

ORLANDO REANIMATING ORLANDO

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Abstract: Predominantly technological, contemporary society facilitates the emergence of more and more reproductions/simulacra of consecrated texts and therefore it is only natural, as in the present case, for one to become aware of the fact that stories are now being told/narrated through words, but also through images. This characteristic of the Postmodern culture, to re-tell stories by means of technological reproductions, determines many theorists and critics to see it as being governed by simulacrum and therefore to become aware of the danger it withholds, that is, the copy replacing the real. The benefits of technology can easily be transformed into disadvantages if the current tendency of engaging in a race against the clock is to be had in view (leading to the consumption of more accessible and less time consuming texts, such as audio books and films). Therefore, it seems only fair to ask to what extent the true meaning of the original reaches the listener/viewer or, in other words, to what extent these technological reproductions alter or distort the core meaning. With these ideas as milestones, the present study is focused on emphasizing how the story of Orlando loses and gains meaning through adaptation, without accusing the filmic text of infidelity or blasphemy, but seeing it as a result of an exchange between literature and film, which is not and cannot be self-sufficient..

Keywords: *modernism, androgyny, hyperreality, postmodernism, intertextuality.*

Hyperreality or the space of the screen

Our postmodern, technologically advanced society faces an inability to consciously distinguish between reality and its simulation, as if suffering from a condition – *hyperreality* – which blurs everything, up to the point where no clear distinction between what is real and what is fictional can be made.

In this context, Jean Baudrillard sees images as no longer mirroring reality, but only as transforming it, from screen to screen, into hyperreality, until “[t]he image can no longer imagine the real because it is the real” (2005: 120). Thus, the viewer finds himself surrounded by a virtual reality which gives the impression that things have swallowed their mirror, that is, that they cannot be reflected, remaining transparent and bare, without hidden secrets and the ability to foster illusion. In this virtual reality, art is now seen as iconoclastic, in the sense that it no longer destroys images, but creates a plethora of extravagant images where there is nothing to be seen, for “they have no aesthetic consequences to speak of; furthermore, behind each of them, something has disappeared” (2005: 118-119). Consequently, hyperreality and simulation are seen as deterrents of principles and objectives turning against power, or, in other words, as turning against knowledge and leaving only the impression that things have “come out of a coma, that everything wants to be animation and is only reanimation, and that this is good because **culture is dead**”. (emphasis added) (Baudrillard 1995: 43). Perhaps “dead” is a strong word to use, but its role is to draw attention to postmodernity, which does not produce but recycles, and hence reanimates the already existing cultural pool.

Following this line of thought, screenings may be understood as reanimations of culture that, to some extent, bear resemblance to the “*verité*” experience in the sense that the viewers are spectators of the process of reanimation, having the possibility to witness the transformation of the literary text into images. Therefore, it would not be completely wrong to

presuppose that they unconsciously find some perverse pleasure in this sensation of witnessing the events, since their attention is caught by a frenzy of frissons of the real, aesthetics of the hyperreal and phony exactitude that only create simultaneous distancing and magnification, distortion and excessive transparency. As a result, the viewer becomes a “nonsignifier” – a final receptor or the end of the line – “exalted by the camera angle”. This phenomenon can be described as “pleasure in the microscopic simulation that allows the real to pass into hyperreal”, (21) which, being “more real than the real”, abolishes that very real (56).

As tempted as one may be to regard all these postmodern features as holding a negative meaning, technology cannot and must not be deprived of the benefit of the doubt since, after all, it is “the only force that still binds together the scattered fragments of reality” and, from this perspective, the only question that remains to be answered is “what happened to the constellation of meaning?” (Baudrillard 2005: 120).

Resonating with this question, this particular analysis is oriented towards investigating how the meaning is altered and why, keeping in mind however that the screening/ simulacrum is an (inter)text. To this end, the study follows a forking path: in search of the intratext, which guarantees a self-meaning provided by the complete text, and of the intertext, which enriches the meaning through external relations established between the text in question and other contaminating texts.

Reading Sally Potter’s *Orlando* through the lens provided by Jean Baudrillard reveals its status of technological reproduction which alters the meaning of the original due to the context in which it was conceived and which hints at the original via carefully encoded symbols.

Key facts about *Orlando: A Biography* (1928)

Orlando: A Biography is a novel, as Woolf herself notes in her diary, written with a constant allusion to Sapphism and intended to be a writer’s amusement and a get away from more serious work. It follows a series of great novels written in a modernist spirit, dedicated to experimentalism and change in form, such as: *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Night and Day* (1919), *Jacob’s Room* (1922), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927). *Orlando* is also a *roman à clef*, Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf herself being disguised in the hypostases of its homonymous character. Although intended to be a means of liberation and amusement, *Orlando* ended by being very serious, with deep insights into the history of English literature made by an androgynous mind, a writer who, at the end of the book, gains recognition as a woman writer.

Virginia Woolf lived surrounded by a group that encouraged a way of life in which it was easy to develop both a male and a female nature. Her friends and acquaintances, inscribed in history as the Bloomsbury Group, gave Woolf the possibility to gain an androgynous vision manifested at its best in her writing. The awareness of the androgynous vision she possesses is made clear in the essay *A Room of One’s Own*, where she notes that “the normal and comfortable state of being” (1977: 106) is acquired when both the female and male powers of the brain co-exist and co-operate harmoniously.

If the tendency towards androgyny is established and understood as being the result of a modern background and of new beliefs, the question to be answered is why *Orlando*, a poet

and playwright, begins his journey as a “man” in the era of Shakespeare. Woolf provides us with a possible answer: “Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare and to have lived a free life in London in the sixteenth century would have meant for a woman who was poet and playwright a nervous stress and dilemma which might as well have killed her” (53).

Orlando’s entire biography and life are a metaphor for the history of English literature from the Elizabethan age onwards, since, regardless of the aggregation of situations and events, Orlando, both as a man and as a woman, writes throughout the almost 400 years he/she lives, the manuscript *The Oak Tree*. The reader is announced right from the first pages of the novel that the “age was the Elizabethan” (Woolf 2002: 17)¹. In other words, it is no accident that the story of Orlando begins in a time known to be extremely prolific for Shakespeare, of whom Woolf, expanding on Coleridge’s opinion that a great mind is androgynous, remarks: “that it transmits emotions without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. In fact one goes back to Shakespeare’s mind as the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind, though it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women.” (1977: 108)

In many ways, Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own* gives keys of interpretation for *Orlando*, the theme and the construction of both works being strikingly similar. Shakespeare is well disputed in the essay, as well as the theme of androgyny, but the interesting similarity that determines one to conclude that *Orlando* is a novel carefully planned for some time and not just a writer’s folly is that, in chapter three of her polemic book, Woolf sketches an imaginary Judith Shakespeare who aspires at being a playwright and who dies after a series of unfortunate events. Orlando undergoes the change of sex in chapter three also; therefore, to some extent, the imaginary appearance of Shakespeare’s sister mirrors the novel. The very name of the androgynous main character in Woolf’s novel alludes to Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Nevertheless, Sasha’s appearance and the Archduke dressed-up as an Archduchess, also hint at situations of mistaken identity due to gender switch which are specific to Shakespeare.

At the beginning of the book, Orlando is presented as a young nobleman drawn by poetry and placed under the protection of Queen Elizabeth I, who gives him an impressive inheritance and names him Treasurer, Steward, tying the jewelled order of the Garter around his knee. The actual oak tree Orlando is leaning on for silence and muse, from which the journey of the character begins, and which also inspires the name of the manuscript written as a binder throughout the novel, may be read as a metaphor for the history of English literature: “It was very high, so high indeed that nineteen English counties could be seen beneath; and on clear days thirty or perhaps forty, if the weather was very fine” (12). As Woolf lived in the early twentieth century and as the journey of Orlando is to end (or not) in the twentieth century also, the nineteen counties may be regarded as a retrospective view on as many centuries of English literature but, *weather* permitting, many others are to come. Following this line of thought, Orlando may be regarded as a representation of the universal male-woman writer leaning on the mighty oak tree – literature as axis mundi – hence his/ her immortality.

¹ All future references are to be made here to the 2002 edition of the novel *Orlando: A Biography*

Screening vs. Novel:

(1) The division into chapters

The novel *Orlando* is divided into six untitled chapters, while Sally Potter partitions the screening into seven chapters, as follows: *1600 Death, 1610 Love, 1650 Poetry, 1700 Politics, 1750 Society, 1850 Sex, Birth* (date unspecified). The titles of the chapters lead to a fragmented filmic text that provides the viewer with the possibility to anticipate events and focus only on the main theme suggested, thus distancing from the original text which allows the formulation of personal opinions; at the same time, by partitioning the filmic text into seven chapters, Potter remains faithful to Woolf's magic number, for, in the novel, Orlando falls twice into a mystic sleep that lasts for seven days, and gains fame and recognition with seven editions of his/her manuscript.

(2) The concept of immortality

Although the novel provides the reader with no clear explanation for the immortality of the characters, the film depicts Queen Elizabeth I providing Orlando with an inheritance, on one condition [00:11:20] "Do not fade, do not wither, do not grow old..." (*Orlando*, 1992). What she actually asks is for him to become immortal.

The bestowal Orlando receives contradicts Woolf's intentions but, as Sally Potter declared in her interviews (ArtForum, 1993), she felt the need to supply little bits of motivation for the filmic text in order to make it psychologically convincing; therefore, she used Queen Elizabeth to launch Orlando on the path of immortality. On a subtle or subconscious level, Potter introduces the idea of androgyny by distributing Quentin Crisp², a man with the appearance of a woman, to portray Queen Elizabeth.

(3) Changing gender

The shift of gender Orlando undergoes is also described in the film as a reaction of rejection towards the violence and cold blood a man should display in time of war, this being the result of politics nevertheless, and Sally Potter ingeniously places this important event in the fourth section of the movie entitled *1700 Politics*:

Orlando: You wish me to take arms?

[...]

Archduke Harry: Leave him! Leave him!

Orlando: This is a dying man!

Archduke Harry: He's not a man! He's the enemy!" [00:52:40 – 00:54:22]

In the novel, Orlando's magical transformation takes place at the age of thirty, for, by that age, he is to assimilate the world as a man, only to create and gain recognition afterwards as a woman. All this is imagined by Woolf as being the result of a godly command, since three austere Gods – Truth, Candour and Honesty – demand in one blast: "The Truth and

² Quentin Crisp, born Denis Charles Pratt, was an English writer, model, actor and raconteur. He was a controversial public figure due to his effeminate behaviour - he used to wear make-up and painted nails. At the beginning of the 20th century, his extravagant appearance generally stirred negative reactions against him. He is also remembered for his criticising attitude against gay liberation and Diana, Princess of Wales.

nothing but the Truth!” (81). The archaic or obsolete uses of the three words denominating the three austere Gods are fidelity and constancy for Truth, unstained purity and kindness for Candour and chastity for Honesty. Such qualities were expected to be displayed by a woman, a Lady of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

(4) *The Oak Tree*

Although by means of paratexts Woolf manages to convince the reader that the novel and the main character make reference to Vita Sackville-West, it is impossible not to point out the overt autobiographical stances embedded in the novel, such as the shift of gender which happens at an age which brings to mind Woolf in her thirties, publishing her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). Furthermore, Woolf’s political argument was oriented towards the unfair treatment of women in British society, as she was directly affected by it: “By nature, both Vanessa and I were explorers, revolutionists, reformers... But our surroundings were at least fifty years behind our times. Father himself was a typical Victorian.” (*The Mind and Times of Virginia Woolf*, 2003: [00:03:10]). The Victorian circumstances she lived under until her father’s death determined her, among others, to be extremely resentful of the fact that she was self-taught. This autobiographical context is transferred to Orlando who, by means of self-forces, is to experience the eighteenth and nineteenth century as a woman, finally growing into an acknowledged woman writer of the twentieth century.

Many critics affirm that *The Oak Tree* finds its way to publication after so many centuries to satirise the amount of time Vita Sackville-West needed to complete her works; yet, this aspect may also be regarded as a metaphor for all the tremendous effort Woolf put into writing her first novel. She worked at it all through her twenties, that is, all through her mental breakdown, it proving to be a very difficult novel for her to write since it focused on her childhood, on the loss of her mother and on her becoming an adult. Orlando, as an autobiographic character, needs to follow the same pattern, therefore, he is to experience life first and then to become a fruitful writer, after reaching adulthood and further womanhood (a mature state of creativity which finally permits the completion of the manuscript *The Oak Tree*).

Sally Potter resonates extremely well with this aspect since, as she herself declares, it took her a great deal of time to finish adapting Woolf’s novel into a film screenplay: “By the time I came to write my first treatment of Orlando in 1984, I felt as though the film already existed; I just needed to look intently enough with my inner eye and write down what I could see. And thus began a long journey. I wrote the first screenplay in 1988. Four years and many drafts later the cameras turned on the ice in St Petersburg” (Potter 1994: ix). As a result, she introduces a self-satire in film through the voice of Nicholas Green, who asks Orlando: “By the way, how long did this draft take you?” [01:25:09]

(5) *The Augustan writers and the male/ patriarchal attitudes towards women*

The three Augustan writers mentioned in the novel – Pope, Dryden and Addison – whose company Orlando longs for, but with whom she does not resonate, bear resemblance with the masculine voices she was hearing during her mental breakdowns, voices which told her she was worthless and terrible. It is not a random fact that Woolf chose to mention the three poets, for they represent a “society”, in Potter’s words, an intellectual establishment that

looked down at the contemporary novelists, women and men alike, who were establishing the beginning of a new-age in literature, where the novel was the main character. In the company of these men of genius, Orlando, the woman, discovers that she is “[...] a beautiful romantic animal, that may be adorned with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds, ores and silk” and that “Women are but children of a larger growth... A man of sense only trifles with them, plays with them, humorous and flatters them” (125); she therefore feels the need to disguise herself and to seek the company of other people. The fact that Orlando begins interacting and enjoying the stories of promiscuous persons like Nell, reminds of Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724) which depict characters faced with the difficulties of surviving in a hostile society. In what regards the witty poets, Orlando is aware that “the intellect, divine, as it is, and all worshipful, has a habit of lodging in the most seedy of carcasses, and often, where the Mind is biggest, the Heart, the Senses, Magnanimity, Charity, Tolerance, Kindliness, and the rest of them scarcely have room to breathe” (127) Although she despises that in them, as a writer she nevertheless recognizes their value since they “taught her the most important part of style, which is the natural run of the voice in speaking ... They taught her this, merely by the cadence of their voices in speech; so that her style changed somewhat, and she wrote some very pleasant, witty verses and characters in prose” (126).

Sally Potter uses the arrogance and the position of the Augustan poets towards women to emphasize specific male features as Orlando, appalled by the way she is treated now that she has become a woman, leaves the “Society” in a rush, only to be followed by Archduke Harry who asks for her hand in marriage.

“Archduke Harry: I’m offering you my hand.

Orlando: Oh! Archduke! That’s very kind of you, yes. I cannot accept.

Archduke Harry: But I ... I am England. And you are mine.

Orlando: I see. On what grounds?

Archduke Harry: That I adore you.” [01:08:23 – 01:08:49]

The dialogue between Orlando and Archduke Harry is extremely interesting in that it is built in such a manner as to mirror the dialogue Orlando the man has with Sasha:

“Orlando: But you are mine!

Princess Sasha: But why?

Orlando: Because ... I adore you.” [00:25:46 – 00:25:52]

The inverted dialogues have the purpose of revealing that women are demanded by men solely on the grounds of their adoration and high status, completely disregarding the principle of reciprocity; thus, the reversed scenes are used to emphasize how gender changes the perspective. Moreover, aside from the reversed situation, Potter aggregates the scene, making it quite humorous in the attempt to draw attention on the “unfair” condition of a woman, by introducing the two officers who inform Orlando:

“First Official: We wish to inform you, er, Madam, that you are a party of several major law suits that have been preferred against you concerning the property.

Second Official: The family seat.

Orlando: Pray continue.

*First Official: One: You are legally dead and therefore cannot hold any property whatsoever.
Orlando: Ah. Fine.
First Official: Two: You are now female –
Second Official: – which amounts to much the same thing.” [01:07:06 – 01:07:39]*

(6)The Victorian age – The “Victorian” love-story

While the story of Orlando is told by an unreliable biographer who changes tone in order to emphasize the changes suffered by the main character, Sally Potter chooses to underline these changes by providing the character with different eye colours, from a golden brown suited for the Elizabethan period to nuances of pale and bright blue and green and, for the Victorian period, a very intense black.

In the film, the transition from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century is a natural maze through which Orlando, infuriated by the turned down Archduke who tells her that she will die a spinster, runs towards the Victorian age, where the maze loses its bright green colour only to gain nuances of grey and to be engulfed in damp vegetation. Woolf is more personal in her description of the beginning of the Nineteenth century as she was directly affected by its traditions and ideology, a result of all being darkness, doubt and confusion:

Orlando then for the first time noticed a small cloud gathered behind the dome of St. Paul’s. as the stroke sounded, the cloud increased, and she saw it darken and spread with extraordinary speed. ... Height upon height above the city was engulfed by it ... With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun. (133)

Nevertheless, as dark and sombre as it may be, the Nineteenth century is the setting of a love-story that on page is the result not of a quest for love on Orlando’s part, but rather of a desperate request for a husband in order to fulfil the societal expectations of a century in which women were expected to get married and have children, in times when the sexes grew even further apart, as if they were carrying out patriotic tasks; the satire is thus inevitable:

The damp struck within. Men felt the chill in their hearts; the damp in their minds. The sexes drew further and further apart. No open conversation was tolerated. ... The life of the average woman was a succession of childbirths. She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty; for twins abounded. Thus the British Empire came into existence; (136)

On screen, the perspective is completely changed, with Orlando, enraged by the prevision of spinsterhood, running through the maze until she trips and falls and with the viewer expecting Shelmerdine, who enters the scene riding a horse – an image very much resembling the cliché of the rescuing knight in shiny armour; attempting to be a saviour; he actually falls from his horse and breaks his ankle. The image of both characters, a man and a woman, lying on the ground facing each other, hides, as the dialogue between the two reveals, dual natures both in Orlando and in Shelmerdine. In a manly manner, Orlando takes the initiative “Will you marry me?” [01:11:36] The unexpected question yields from Shel a response which seems to be coming from a lady in distress: “Ma’am I would gladly ... but I

fear my ankle is twisted...” [01:11:40] and the scene ends with the two of them galloping together through the misty landscape, Orlando playing the role of the saviour.

If Woolf chooses to reveal clearly the perfect compatibility between the two lovers “‘You’re a woman, Shel!’ she cried ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried” (150), Potter only hints at it:

“Orlando: If I were a man...

Shelmerdine: You?

Orlando: I might choose not to risk my life for an uncertain cause. I might think that freedom won by death is not worth having... in fact...

Shelmerdine: You might choose not to be a real man at all... say, if I was a woman...

Orlando: You?

Shelmerdine: I might choose not to sacrifice my life caring for my children, nor my children’s children. Nor to drown anonymously in the milk of female kindness ... but instead... say, to go abroad. Would I then be ...

Orlando: ...a real woman?” [01:15:08 – 01:16:06]

The dialogue is completed by the image of Orlando and Shelmerdine looking at each other and sharing a smile as a sign of recognition.

Although the secret of their compatibility is revealed in the novel, both characters keep acting according to their gender. However, on screen everything is reversed, as illustrated in the love scene, in which Orlando, once again, adopts a manly behaviour when she gazes into Shelmerdine’s eyes until he breaks the eye contact smiling embarrassed.

In what regards the relation between the two characters, Potter feels that Orlando is too anchored in the past and therefore chooses to introduce the “wind of change” adding an American scent to it, and with it the idea of liberty, of self-reliance and self-support and individuality; it is for this reason that Shelmerdine points out to Orlando that she does not need a husband but a lover. The love affair is a breath of fresh air and a turning point also, since it represents the moment when Orlando refuses to conform to norm, choosing to remain single. Apart from this, she disregards Queen Victoria’s decision that, unless she has a son, she will lose everything and her giving birth to a female child becomes a symbolical act of self-disinheritance. This rebellion against authority may be read as Potter’s homage to Virginia Woolf, a manner of remaining true to her beliefs and actions. As for Orlando, riding into the present on an early twentieth century motorcycle, he/ she supports the construction of the myth of the cyclicity of time and experience.

(7)Orlando – the metaphor

While Woolf constructs her novel as a metaphor for English literature, Sally Potter tries to remain faithful to it by constantly gathering and hinting at an entire history of famous art paintings representative for the centuries depicted in the motion picture (Carvalho, 2012), some of the most obvious being:

- Orlando as a young nobleman gazing and directly addressing the camera reminds of the portrait of **Sir Philip Sydney**³ (circa 1576), unknown artist,

³ Image available at <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw07877/Sir-Philip-Sidney>

- the imposing image of Queen Elizabeth I reminds of George Gower's **Armada Portrait**⁴ (circa 1588),
- the desolate images of the flood following the Great Frost emphasizing Orlando's feelings of deep sadness due to his broken heart bear resemblance to Monet's 1880 canvas, **The Break-up of the Ice**⁵,
- the shift of gender Orlando undergoes and the contemplation of his image as she is strikingly similar with Gustav Klimt's 1899 Art Nouveau canvas, **Nuda Veritas**⁶, as well as the appearance of Orlando in a blue dress which practically copies Thomas Gainsborough's painting, **Portrait of a Lady in Blue**⁷ (circa 1780).

Just as, on page, Orlando's journey marks various important periods of English literature, on screen, the same Orlando pins down several images representative for the history of visual arts. This is indicative of the fact that both Woolf and Potter at times satirise, at times criticise, yet in the end they bring an homage to their forefathers in arts.

Final remarks

The analysis of the two texts underlines that Sally Potter's production is, beyond an intertext, the result of a process of transtextuality, with multiple valences if not simply "read" as an isolated text. However, despite the identical story of the two narratives, it still seems that differences are not easily accepted. This reverential attitude towards the literary hypotext being obvious in *A tale of two cultures*, where Jane Marcus points her finger at Potter's film accusing it of turning "a masterpiece of comic satire for grown-ups into a story for children" and of "being a ridiculously bad film", ending by stating: "I can't believe anyone who helped with the making of this mockery of genius has ever read the book" (1994: 11).

Such a reaction towards a piece of cinematographic art regarded mainly as an adaptation of the work of a highly celebrated and appreciated modernist writer like Virginia Woolf should not strike one as odd, but should rather be regarded as a natural reaction of resistance towards a new point of view. Although the exposure of a personal perception under the form of a screening is sheltered by theories of adaptation, it remains completely vulnerable to accusations brought about by questions of faithfulness or truthfulness. Similar is the case here. Sally Potter has been blamed of omitting important stances from the book, of adding to the story narrated on film fragments which do not exist in the novel and of completely transforming the ending. Yet, in mediating the debate on the faithfulness and truthfulness of the adaptation, one must take into consideration that the two texts under focus share a relation of subordination that is hierarchical in its temporal orientation and that that presupposes the reanimation of history and its transformation/ rewriting which encapsulates, in Foucault's words, "the evolution of mentalities" (2004: 136).

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⁴ Image available at <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw02077/Queen-Elizabeth-I>

⁵ Image available at <http://www.claudemonetgallery.org/Break-Up-of-the-Ice.html>

⁶ Image available at <http://www.klimt.com/en/gallery/early-works/klimt-nuda-veritas-1899.ihtml>

⁷ Image available at http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/03/hm3_3_1_6a.html

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