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"The 'trans-historical self'; Slavic spirituality in Potter's *Orlando*"

The Essential human being

What is the main point in Sally Potter's *Orlando*? Is there a conflict between interests of the author, and the various readers or interest groups of the film? The director states, in the introduction to her screenplay, that "it gradually seemed to [me] that *Orlando* was, at its least, a "celebration of impermanence".

Making a historical film about chosen periods in history would, on the other hand, point to a specificity in the subject and perhaps lead us to understand these segments as connected by a kind of logic - a permanence. *Orlando* isn't the usual sort of historical film, though.

This paradoxality (or interesting contradictions at least), I believe, arise from the film's layeredness and ambiguity of time, space and identity - which are given at least a double treatment; of historical commentary (our intellectual tradition) and anachronistic mysticism (an unconscious, Slavic tradition).

The film seems to progress simultaneously by linear and cyclic strategies. "The narrative 'proceeds' through the juxtaposition of conflicting temporal structures; the 'external' temporality of British imperial time set against the rotation of cyclical, feminine time - from death to (re)birth" ¹. The timeframe moves linearly onwards from 1592 to 1992, using comments in intertitles such as 'DEATH', 'LOVE', 'BIRTH', to make statements of the formation of identity² at different periods.

It has been argued that the very use of these titles is a differentiating - feminist - tool, because of their inverted order starting with 'DEATH', bringing forth a new state of being through an "epistemological crisis"³ which affects the nation as well as the individual identity (which has yet to become either gendered or is male, and so in crisis and becoming female).

The cyclic strategy is more ethereal. The episodic nature of the film is framed by two scenes at each end featuring a symbolic Oak Tree "that suggests a turning point"⁴. It is

interesting, though, that if in Woolf's novel the tree symbolises turning points, in the film these turning points are situated at both ends of the film, referring to space outside the film.

This framing, though given dates in the script, 1592 and 1992 respectively, is notable because 1) both scenes subvert Woolf's novel (distort one scene and create an end scene), 2) they create an anachronic, possibly non-diegetic space, in which 3) Potter can stake a claim to a feminist tradition (a continuum). It may have been Potter's intention to create an intelligent, mesmerising film about the polyphonous, Bakhtinian possibilities of identity, but within that she has also contributed the notion of a female, transcendental- creative spirit - is she talking about history or women ?

Potter, like some other feminist figures (e.g. the psychoanalyst and critics Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous) has wanted to avoid being labelled 'feminist' for the limiting effects of such comments to her work. She'd like to remain independent for two reasons. Firstly, for *Orlando* specifically, such comments do injustice to what she sees as a story about a human being stripped of the pressure of gender.

The second reason is more specific in terms of locating it in Potter's world and era; she sees the feminist project inextricably linked to the liberation of other minority groups⁵ - gay / lesbians etc., but especially post-colonialist questions. In this sense, if she's a feminist, she has decided on a specific socio-economic position or rationale for it, and would in return stand by a more socialist-internationalist framework of feminism.

Trans-nationality

The idea of an 'essential human being' or 'essential' is something that sends shivers down the spines of academics, a lot of feminists and progressive filmmakers today. It is not the respectable thing to do in the fragmented post-modern age. And to speak of essentialism while speaking of the film you're making as " a celebration of impermanence"⁶ could be seen to be somewhat of a contradiction. It would seem that Potter is using this notion as a strategy for commenting on the future(s). It may be her overall (auterist) ideology but, but using this universalist, anachronic device, could be another transcendental (post-modern) device for interrogating the current day's fascination with technology, speed, the problem of engaging with or withdrawing from society and the fascination with deconstruction and tension with historical specificity.

Along with the end result, which symbolically looks like a feminine spirit (a synthesis of previous eras) returning civilisation 'down to earth' in the 1990s, could be read a post-feminist, post-national future - one, where the subject/ citizen is, like film, self-reflexive and therefore is more of an independent, democratic component in 'society', *where* ever that may be located.

There are trans-national elements of the whole business of *Orlando* that permeate the film's texture. Anne Ciecko argues, that the sexual (gender), artistic (genre), and national (& economic) factors influence each other in making a "post-genre (post-historical) film"⁷, whose success lies in the popular "crossover" potential of transgressive ideas, rather like Woolf's novel in the early part of the twentieth-century.

Though going for a gentle approach in ideological film making, Potter would be likely to agree. She cites in interviews and diary excerpts an interest, rather than in a feminist politics of opposition, in questions of national identity in history in a post-feminist climate about "creating a new vocabulary to explain the necessary ideas about ourselves (as women) without resorting to the old jargon"⁸.

In addition to the story offering a display of nationalities and customs, the background for the film is equally international, from its cast to its crew and financing and distribution (including the festival circuit). *Orlando* has, in addition to being a British female auteurist film (and, thus, a rarity) a curious position as a specifically 'Europeanised' film "adapted from an English novel about the formation of a fictional English subject in history by a canonical (English) writer"⁹. Thus it presents itself as English/British/European.

Does this have anything to say about the time of its creation? For Potter, *Orlando* has been a seminal guiding text, "a catchword for work that dared to be epic"¹⁰ and after the public failure of her last feature "*Gold diggers*" (in 1983), she began again to harbour the idea of an adaptation of Woolf's *Orlando*. But none of this arguably would've been possible without the changing political and social climate of post-communist Russia and subsequently more relaxed, though troubled, Europe - all of which offered the reciprocal possibilities of new ideas, new experiences, new identities as masses would soon begin to emigrate and intermix.

As Potter began to find her way in the patchwork of crewing financing and rewriting she found that this patchwork of international co-operation was in fact a more fluid system of film making in the absence of a supportive film establishment on the home front. Accidental elements, such as the cross-Atlantic casting of Billy Zane as Shelmerdine (whom Potter had

spotted in an episode of *Twin Peaks*), came to significantly act as the parts of *Orlando*, that would later be vital to the cyclic spirituality - theme mentioned earlier.

It's significant where this American *star* was plucked from as David Lynch offers, though in places conservative views, a very radical distortion of American imagery, which allows for the use of Zane as a double signifier; of 'the new world' (USA, historical) but also of possible varieties, perversions of, the US - i.e. plural (meta)americas.

Semi-utopic ideas of new worlds in a sea of concise references and deconstruction in the present world are one of the most intriguing elements in *Orlando*, providing an even more elusive, fractured (though pleasant) 'Other'. The combination, as mentioned briefly earlier, is close to the study of identity/ nationality by the Russians Sokurov in *Mat I Syn* (Mother and Son) and Tarkovsky in *Zerkalo* (Mirror) , both different in style to *Orlando*, but with both having a lot in common with it (as it happens, Potter cites Tarkovsky as one of her general influences – along with The Marx Brothers)¹¹.

From *Zerkalo*, especially, the ideas of documentation (in *Orlando*: pen, camcorder, poets, costume etc.) , documentary-style speaking to the camera (Swinton's returned gaze to the camera) and episodic story which meshes time, age and space and is presented in a dreamlike framework, pop up – after all we are suspending our disbelief about a 400 year lifespan. The main (young) female protagonist in *Zerkalo* , Masha , works in publishing (one recurring motif of *écriture féminine*), like *Orlando* the character eventually ends up handing over the 400 year old draft. Margarita Terekhova, plays both the Mother Natalia and Masha, the wife of the main autobiographical male protagonist, Alexei, who frames the film by opening it in a state of otherworldliness: an extra-diegetic space?

Finally, the actual transformation scene in *Orlando* bares, in addition to Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*¹², some resemblance to the 1st dream sequence from *Zerkalo* , evocative of a significant change in the (societal or temporal) environment as experienced on the surface of the bare(d) anatomy of the individual. "It's about the claiming of an essential self, not just in sexual terms, it's about the immortal soul". Though speaking in spiritual terms – at times Potter sounds as if trying to describe an energy that is in societal (r)evolution : a 'joy of life' , and of creating.¹³

Formalism

Potter seems equally proud about the sparse economy and struggle that the film was made by – its socio-economic context – as much as the splendour of its design – which usually gets the attention. She frequently refers to working, especially on *Orlando*, as a learning experience. This would also be a guiding principle along with other important notions in her work, such as play, deconstruction, and formalism.

Although a very cerebral, elusive filmmaker, she wishes to cater to a wide variety of contemporary audience. This she does by the simplest of cinematic devices, the lure of the image; “I wanted people to be able to engage [with the work] on the most complex and subtle levels if they wished or at the surface level of sheer intoxication of the senses”¹⁴

In this multilayered release of the spectator from the ignorance of references in ‘art-house’ cinema, she is creating a politic about knowledge/power where viewer (and, subsequently, also she) is let to play with the materials (re)presented. This play has a natural aesthetic dimension but also cultural dimension: the viewer is not obligated by the societal norms to read in the traditional way and constructs a community of viewers rather than a panel of reviewers.

