora style, together with the presence of actor John Slattery of AMC’s critically acclaimed television series *Mad Men* (2007-2015), here cast as an Adjuster, establishes a visual bridge not only to Johnson’s film, but also to themes that resonate with Nolfi’s version of the Orpheus myth.

Nolfi’s integration of the Orpheus myth with the post-World War II U.S. myth of the company man’s choice between work and family opens a window onto contemporary debates about love, identity, and work-life balance in the early twenty-first century. At the end of the
film, Norris and Elise triumph over the supernatural forces aligned against them. Unlike the classical Orpheus and Eurydice, who are reunited only in Elysium, the land of the meritorious dead, Norris and Elise are reunited among the living. Not only are they allowed to stay together; their great destinies may yet be open to each of them, despite having made one another their first priorities. The film thus provides twenty-first century audiences with a new myth of finding one’s true self within a relationship in the context of successful, demanding careers.

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1 I would like to thank the editors Monica Cyrino and Meredith Safran, as well as Yurie Hong, Sean Cobb, Robert Kendrick, Martin Lang, and Laura Maki for their valuable help.

2 See Gantz (1993) 721-25 for an overview of the myth in its ancient form, including the famous versions in Vergil’s *Georgics* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

3 For a summary of this post-classical tradition, see Segal (1989) 155-198. Even in Ovid’s classical version the couple is joined together in Elysium after Orpheus’ death.

4 For the text of Plato’s *Protagoras*, see Lombardo and Bell (1997).

5 Philip K. Dick’s short story “The Adjustment Team” (1973), which the film liberally adapts, focuses entirely on the accidental sighting of the adjusters, its cause and fallout.


7 The Greek Underworld is pervaded by numerous rivers: I thank the editors for this point.

8 I thank Yurie Hong for this point.

9 For a thorough examination of classical themes in *Black Orpheus*, especially the film’s relationship to the myth and the role of sacrificial ritual, see Fredricksmeier (2007).


11 For discussion of *Black Orpheus* in both its Brazilian socio-historical and classical contexts, see Murillo (2010).

12 Dargis (2011) notices the uniforms and substitution of doors for Cocteau’s mirrors. On Cocteau’s *Orphée* from a classics perspective, see Winkler (2009) 281-94.


Wittkower (2011) 105 establishes the thematic and aesthetic connections to The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit.