

A Journey through Time and the European Visual Arts Based on the Novel *Orlando, A Biography* (A Perspective)



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Abstract

The goal of this analysis is to establish a parallel between Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando, A Biography*, the 1992 film directed by Sally Potter, and a few examples of European canvases that may have inspired both artists. Woolf broke the shackles that still dominated British literature in the 1920s by writing a storyline that encompasses four centuries of a nation's life and of mixed emotions for the novel's leading character: Orlando was/is his/her name. Both the book published in 1928 and the film directed in 1992 start by presenting Orlando as an Elizabethan nobleman. As the plot unfolds, much like a caterpillar Orlando will evolve from a shy teenage boy into a confident adult woman. However, Woolf and Potter's distinctive timelines and perceptions of the world explain the different paths offered by each author to Orlando in the last stages of their works. Focusing on this text's purpose, its writer shall start by reflecting over some recurrent elements of the book written in 1928 as a means to praise the outstanding cultural background of Virginia Woolf at the time of its production. The following step will be to present canvases produced by painters like George Gower, Claude Monet, Gustav Klimt or even Marcel Duchamp that can be associated both to some excerpts of the novel and/or to scenes from the movie.

The current paper aims at establishing a parallel between specific moments of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando, A Biography*, visual examples of European canvases, and scenes taken from the 1992 movie directed by Sally Potter. Transgression was the *leitmotif* of the 1920s and Woolf managed to weave a storyline that stretches itself for a period of about 400 years in a single character's life. Orlando is introduced to both reader and audience as a privileged teenage boy living during Elizabeth I's reign, only to fall asleep and wake up a few pages later as a young adult woman, a stranger in a foreign land

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doomed to face gender prejudice, until finally reaching the liberating 1920s of Woolf's moment of writing, already as a confident and independent being.

Besides references to Greek mythology, medieval literature, natural symbols and psychic duplicity, the historical textual account shall be visualised according to specific paintings such as Gower's *Armada Portrait*, and Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase Nr.2*, among other masterpieces. In between, the author's wit and social criticism shall also be taken into account, alongside the safe haven portrayed by the ancestral oak tree at Orlando's timeless estate. Well aware of his/her earthly Home, Orlando's real quest is the quest for the Self.

Born in 1882, Virginia Woolf led a life of nervous breakdowns in-between outbursts of creativity; regardless of any clinical analysis, she found peace on the 28th of March of 1941 when committing suicide by drowning in the River Ouse, on a sort of ritualistic purification act. In spite of her marriage to Leonard Woolf, a lot has been disputed on her friendship to Vita Sackville-West, a bisexual aristocratic writer whose intimacy to Woolf was reinforced after 1925, to such an extent that in 1928 the latter dedicated *Orlando, A Biography* to her. The novel is somewhat exotic in the fact that the main character experiences a lifespan of four centuries which does not end with the closing of the narrative, not to mention the curious remarks Orlando goes on presenting, first as a man and afterwards as a woman.

The author based her book on Knole Castle, Vita's family estate, and on Vita's family and personal history. Woolf aimed at producing a novel that would allow her to explore the inner Self of the main character and the social conflicts he/she faces along the way.¹ According to Monique Nathan, this literally resulted in the making of an androgynous character² Woolf would later develop in *A Room of One's Own*. Besides, "androgyny in female fashion in the 1920s was related to (young) women's increased nobility and freedom to occupy public spaces" (Peach 151); still today one of the trademarks of that period is the

garçon look. According to Linden Peach, *Orlando* mocks “the familiar triptych of Englishness, empire and gender identity” (Peach 137), meaning the Victorian *status quo*, not only for the peculiar physical transformation of Orlando, but mostly for the affection the English Lord reveals for a Russian «barbarian»³ and his night habit of mingling *incognito* with the commoners of London and of Constantinople, and sometimes even cross-dressing to better fit in.