In taking this ideology into the realm of historical films, she is making 3 statements linked to the cultural materialist movement. The first calls for an active participancy in knowledge and history. The second is a comment about the importance of multiple applications to the present of these histories. Most interestingly here, though, she seems to be suggesting an extra-sensory, spiritual link between events in history, which provocatively could be seen as a step back to determinism in history or an evaluation of the importance of mythologies in our lives.

The director’s background in Performance art and Dance undoubtedly has contributed to the specificity in detail (like Jarman and Greenaway as painters-come-directors) and a special emphasis on performativity.

As historiography, a researched performance art influenced film, is a good approach as it can add several elements to its ‘bare’ topics. Elements, that history books and accounts from contemporaries can’t provide, or can’t necessarily compete with (excluding the possibility of enhanced CD-ROMs as forms of book etc.).

The artificial nature of film, when it hits its target well can have a wide educational effect. This effect of a film won’t necessarily educate the viewer specifically and completely

about a period – and with *Orlando* this would be nearly impossible – but in the 1990s with the vogue for self-reflexive films such as *Scream*, a target audience is surely there to be built. An audience, that is, with the tools to better read ‘History’ as well as ‘film’ and ‘Cinema’.

The Cinema, as a contextual system, incorporating the laws of film, is a completely valid set of historiographical tools. The medium itself has its own historicity and reception, a fact that is often neglected; and thus a technique of metanarratives (metacinemas) are needed to simultaneously free Cinema from the constraints of e.g. Hollywood classical narrative. Only then can we glimpse at the possibilities of cinema as a set of accurate tools. By loose comparison to historians’ tools of research, Potter relates to Cinema and film makers’ community through the view of a trained dancer: “inspiration is irrelevant. It’s all about discipline. That is the single biggest lesson any film maker can learn”.¹⁵

Optimism

Is there a difference between history writing and what feminists call ‘herstory’? Again, Potter denies straightforward feminist projects. But one can ask: how is one to distinguish gender-free history writing (in filmic media), which will probably be feminised anyway, from feminist history writing – when all will be inevitably set against the monolithic presence of ‘history-proper’ – i.e. history writing in patriarchal Western culture until deconstructive movements?

One element that distinguishes *Orlando* as unique here is that while positing the film as ‘historical’, Potter will choose a strategy of ambivalence in particular sensitive issues – showing that she is consciously playing the gender polarities in historiography. In other terms, while moving onto a new format – and many feminists have claimed film/video to be *the* great chance for women to be free (i.e. write/voice freely) – she is deliberately distorting the conventions of all history writing, which strives to be more *accurate*, by being vague and semi-fictional (Cf. Alain Resnais’ project in ‘historical/documentary’ films)

It is this dimension that can take her onto the new levels that she aspires to, and not only combatting male environments of work, spanning from traditions of logic and coherence of the Ancients, to attacks on them. Additionally, it is Potter’s optimistic, forward looking Gaze that distorts in her history writing, and thus adding new levels to our understanding as history is naturally retrospective and possessive (in an intellectual economic sense, as one is

always treating lost properties). Somewhat like Orlando's alleged liberation at the end of the cycle, by loss of property, history writing can be partially liberated and re-configured, performed to evade a convenient determinist ending.

Conclusion

Through all these aspects and tensions, (*The essential Human being, trans-nationality, formalism, and optimism-as-strategy*) Potter attempts to construct a "golden thread" of spirituality in history. It is almost like the idea of a collective unconscious, which is anthropocentric, humanist though transcendental; visceral though intertextual. This spirit, like in Tarkovsky's *Zerkalo*, is anachronic and historically specific at the same time and here the progression of history is possibly gendered as timeless and female, although the film posits humans as androgynous modern individuals. The film offers complex new perspectives on historical film making, and is influential to the genres, which it disrupts and supersedes.

¹ Garret pg. 6

² Ferriss/Waites pg. 113

³ Anne Ciecko pg. 29

⁴ Ouditt pg. 149

⁵ Ehrenstein pg.7

⁶ Potter, intro to *Orlando*

⁷ Ciecko pg.21

⁸ Potter, diary notes, brackets mine.

⁹ Ciecko pg. 20

¹⁰ Potter, intro to *Orlando*

¹¹ Zeig pg. 26

¹² Garrett pg. 95

¹³ Ehrenstein pg. 7

¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 4

¹⁵ Johnson pg.3

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