

# Eye and Brain, Torn Asunder: Reading Ideology in Sally Potter's *Orlando*

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An investigation of how gender, genre and politics play out in Sally Potter's *Orlando*.

Virginia Woolf thought the movies were stupid. In her 1926 treatise on the moving image entitled "The Movies and Reality," Woolf stated that "at first sight, the art of the cinema seems simple, even stupid" (86). She invokes a certain relationship between eye and brain, and implies gluttony of the former and lethargy of the latter when she describes the film-watching experience as an instance whereby "the eye licks it all up instantaneously, and the brain, agreeably titillated, settles down to watch things happening without bestirring itself to think" (86). It soon becomes clear, however, that this anti-cinema stance is more than a little literary bias. She, rather sarcastically, claims that

*all the famous novels of the world, with their well known characters, and their famous scenes, only asked, it seemed, to be put on the films. What could be easier and simpler? The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to this moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results are disastrous to both. The alliance is unnatural. Eye and brain are torn asunder ruthlessly as they try vainly to work in couples... So we lurch and lumber through the most famous novels of the world (88).*

Her image of the cinema as a ravenous predator savagely feasting on the victimized corpse of literature

is striking. What is even more compelling, however, is her insistence upon the separation of eye and brain that she believed to be inherent in cinema. Woolf's dabbling in film theory is riddled with a sensory binarism that is surprising, considering the stylistic and thematic fluidity and unconventional nature of her prose. The notion of the eye/ brain binary opposition becomes even more interesting when we consider a discussion of a cinematic feasting upon the body of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928).

In Sally Potter's 1992 filmic adaptation, Orlando's story begins in 1600. Before her death, Queen Elizabeth I bestows the gift of immortality upon the young courtier, ordering him "Do not fade, do not wither, do not grow old" (Potter, 9).

Thus Orlando lives through four centuries of English history, "albeit an imagined history told with a liberal amount of poetic licence" (x). Orlando experiences heartbreak at the hand of the Russian princess Sasha, and in turn breaks his fiancée's heart. He discovers poetry and politics, taking a position of English ambassador in the East. It is here that Orlando experiences the atrocities of war, and his confrontation of death and destruction leads to his uncanny and unexplained change of sex. The Lady Orlando proceeds to move through English society, legally dead and therefore dispossessed of title and property, and into a future consisting of an empowering romance with a representative of the New World and modernity, and a roaring motorcycle entrance into the digital age, daughter and video camera at hand.

Potter's *Orlando* exhibits a high degree of thematic, narrative, and stylistic fluidity and pluralism that would trouble any binary assertion. The film exists within a complex terrain of issues, from *Orlando*'s status as a literary adaptation, to questions of the politics of the film's aesthetics and representational strategies, to its engagement within a particular socio-historical context. This paper will address the issue of how these disparate strands of *Orlando*'s matrix come together to create its "readable ideological orientation" (Monk, 181). An ideological reading of the film is inevitable considering the concerns stated above, and ideology in *Orlando* can be discussed in terms of the performance of gender, androgyny as transcendence, and the film's situation in the (post)heritagefilm debate.

### COSTUME AND THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDERED IDENTITY

Analysis of costume is often ignored in film studies. Influenced by the work of Pamela Church Gibson, Sarah Street believes that

*the possible reasons for the relative scarcity of sustained analyses of film costume... [are] the assumption, held by many academics, that fashion is a frivolous, feminine field; the suspicion that fashion is merely an expression of capitalist commodity fetishism and the opinion, held by some feminists, that fashion is one of the primary ways in which women are trapped into gratifying the male gaze (1).*

Just as the analysis of costume itself is given short shrift in cinema studies, so, too, is the analysis of the 'costume drama'. Julianne Pidduck asserts that "often perceived as a woman's genre, costume drama shares some of the abuse regularly leveled at soap operas and popular romance" (5). This lack of critical analysis of the costume drama is surprising when one considers the myriad avenues for analysis within the genre: "gendered accounts of (historical) significance, taste and quality are intertwined with the development of the historical epic, literary adaptation, British 'quality' cinema and television, melodrama and the 'woman's film'" (5). It is with the duality of the under-examination of the costume drama, and its enormous potential, in mind that I will begin a discussion of Sally Potter's *Orlando*.

While a discussion of costume might, at first glance, appear to be perhaps a (literally) surface-level analysis, it contains possibilities for radical critique. On one hand, "'costume' suggests the pleasures and possibilities of

masquerade—the construction, constraint, and display of the body through clothes" (Pidduck, 4). Contrary to its pleasures and emancipatory potential, however, is the sustained view that costume goes hand-in-hand with a patriarchal notion of gendered identity construction. The costuming in *Orlando* is both a source of visual pleasure and a comment on its inherent role in the construction of gendered identity.

Costume designer Sandy Powell's elaborate creations are preeminent in *Orlando*'s diegesis and the focal point for discussions of the film's stylistic excess. In her discussion of the film's baroque scopoc regime, Cristina Degli-Eposti states:

*The grandiose, the redundant, the trompe l'oeil, the excessiveness of the details of the mise-en-scene work together to produce an effect of estrangement and separation from previous aesthetic forms – those forms of the baroque style elaborated, manipulated, "staged", and translated to excess (79).*

The frame is consistently filled with ridiculously large and ornate ball gowns, heavy powdered wigs, and countless other stylized pieces of apparel, making costume the essential part of the mise-en-scene that translates to excess. While the sheer volume and ornate nature of the costumes could simply signify a postmodern parody or social commentary on the bourgeoisie through cinematic excess, costume also has narrative significance. Queen Elizabeth I slips a garter onto Orlando's leg as she declares her affection for the young Lord. This scene is remarkable in terms of gender performance: a decrepit Quentin Crisp plays the Virgin Queen, while the Lord Orlando is played by Tilda Swinton, both of whom are swathed in ornate garments. While the garter on Orlando's leg acts as a signifier of the Queen's affection for the Lord's youthful masculinity, it also acts as a narrative tool, as it is into the garter that the Queen slips the deed for Orlando's house as she coos, "For you, Orlando. And for your heirs." Costume here plays a central role in both the indexing of gender as well as narrative progression.

There is one essential segment of the film in relation to any discussion on costuming. After his/her mysterious change of sex, Orlando returns to England and its bindings, the metaphor literalized by Potter's mise-en-scene. Indeed, this notion becomes a visual joke: Potter cuts to a close-up of Orlando's side and back, looking in her hand mirror as the servants' hands lace her corset. The camera pans around to her front reflection, rises

and zooms to a close-up of her face as she watches her reflection. She looks uncomfortable as the servant jerks her around. Even the sound design privileges costume and its connotations, as the sound of the dress rustling and the corset crisply lacing is magnified. The next shot presents a medium-long shot of Orlando's full figure, centred in the frame. She wears a ridiculously huge white gown and the skirt fills the bottom of the screen. Two servants fasten the ties of her dress. There is a mirror screen left which reflects her figure on an angle. Orlando turns her head to gaze, in disbelief, directly at the camera/ spectator due to her ridiculous and consuming get-up. Potter then cuts to a long take that continues the visual joke. Orlando is presented in a long shot in the back of a great hall, the furniture draped with white sheets. The camera tracks back as Orlando walks forward towards it, screen left. A servant enters from screen right, and Orlando does an awkward twirl around the servant as she tries to maneuver herself and her huge dress out of the way. The servant disappears to the back of the frame as Orlando comically sidesteps the furniture. This sequence overtly comments on the construction of gender through costume while offering the spectator visual pleasure and humour. The film's social commentary is never far from the surface, however, and "the sheer crippling unmanageability of Orlando's bourgeois female attire... brilliantly conveys feminine physical and social constraint" (Pidduck, 106).

What are the ideological assumptions inherent in a discussion of costume in Potter's *Orlando*? Does this discussion locate the film firmly within the realm of feminist and queer theory, or are there other ideological positions inherent in the discussion of the construction of gendered identity? A reading of Judith Butler's work on the performative nature of gender can illuminate other avenues for analysis.

In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology And Feminist Theory," Judith Butler theorizes gender performativity through her reading of the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the feminist critique of Simone de Beauvoir, complementary in the way in which "phenomenology shares with feminist analysis a commitment to grounding theory in lived experience" (522). In both contexts, Butler asserts that "the existence and facticity of the material or natural dimensions of the body are not denied, but reconceived as distinct from the process by which the body comes to bear cultural meanings" (520). Butler believes that the human form is known only through its performance of gender. She states that "the' body is invariably transformed into his

body or her body, the body is only known through its gendered appearance... the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (523, my italics). With this in mind, Potter's *Orlando* can be read as a quintessential Butlerian text, as gender roles are constantly being negotiated through performative acts. The Lady Orlando moves through the diegetic world, constricted by the costume that indexes her femininity, and it is both her physical movement as well as her enunciations that highlight the performed quality of her gendered identity.

Butler's analysis of gender performativity relies on a notion of the punitive aspect of the performance, as she cautions that "there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations" (531). In fact, I would argue that the probability of various forms of 'punishment' is perhaps the main reason why our binary set of gender roles continues to exist and maintains prominence. Butler contends that

*because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term 'strategy' better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences ... those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished (522, my italics).*

In the case of *Orlando*, the Lady Orlando's punishment comes in the form of being declared legally dead, and therefore losing her property and estate.

Judith Butler's assertion that gender is performed leads feminist analysis to question the "unexamined reproduction of gender identities which sustain discrete and binary categories of man and woman" (523). She states overtly that "regardless of the pervasive character of patriarchy and the prevalence of sexual difference as an operative cultural distinction, there is nothing about a binary gender system that is given" (531).

This perhaps leads to an ideological position that could be referred to as universalism; as the androgynous angel sings in *Orlando*'s last sequence, 'we are one with a human face'. However, a sort of privileging of commonalities of human existence, the effacing of gender differences, or the singular universal of 'woman' (or 'man') can be seen as detrimental to feminist political struggle. Butler

invokes Gayatri Spivak's argument:

*Feminists need to rely on an operational essentialism, a false ontology of women as a universal in order to advance a feminist political program... Kristeva suggests something similar... when she prescribes that feminists use the category of women as a political tool without attributing ontological integrity to the term (529).*

While any notion of biological essentialism in terms of an unquestioned binary of gender identities is problematized by Butler's argument, so, too, is the abandoning of the distinctions of woman/man. 'Woman' must remain a functional category as long as 'women' continue to struggle against patriarchal oppression.

What, then, of androgyny? Is any notion of a sort of liberatory impulse in the blending or transcending of gender ideologically problematic? We will now turn to a discussion of androgyny and transcendence in relation to Potter's *Orlando*.

## ANDROGYNY AND TRANSCENDENCE

In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf muses on the androgynous potential of the human mind. She wondered:

*Whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction of happiness? And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man... If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this great fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties (Woolf, 1929: 94).*

*Orlando*, in both literary and filmic incarnations, can be seen as a text that privileges the ideal that 'a great mind is androgynous'. Potter's film does so through many

aspects of form, from the casting, to the costuming, to Orlando's consistent addressing of the camera, taking the spectator out of its inherently gendered sutured positioning, which essentially "causes the patriarchal eye to blink" (Degli-Eposti, 78). The film ends with Orlando and her daughter returning to the family's estate, the narrator explicitly informing us that Orlando has acquired the "slightly androgynous appearance that many females of the time aspire to" (Potter, 61). Why would a woman (or man) aspire towards androgyny? Is androgyny a subject position that transcends the trappings of masculinity and femininity, thereby attaining some sort of ideological and experiential superiority? Cristina Degli-Eposti asserts this stance when she claims that, "since Plato the myth of androgyny has been a metaphor for awareness, for spiritual learning and growth" (86). Sally Potter herself states that the film is "not so much about gaining identity as it is blurring identity. It's about the claiming of an essential self, not just in sexual terms. It's about the immortal soul" (qtd. in Ehrenstein, 7). Again, there is a notion of an 'essential self' that exists outside of the binary of gender, leading to the notion of androgyny as transcendence.

Larin McLaughlin discusses this conception in his essay on "Androgyny and Transcendence in Contemporary Corporate and Popular Culture". The concept of androgyny was first studied empirically in psychology when, in 1974, the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) was introduced as a psychological test to measure relative masculinity, femininity, and androgyny. Since then "the psychological concept of androgyny has had three distinct forms: androgyny as 'co-presence', 'fusion', and as 'transcendence'" (192). As the terms implies, co-presence describes someone who exhibits both typically masculine and feminine behavioral traits, while fusion implies a blending of the two distinctions. McLaughlin states:

*The third and final (and present) conception of androgyny functions using a model of 'transcendence', where androgyny indicates not a blend of masculine and feminine characteristics, but an absence of them, and where androgynes are perceived to rely on neither masculine nor feminine behaviors (193).*

At first glance, one might be inclined to believe that this model of androgynous transcendence has a sort of emancipatory potential – essentially 'liberating' the subject from patriarchal and heterosexist societal

constructions. This is certainly the ideological position that Potter's *Orlando* takes.

Contrary, however, to this presumed liberatory nature of transcendental androgyny, McLaughlin theorizes several problematic aspects of this conception. Central to his argument is the notion of disembodiment:

***The idealization of a (disembodied) transcendent androgyny can have several detrimental cultural effects: it disembodies gender ambiguity and, in so doing, disavows any connection of androgyny to queer sexuality and thus perpetuates the heteronormativity of late-capitalist institutions; it renaturalizes the disembodied white masculine liberal humanist subject; and finally, it participates in the valorization of a mobile individual agency by working explicitly against gendered collectivity (206).***

Do these effects constitute *Orlando* as contradictory or problematic to feminist and queer film theory? McLaughlin would argue that the supposed liberatory nature of transcendental androgyny is actually detrimental to the subject positions that it would purport to liberate<sup>1</sup>. Essentially, McLaughlin implies that *Orlando* is an instance of the “mainstream filmic disarticulation of queer sexuality and androgyny” (209). The fact that “disembodied transcendence can also have the effect of renaturalizing the disembodied white masculine subject” (210) is a problem for queer and feminist theories and their projects of ‘positive image’ representation and visibility. Clearly, *Orlando* is not as ideologically stable as it would appear upon first viewing.

### **THE HERITAGE FILM: NATIONAL CINEMA, IDEOLOGY, & GENRE**

Following the work on British national cinema by Andrew Higson, Claire Monk describes the heritage film debate: “a perceived cycle of recent British (or ‘British?’) films set in the past ... became the objects of a critical discourse which treated them as a unified entity—indeed, a genre—about which generalized claims could be made and to which a monolithic critique could be applied” (177). These films were pejoratively referred to as ‘white-flannel’ films, and, while the groupings varied from critic to critic, some common examples of supposed ‘heritage films’ are *Chariots Of Fire* (Hugh Hudson, 1981), *Another Country* (Marek Kaniéwska, 1984), *A Passage To India* (David Lean, 1984), *A Handful*

*Of Dust* (Charles Sturridge, 1988), *A Room With A View* (James Ivory, 1985), *Maurice* (Ivory, 1987), and *Howards End* (Ivory, 1992), to name but a few. Monk asks us to remember, however, that “‘heritage cinema’ is most usefully understood as a critical construct rather than as a description of any concrete film cycle or genre” (183). The critique of the ‘heritage film’ was predominantly journalistic, and noticeably arose in 1987-8, “doubtless in reaction against the media saturation surrounding *A Room With A View*” (187).

What, then, was the argument behind the widespread anti-heritage critical position? Monk states that “the critique of heritage cinema depended on an insistent coupling—even conflation—of aesthetic and ideological claims” (180). The critics believed that the films were aesthetically conservative; uncinematic in that they favoured a static pictorialism rather than making the fullest use of the moving image; and their claims to ‘quality’ rested on a secondhand affiliation with ‘high’ literacy and theatrical culture (178). Essentially, heritage films are intrinsically ideological without taking into account, say, questions of empire, multiculturalism, race, class, gender, and so on:

***(They) project and promote a bourgeois or upper-class vision and version of the national past which was organized around a narrow Englishness rather than any notion of hybridity or regional diversity ... Heritage films were conceived as a ‘genre’ centrally engaged in the construction of national identity. (179)***

According to Andrew Higson, there was a generalized conception among critics of heritage cinema (and British cinema in general) as a sort of “Althusserian ideological state apparatus ‘by which the dominant representations of the past were reproduced and secured’ by means of presentation to ‘the public gaze’” (qtd. in Monk 188).

The notion of the ‘heritage film’ as a genre or cycle is problematized by ideology:

***(The heritage film’s) attributed ‘genre’ characteristics are centrally organized around its ideological character, and around its supposed raison d’être as the projection of dominant ‘national’ values and a specific version of the ‘national’ past which serves a bourgeois, southern-English hegemony. It seems questionable whether a genre (or sub-genre) can be defined pre-eminently by***

*such ideological and national functions, since such matters are highly dependent on the interpretive judgment of the viewer; certainly, such a genre will be a particularly unstable and contested proposition... If heritage films do share common ideological and 'national' traits, it seems more useful to conceive of these 'heritage' characteristics as pan-generic, potentially present across a range of period genres. An important possibility this raises is that 'heritage' ideologies – and ideological functions – are not specific to films set in the past (192).*

Essentially, it seems that Monk equates 'heritage ideologies' with white, male, southern, aristocratic, empiricist ideological positions (which, it could be argued, are the dominant founding ideologies of England).

How does one situate *Orlando* into this conception of the heritage film, with all its seemingly negative ideological connotations? As a literary adaptation, the film does attain some sort of second-hand affiliation with 'high' literacy. However, the film troubles many other aspects of the heritage film critique. The Middle Eastern segment comments on empire and war: the Khan is frequently wary of Orlando as an ambassador of a country that "make[s] a habit of collecting countries" (Potter, 32). Orlando proves incapable of conforming to the ideologies of war and masculinity in his inability to accept the Archduke's declaration that the dying soldier is "not a man, he is the enemy!" (38). As previously mentioned, it is the experience of the atrocities of war that lead to Orlando's change of sex.

The film also employs formal strategies that undermine the supposedly 'uncinematic' nature of the period film. While the mise-en-scene does consistently exhibit a painterly symmetry, the film is quintessentially 'cinematic' in its privileging of the camera. Orlando addresses the camera frequently from the beginning of the film, subverting the suturing codes of mainstream cinematic practice. Degli-Eposti claims:

*The stream of consciousness that characterized Woolf's style is rendered through the direct relationship that is established between Orlando and the camera from the very outset of the film ... Orlando shares visual pleasure with the viewer. When looking into the camera, Orlando directs his/her pleasure to an invisible audience of which*

*he/ she is constantly aware (83).*

While *Orlando* is a literary adaptation that features period costumes and a trajectory through British history, it cannot be said to belong to the (troubled) critical category of the 'heritage film', as it transgresses the patriarchal and empiricist ideologies central to the construct of the heritage film.

Instead, we can place *Orlando* within the relatively recent critical formulation of the 'post-heritage' film. Pidduck believes that "this term evokes an increasingly self-conscious, sexual and performative tendency of late 90s British costume film" (10). She also places *Orlando* alongside Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio* (1986) and *Edward II* (1991), and Isaac Julien's *Looking For Langston* (1988) in terms of "stylistic excess and a 'flat' postmodern scenic sense," referring to this grouping of films as "anti-heritage" (105). Although the 'anti/post-heritage' film as a critical construct is still in its infancy, Sarah Gilligan asserts that, in differentiating the heritage from the post-heritage film, 'the most significant shift was towards an overt focus upon the ways in which costume functions in the construction and performance of gendered identity' (71). Essentially, since the heritage film is seen as inherently ideological, a new vocabulary is needed to describe films that fall outside of this formulation, of which Potter's *Orlando* is exemplary.

## CONCLUSION

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger says:

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split in two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself (46).

Therefore women turn themselves into images, objects of vision, sights to be consumed by an implied male spectator. This has been the legacy of medieval tradition, Renaissance painting, mainstream cinematic practice, and an internalized facet of many women's lived experience.

Virginia Woolf, in her writing and life, refused to internalize and normalize this patriarchal ideology. Sally Potter's 1992 filmic adaptation of *Orlando* goes so far

as to overtly challenge this conception. Rather than assimilate to inherent self-surveillance, Orlando gazes directly into the camera and thus into the eyes of the spectator.

Does this make *Orlando* a feminist text? *Orlando* has certainly been championed by feminists and queer theorists alike for its 'progressive' ideological position. However, as illustrated above, nothing is entirely as it seems. The film exists within a complex matrix of issues, from literary adaptation, to politics, to aesthetic and representational strategies, to questions of history and nation. Therefore, ideology in *Orlando* must be discussed in terms of the performance of gender, androgyny as transcendence, and the (post)heritagefilm debate. It is only through a detailed and conscientious examination of these issues that we can begin to interpret the film's "readable ideological orientation" (Monk, 181.)

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## FOOTNOTES

**1** McLaughlin also discusses "the racialization of androgyny as white" and the "consequence of invisibility for androgynous black men" (196). While this is not central to a discussion of *Orlando* as such, it is important to note that "androgyny may work within a logic of white supremacy" (211).

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*Edited by Amanda D'Aoust.*