The description of space respects the visual and spiritual worlds of the main character as well, since there are references to both rural and urbanscapes, besides approaches to a powerful topic of discussion during Woolf’s lifetime: Freud’s theory on the existence of multiple selves⁴ within each person. Lady Orlando reflects on the matter stating that she has “a Great variety of selves to call upon [... because] a person may well have as many as thousand” (Woolf 213). Woolf had previously written that Lord Orlando’s brain “was a roomy one” (Woolf 13), in order to prepare the reader for the duality between a daytime aristocrat and a nighttime wanderer, the conflict of Conscious vs. Unconscious minds. The matter of human duplicity actually started as a recurrent topic in late 19th-century literature: one may mention masterpieces such as *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*⁵ and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*⁶, among other works. The core of those books was the latent fight of rational behaviour *versus* primitive urges each individual encloses in oneself, as if alluding to Darwin’s evolutionist principle, a scientific background which would be creatively exploited by literature. Besides, such contrast was also perceived in Victorian society itself, mainly on the gap between the middle classes (living in their comfortable suburbia residences/manor houses) and the working mob (surviving in urban slums, mainly at the East End). Symbolism is another detail worth mentioning, three elements being quite often repeated along the novel:

- 1) the oaktree;
- 2) the goose;

3) the number 7.

On a brief analysis one must state that the oak tree usually recalls the landed aristocracy, which Orlando is a part of. It is also his sole emotional stability core, for it is under the oak tree that Orlando writes, it is after this earthly element that Orlando sets the title for his/her literary masterpiece, and it is also under its roots that Orlando buries the manuscript at the closing chapter of the novel. In the dictionary of symbols we have consulted the oak tree is also referred to as a messenger between Heaven and Earth, besides recalling its importance on Ancient Greek legends like those of Ulysses and of the Golden Fleece.⁷

Tom O'Meara (15) recalls the mighty oak tree to be understood as the national tree of England and its presence in the country's History can take us on a time travel from the days of Celtic worship to the material used in the structures of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, and Lord Nelson's boats. O'Meara also reminds us that it is the tree connected to Robin Hood and his Merry Men at Sherwood Forest, and to Charles II's survival after the defeat at the Battle of Worcester, in 1651. The movie itself begins with Orlando wandering under the shadow of a magnificent oak tree while reading.

As for the flying goose it is at first an allegory of the quest of the Self and at last an allusion to the wings of freedom Lady Orlando feels flapping in her soul in 1928; this bird is usually perceived as a(nother) messenger between Heaven and Earth, announcing the coming of changes. In general terms, the number 7 is associated to the days of the week, the colours of the rainbow, the seas, the deadly sins, the virtues, but mostly it is the sum of the Holy Trinity with the four Elements of Nature, representing the Cosmos's Unity. In numerical tarot decks number 3 is the Empress/female principle, number 4 is the Emperor/male principle, while number 7 is the chariot, whose symbolism is connected to victory, the taming of both horses of intuition and reason, that is, of Oneself. Still according to the dictionary of symbols, 7 are the Heavens, the spheres, and the

years comprising each cycle of life, but this number also represents the androgynous being.⁸

In Woolf's novel, 7 was the number of days Orlando slept after his heartbreak over Sasha; he was then reborn with only selected memories, for he "appeared to have an imperfect recollection of his past life...some change...must have taken place in the chambers of his brain" (Woolf 47-48). Already in Turkey another mystical sleep occurs, this time leading to a physical change, followed by a return by sea to England (as a means of final purification of her former Self) and the literary glory acknowledged by Lady Orlando and proved by the seven editions of her poem, *The Oak Tree*.

The writer also innovated by breaking the rules of Time through Orlando's ceaseless, timeless and universal quest: happiness (through Unity). The novel's narrator rejects the formalities of chronology by offering meagre details to the reader, such as the visit of the 16-year-old Orlando to an already aging Elizabeth I. Afterwards, there will only be mere references to the rulers he lived under, as a means to guide the reader, and a reference to the fact that Orlando changed gender at the age of 30. Even on the last pages, when Woolf situates the reader on the 11th of October of 1928, her wit is revealed in the sentence "it was the present moment" (Woolf 206); the verb To Be is pronounced in the past tense and the noun is adjectivised using the word «present». Indeed, Woolf decides to unsettle the reader's peace of mind straight at the novel's opening line when one reads: "He – for there could be no doubt about his sex" (Woolf 11). Trouble was surely on her mind.

The innovations in this narrative are also connected to the reader's awareness of Orlando's deepest thoughts, to the modernist taste for breaking the shackles of Victorian sexual conventionalism, and in the ellipses, which allow the reader to have a social perception of the ages without too much concern towards a rigid timeline. As for the all-knowing narrator, (s)he is not part of the

story, but does not sway from teasing and communicating with the reader either, much like Woolf, using her wit during social and intellectual events whenever her health would allow her to attend them.

Another important trend in this book is the recurrent presence of episodes, which bring to mind European and English literary traditions. The Greek heritage can be perceived through the oak tree's symbolism and the name of Orlando's *fiancée*, Euphrosyne, named after one of the Three Graces, daughters of Zeus and goddesses of beauty and creativity that Botticelli painted in his *Spring* canvas, and Milton printed in the *L'Allegro* poem, during the 16th and 17th centuries, respectively. The influence of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are understood in Orlando's name, because of the parallel one may draw to the *Chanson de Roland*, a *chanson de geste* or medieval epic of the 11th and 12th centuries, as well as to *Orlando Innamorato* and to *Orlando Furioso*, both written during the Italian *Cinquecento* (the 1500s). This name would also recall a character in Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*.

In Virginia Woolf's novel one may also pinpoint two aspects recalling 19th-century literature:

- 1) facing his wife's death, Dante Rossetti, the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, buried his poems by Lizzie's coffin side; in Woolf's book Orlando buries the manuscript of his/her masterpiece under a centuries-old oak tree;
- 2) the matter of duality was not only a key-factor in the late-1800s literature, as Woolf was also influenced in her writings by contemporary authors like T. S. Eliot and Sigmund Freud, the latter mainly on studies over individual fragmentation.

Bearing in mind the Modernist aesthetics depicted in Woolf's text, I would like to build a bridge between the narrative progression, Orlando's personal development and a canvas by Marcel Duchamp called *Nude Descending a*

*Staircase Nr.2.*⁹ That painting drives us to the early photograms used in cinema, for each step taken by the figure combines dynamic lines between departure/arrival, and leads to its unity in the arrival point, much like Orlando did when finding her real Self in 1928. And if Woolf's novel shocked London at the time of its publishing, Duchamp's piece also stunned New York when it was displayed at the Armory Show of art.¹⁰

After this approach to some of the novel's most interesting allegories and cultural foundations, one shall dwell for a while on Sally Potter's 1992 movie inspired by Virginia Woolf's book. During her teenage years Potter got interested in cinema and dancing, later embracing other artistic fields such as theatre and music; it explains why she worked with David Motion in the original soundtrack of *Orlando*, besides directing the film after writing the screenplay herself. These were the reasons why critics such as Joseph Hooper defended that "she has used all of her talents to bring Orlando to life – composer, choreographer, writer, director" (Hooper). The scope of both effort and courage required to adapt this specific novel was also admired by Mira Stout, who claimed "anyone who has read Woolf's idiosyncratic novel can understand why [it took courage]: much of its interior life seems unfilmable" (Stout).

Respecting the predominance of the number 7, the director divided the different ages of the book in equal topics. As follows:

- 1) Death;
- 2) Love;
- 3) Poetry;
- 4) Politics;
- 5) Society;
- 6) Sex;
- 7) Birth.

Potter thus built a life cycle and kept the novel's preference for the numerical symbolism. On the other hand, while most of the movie respects the spirit of the 1928 book, the last minutes of the 1992 production already make way for the director's late-20th century vision, as a means of surprising and/or updating the viewer.

Plunging into the book's early pages and into the 16th century, Orlando is to be found playing in the attic of the family's house, hitting a Moor's head hanging from the ceiling with his sword. The severed head is described as having "the colour of an old football, and... the shape of one" (Woolf 11). Indeed, colour and shape are the basic elements for any canvas's appeal. Woolf proceeds her visual composition when writing about the coat-of-arms painted at the stained-glass window of that same attic, for while pushing the window wide open, Orlando's hand "was instantly coloured red, blue and yellow like a butterfly's wing" (Woolf 11). Following the initial data granted on the early pages, the reader creates the mental image of Orlando as a 16-year-old Elizabethan aristocrat who spends his time writing, and whose family paid the queen regular visits; Orlando is, thus, "the very image of a noble gentleman" (Woolf 18). In the reader's and the viewer's minds the connection between this description and Sir Philip Sidney's portrait¹¹ hanging at the National Portrait Gallery is almost an immediate one; especially for the viewer due to a specific poise young Orlando offers him. Sidney was one of the most outstanding Elizabethan courtiers. As a man of the Renaissance, he excelled in the mastering of words, not only as a diplomat but also as a poet. His artistic and literary skills were so great that according to Roy Strong "Sir Philip Sidney's *Apologie for Poetrie*, published in 1595 after his death, bills poetry along with painting in the classical canons as being sisters arts" (Strong 177).

George Gower's *Armada Portrait*¹² is another painting the reader may mentally visualise while reading Woolf's description that Elizabeth I was "an old

body...caparisoned in all sorts of brocades and gems...and the Queen's eyes were yellow [...for] the sound of Canon was always in her ears [...and] as she sat at the table she listened; she heard the guns in the Channel" (Woolf 16-17). Although the painting was actually produced in 1588-1589 while the monarch was still young, the book's excerpt presents a ruler haunted by the ghosts of days gone by. On the other hand, the canvas exhibits two windows with the perspectives of the fate of the Spanish Armada before and during the naval conflict, hence Woolf's reference to that glorious moment of *Gloriana's* rule. While art historian Roy Strong mentions that the art produced for the State during the renaissance intended "to establish the mythology of a new society" (Strong 176), director Sally Potter offers the viewer a hint of her wit and of the book's transgressive gist when having Elizabeth's role performed in a rather amusing tone by Quentin Crisp, a male actor. As movie critic Joseph Hooper indicates, "The English have always gone in for a gender bender, whether of the old-fashioned music-hall variety (Benny Hill in a tutu) or something more with-it (the Kinks song "Lola")" (Hooper).

Skipping into the 17th century one cannot overlook Linden Peach's words, which state that *Orlando, A Biography* and *The Waves* share "an exploration in the interconnection of space, political history and the imaginary through a range of cryptic reference's to Britain's cultural climate in the 1920s and to specific political events" (Peach 137). Indeed, during the reign of James I the reader is confronted with the *Great Frost* of 1608 that froze the Thames, which was promptly used by the court as a sort of playground, while the rest of the nation had to bear the horrors of Winter. Woolf even resorted to hyperboles such as "birds froze in mid air and fell like stones to the ground" (Woolf 24); Peach believes that was an analogy between the specific ages of the chapter and of the novel's writing. As one may read:

The Great Frost of the seventeenth century may be seen as analogous to the Great War of the twentieth century. The emphasis in the account of the Frost upon the enormous mortality, the suddenness of death and the frozen corpses clearly bring the front lines of the Great War to mind (Peach 143).

Later came the defrosting and the emotional blow when Sasha forsook Orlando, taking advantage of the river's restored vitality, in order to sail home to Russia. The word «defrosting» can be visually associated to Claude Monet's impressionist canvas, *The Break up of the Ice*¹³, in which a frozen landscape slowly melts down as the river bed reveals itself amidst floating ice fragments; gazing the sky, the mist is also being replaced by shades of light blue. Monet's personal experience while painting this canvas witnessed the cyclical sequence of natural life changing from hibernation into renovation.¹⁴ In Orlando's case, the defrosting of the Thames and Sasha's departure was like a rite of passage into adulthood: she represented the challenge of overcoming love's growing pains. Indeed, Orlando was about to face a deeper renovation.

Still in the 17th century Orlando requested King Charles II to be sent as an ambassador to Turkey, where a radical physical change would take place. In the novel, this is how such surprising moment is described:

we are...now...in the room with the sleeping Orlando and the trumpeters... [and they] blow a terrific blast

THE TRUTH!

At which Orlando woke... He rose. He stood upright in the complete nakedness before us and... we had no choice but confess – he was a woman (Woolf 97).

Bearing in mind such naked truth, the reader may recall Klimt's *Nuda Veritas*,¹⁵ where a slender naked woman faces the observer, while she gazes herself at the mirror she holds. At the feet of the red-haired *femme fatale*¹⁶ one beholds a

snake, a Christian symbol of temptation. However, while Klimt depicted a defying eroticism that Woolf did not refer, Potter copied it to her movie on the scene in which Orlando thoroughly contemplates her nudity over a big standing mirror, only after proudly showing herself to the viewer. Pretty soon reality hits her hard through an awareness of the social shortcomings of her new gender when Lady Orlando finds her way out of Turkey in the company of a caravan of gypsies, as if she were an outcast and not an aristocrat. After all, the reader would expect Orlando, as a former English ambassador, to travel home in a more dignified manner.

As the leading character moves on, so this analysis shall proceed into another timeline. Surprisingly, the 18th century will possibly be the easiest Age for the viewer to establish a parallel between the movie scenes and a canvas by Thomas Gainsborough entitled *Portrait of a Lady in Blue*.¹⁷ Potter shot Orlando in a beautiful light blue dress of fine cloth, much like the gentle and ethereal figure of the portrait, with the simple adaptation of the wig to Queen Anne's period, because the painter lived in the 1770s when the Rococo taste imposed larger and heavier hair sets. And if the refined lady of the canvas uses her fragile right hand to hold the dress falling off her left shoulder, Woolf's text also recalls the reader that in the 1700s while "the man had his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping her shoulders" (Woolf 132).

The progression of the storyline into the 19th century is woven with a dreadful description of the turn of the century, a metaphor of the social uselessness of women during the Victorian age. Ironically, that historic period has been officially named after a woman who was not only Queen of England, but also Empress of India. As one may read: "The great cloud which hung, not only over London, but over the whole of the British Isles on the first day of the

nineteenth century stayed... Men felt the chill in their hearts; the damp was in their minds. The sexes drew further and further apart” (Woolf 157-158).

In the movie the ellipsis was displayed during a momentary disorientation, when Lady Orlando receives news of the precariousness of her existence accordingly to the ages’ law and abruptly runs inside a maze. She enters the labyrinth wearing a light blue dress, runs like the wind from the social and legal constraints imposed on her, gets caught by a heavy fog of misunderstanding, only to leave the maze in a dark blue dress of emotional turbulence. This actually turns out to be a very interesting chromatic metaphor of the gender repression the Victorian period imposed on women.

The last stage of this analysis will focus on the 20th century. However, one should not overlook the fact that Potter’s movie slightly differs from Woolf’s novel from the 19th century onwards. A good example of that is the topic «Sex», when Orlando meets Shel and the viewer is offered a nudity scene that was not included on Woolf’s text; in turn, Woolf’s reference to their marriage was overlooked by Potter, a late-20th century female director. Informed of the final verdict over her estate and further assets, the viewer witnesses the departure of Shel and a new passage of time is perceived when a (very) pregnant Orlando stumbles amidst the First World War bombings on a battlefield.

The movie’s last topic, «Birth», reveals the character’s lifestyle as if reflecting the 1990s, for Orlando is now an independent woman on the same grounds as the four friends of the *Sex & The City*¹⁸ TV series. Orlando lives off the success of her literary accomplishments, drives a motorcycle with sidecar, wears comfortable trousers, is a single mother (for Potter did not construe her as married) and maintains a healthy connection with her daughter. In the final scene she is writing under the ageless oak tree, while her child toys around with a video camera and an angel¹⁹ appears in the sky singing the glory of Orlando’s androgynous soul.

As for Woolf's book, one believes that by including Vita Sackville-West's photograph the author meant to assist the reader in visualising 20th-century Orlando, resorting to one of the most recent arts of its early decades: Photography. Orlando only finds happiness when being a woman in a timeline when technological and social developments permitted her to enjoy life (and cars, and trousers, and cigarettes, and elevators) without prejudice. The last pages take the reader back to the Roaring Twenties and to the mental image of independent women wearing large pearl necklaces and the *garçonne* hairstyle, much like Vita's photograph inserted on the printed novel's last pages shows.

It is never easy to assess Virginia Woolf's problematic genius regardless of the perspective one may follow. Indeed, that difficulty springs from the author's deep cultural background, from her complex space/time insertion, besides her shifting personality, deriving from a complex clinical frame. On the other hand, it is hard to resist the subversive appeal of a novel such as *Orlando, A Biography*, mainly because of the leading character's lifespan of four centuries, which will continue after the book is closed, and its gender change. Across these lines the present analysis of the 1928 book and the 1992 film intended to offer one visual perspective of the artistic and cultural complexity of both Woolf and Potter's works, all in the name of their fondness for such a unique character: Orlando.

Notes

¹ The Victorian conduct outlived the queen who passed away in 1901, and Virginia Woolf and her intellectual circle, the Bloomsbury Group, would react against the maintenance of the bigotry of that time. From 1910 to 1918 she also joined the Women's Suffrage, whose demand for the women's right to vote would be reached after the 1st World War and the general acknowledgement of the gender's role during wartime.

² Original text: "um ser espiritualmente andrógino." (Nathan 57).

³ Criticising England's vision of other cultures.

⁴ One must add that the Hogarth House owned by Virginia and Leonard Woolf was the first to publish Sigmund Freud's books in England.

⁵ Published by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1886.

⁶ Written by Oscar Wilde back in 1890.

⁷ Original text: “[Um] instrumento de comunicação entre o Céu e a Terra...na Odisseia, Ulisses vem consultar...a *folhagem divina do grande carvalho de Zeus*...[e] o Velo de Ouro...estava suspenso num carvalho: este tinha um valor de tempo.” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 165).

⁸ Original text: “Sete, número dos Céus, é também, segundo Dante, o das esferas planetárias...Sete indica o sentido de uma mudança depois de um ciclo...e de uma renovação positiva...o Sete, número do homem...perfeitamente realizado...é...o número do andrógino hermético, como o é em África o dos Gémeos míticos” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 603-606).

⁹ Painted in 1912, the canvas can be admired at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, in the United States. Online image available at <www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/51449.html>.

¹⁰ Janson 691.

¹¹ An unknown artist probably painted the portrait of the Elizabethan scholar and courtier in 1576. It hangs at the National Portrait Gallery, in London. Online image available at <www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw07877/Sir-Philip-Sidney>.

¹² Painted c.1588-1589, the canvas is to be found at Woburn Abbey, in Bedfordshire. Online image available at <www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/armada_gallery_02.shtml>.

¹³ The 1880 creation can be admired at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in Lisboa. Online image available at <www.artres.com/c/htm/CSearchZ.aspx?o=&Total=186&FP=7959520&E=22SIJM5MZFIQJ&SID=JMGEJNB5BJOSB>.

¹⁴ Wildenstein 152-154.

¹⁵ Painted in 1899, it can be found at the *Theatersammlung der Nationalbibliothek*, in Vienna, Austria. Online image available at <art.mygalerie.com/les%20maitres/klimt5.html>.

¹⁶ Fliedl 49.

¹⁷ The 1770s masterpiece now hangs at the State Hermitage Museum, in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Online image available at <www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/03/hm3_3_1_6a.html>.

¹⁸ Created by Darren Star, it was a success from 1998 to 2003, later continuing its path through two films released in 2008 and 2010.

¹⁹ Played by the 1980s pop artist Jimmy Somerville, lead singer of Bronski Beat and later of the Communards.

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