ORLANDO [1993]

by

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Orlando. Directed by Sally Potter. Written by Sally Potter from the novel by Virginia Woolf. Production designed by Ben Van Os and Jan Roelfs. Distributed by Sony Pictures, 1993.

Orlando (Tilda Swinton), a young man living around the year 1600, is granted favors and property by Queen Elizabeth I (played with ironic gusto by Quentin Crisp – an aging queen playing an aging Queen – get it?). He then falls in love with and is rejected by a Russian Princess (Charlotte Valandrey). Though we check in on his progress about every half century, he doesn't age. He unsuccessfully tries his hand at poetry. During a stint as ambassador to Turkey, he wakes up after a seven-day nap to find himself transformed into a woman. Lady Orlando is now faced with the problems of 18th-century salon life – choose a man or lose your property. She meets a man but does to him what the princess did to Orlando as a man – rejects him. She finally emerges into the 20th century, poor and ordinary, an unsuccessful author, but apparently happy.

Orlando is a beautiful film, designed by the same people who do John Greenaway's films, and therefore a pleasure to watch. Yet, thinking about it is another matter. As we hop, skip, and jump through time (none of this, much to the film's credit, is explained), we are presented with a series of smug vignettes intended to survey defunct gender assignments. Orlando begins as a man, I presume because the film is saying that there were no roles for women in the 16th century. Yet we clearly see that the Russian Princess has the upper hand in all matters. Sometime around 1800, Orlando goes to sleep for a week and wakes up transformed into Lady Orlando. And so, the belabored critique of "the patriarchy" continues from the other side. However, nothing much in our perception of Orlando really changes because we've known all along "he" was a woman – "he" is far too pretty, far to pale skinned, resembling far too much a precious piece of chinaware. Thus, the critique, rather than expanding, continues in its previous one-sided manner.

The film almost bursts off the screen, swelling with the pride of having addressed gender vs. sex issues. I have problems with this for two reasons. First, very little happens to the character as a result of his/her experiences. And, as a result, we get very little to take home from a film that seems to take such "bold" political stances. Second, and more important, just addressing these issues is not enough. Political intentions, no matter how noble, do not a film make. And, as I will show, our cultural heritage is full of androgyny and sexual confusion. Merely addressing it is nothing unique or unusual or valedictory, as *Orlando* assumes it to be.

Androgynes, hermaphrodites and gender shifters are not the strange, unusual and unmentionable figures *Orlando*'s professorial attitude makes them out to be. Our cultural history is full of images and stories that question sex and gender. Let me give a few examples, first contemporary, then older.

Films about gender ambiguities – either direct or symbolized by cross-dressing – are legion. They range from Edward Wood's inept but heartbreaking semi-autobiographical *Glen or Glenda* [1953] to the fantastic and elegant *Liquid Sky* [1983] in which Anne Carlisle not only plays a lesbian punker but also a homosexual male model. Cross-dressing films run the gamut of genre. Westerns include Arthur Penn's quite bizarre *Missouri Breaks* [1976] which features Marlon Brando as an assassin in a dress. The most common gender questioning genre is comedy. In *Some Like It Hot* [1959] Jack Lemon plays a character who alternates repeating, "I'm a girl, I'm a girl, ..." then, "I'm a boy, I'm a boy ..." when he finds his psyche being swallowed up by whatever gender role he is performing at that moment. Sidney Pollack's *Tootsie* [1982] is perhaps the best example of a character learning from his experiences as a member of the opposite gender and using what he has learned to help others ... of both genders. Gender questions recently hit the big time with *The Crying Game* [1992] (the marketing coup of the decade). While this film ignores more of the issues it brings up than it addresses (you cannot, for instance, have one man handle another man's penis almost on screen and then drop the issue), the characters at least don't sleepwalk through their experiences *a la Orlando.*

There are a surprisingly large number of "popular" films with gender identity issues. That they have not been recognized as such is perhaps because those most interested in gender issues are either in the academic or intellectual communities and thus find only a narrow segment of films worthy subjects for examination. However, many films that were (and still are) seen primarily as popular entertainments have something very interesting to say about gender.

For instance, we might easily assume that any film starring John Wayne would portray very strict gender role assignments, yet we might be surprised to find that a film like *Red River* [1948] seriously questions them. This was the first starring role of Montgomery Clift, an actor who brought a tragic fragility to his role as Matthew Garth, a young boy adopted by Tom Dunson (John Wayne). Very symbolically, the film begins with Garth as a boy bringing a cow to mate with Dunson's bull. Throughout the film, Garth struggles with both the positive and negative aspects of his "feminine" side, unsure which to pursue. He sees that it can support the men around him, bring sensitivity to the decisions that he and the others must make, and nurture not only the West, but ultimately all of America by bringing in the herd of cattle so that a whole country can be fed. On the other hand, he also finds that the patriarchy around him makes debilitating demands: he must exercise his masculine sense of judgment, he must physically enforce what he sees as justice, and he must fight the tyrannical father at his own level. While the film has a happy ending, we are left with a taste of doubt about Garth's future, given that his experience of both the masculine and the feminine has been so strong.

Looking further back in our cultural history, we see that Medieval alchemy's road to perfection involved two characters, the "king" and the "queen," who had to be killed and cooked in a pot until they became a single, living being – the androgyne. This, of course, is not to be taken literally, and, as Carl Jung has pointed out, the process corresponds to psychological growth and the characters correspond to the various psychological states inside any *single* person. Thus, according to Jung, we all contain within us elements of all gender possibilities and the external face we put to the world is simply a carefully selected performance of some combination of these.

Still further back, we find a very important but almost totally ignored character in Greek mythology – Teiresias. I believe he is important not only because of his gender experiences, which I will describe, but because he is the only character to appear in both the stories of Oedipus and Ulysses, the two major myths underlying Western European culture. As a youth hiking in the Arcadian mountains, Teiresias came upon two snakes making love. Apparently outraged by what he saw, he struck them with a stick. He was immediately transformed into a woman. Seven years later, having either learned little or having learned a lot (it is difficult to know), he came upon the same snakes in the same position and hit them again, whereupon he was transformed back into a man. Later he was called to Mt. Olympus to settle an argument between Zeus and Hera as to who obtains more pleasure from making love – Teiresias being the only one really able to compare. He affirmed Hera's view that women have more pleasure. Enraged, Zeus struck him blind, but Hera, to compensate, gave him the gift of prophecy and long life.

Lastly, consider Genesis. In 1:27, "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them." This triple statement can be interpreted in only one way: both male and female are aspects of God's image. Therefore, God's image is that of either a hermaphrodite or an androgyne. I can think of no other interpretation of this passage. I think this is correct, because the same image is repeated in the next chapter. Genesis 2:8 "the Lord God formed man of dust of the ground, ..." Genesis 2:22 "And the Lord God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man ... She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man." In this version of the creation, God makes a single being in his image. That being is later divided into male and female. Thus, the original being is either a hermaphrodite or an androgyne that is split into its male and female components (It is interesting that this is the only time in Genesis the words "man" and "woman" are capitalized.) And again, we are inexorably led to the conclusion that the image of God contains both sexes equally.

Thus, to my eye, *Orlando* cannot claim fame for simply addressing these truly ancient issues. Orlando's accomplishments, through four centuries of life, are few: personal freedom as a woman to live independently of men, happy single parenthood, and a manuscript. As a man, he accomplished little when judged from the point of view of the patriarchy: no success, no wealth of his own, no building, no heroism, no accumulation of knowledge, no teaching. As a woman, Orlando accomplished little to either show the weakness of the patriarchy or to correct it. She also accomplished little of what most contemporary feminist literature prescribes as the future of women: equality (at least) with men, building a network between women, finding uniquely feminine roles that

function in the world as well or better than those defined by men, and so on. Thus, *Orlando* is reduced to a self-indulgent exercise which completely ignores much of our cultural history – a cultural history that at every turn deals with the same issues, only in more interesting ways.

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