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Frame from Sally Potter's 1992 film *Orlando*.
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Framing Ambiguity and Desire through Musical Means in Sally Potter's Film 'Orlando'

RUTH LEE MARTIN

Sally Potter's film *Orlando* (based on Virginia Woolf's 1928 book of the same name) is a rather curious tale based on a mixture of biography and fiction about sexual ambiguity and identity. The film has been the subject of much feminist criticism for the manner in which it departs from the main theme of the original story. Woolf's final message in her book is that the status quo in regards to the treatment of women continues ever onwards, while Potter's message in her film – that we have reached a stage where we can transcend constructions of gender – seems, at first glance, superficial. Potter not only directed the film but also wrote the music for it, and an analysis of this music (that runs throughout much of the film) demonstrates that the case against Potter, and the grounds for such criticism, may not be clear-cut at all. This article shows how the music reveals a deeper, more profound message at the heart of the film that is as ambiguous as Orlando him- (or is it her-?) self.

Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been.

(Woolf 1990: 87)

[A] phantasmatical mingling of men, of males, messieurs, of monarchs, princes, orphans, flowers, mothers, breasts, gravitates around a marvelous 'sun of energy' love, which bombards and disintegrates these ephemeral amorous singularities so that they may recompose themselves in other bodies for new passions [...]

(Cixous 1980a: 98)

Written by Virginia Woolf in 1928, *Orlando* is a rather curious tale based on a mixture of biography and fiction about sexual ambiguity and identity. It does not seem at first glance ideally suited as the raw material for a film. For one thing, the narrative wanders and weaves through a vast historical backdrop that spans four centuries with very little dialogue to support it; for another, much of the book consists of an inner stream of consciousness. However, this inner stream of consciousness is often accompanied by an exquisite imagery that combines with a wide range of historical and geographic settings, providing a rich and opulent backdrop around which the quirky story unfolds. Director Sally Potter has grasped the cinematography inherent in Woolf's book and made this a real feature and strength of her film, released in 1992. Potter has also grasped Woolf's underlying sense of humour. While the issues with which the book and film grapple are profound, a rueful sense of fun and mockery underpins both, making the penetrating observations on society and the role of women less didactic, and, because the defences are seduced in this way, the effect is more powerful.

Orlando is one of the few feature-length films to be both written and directed by a woman, and the theme, as might be expected from something based on Virginia Woolf's writing, questions our identities – particularly our sexual and gendered identities: both book and film play on the deliberate blurring of boundaries through ambiguity. However, Potter has attracted criticism for her adaptation, which stems from her insistence on remaining, in her own eyes at least, 'true' to the book's single central core; of being at one with the book's narrative voice. Yet this in itself is highly problematic as Woolf's book warns many times against the seduction of succumbing to the idea of a single 'shimmering' essence (Hollinger & Winterhalter 2001: 3). Potter's stance is particularly evident in the film's ending. Where Woolf's final message is that the status quo with regard to the treatment of women continues ever onwards, Potter's message is that we have reached a stage where we can transcend constructions of gender, and our own biology, by peeling back imposed layers to find an 'essential genderless self'. We are one; and thus we are, as the last song of the film proclaims so passionately, 'free at last'. Or are we?

Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter, in their article 'Orlando's Sister, or Sally Potter Does Virginia Woolf in a Voice of Her Own', take Potter to task for this:

Potter's figure of the androgyne is much less likely than Woolf's sexually ambiguous hero to stimulate thinking that could lead to social change. Potter translates what is a complicated issue for Woolf into a fable of

liberation [...] This fable of liberation does not portray gender as a problematic, elastic site of cultural forces, but rather as a prison that may be escaped if ones reaches nongender-specific qualities buried deep within the self.

(2001: 4)

So while Woolf's figure of the androgyne subverts patriarchal binary thought, and acknowledges the complexity and multiplicity of selves that we contain, Potter's approach seems superficial and clichéd. In Woolf's own words, 'the great fish' of the essence of things 'who lives in the coral groves' will never be caught although one 'fling[s] words after it like nets' (ibid: 2).

However, Potter's apparently 'superficial' stance lies in contradiction to what is embedded within the music of the soundtrack, and here it is important to note that Potter co-wrote the music for the film. She says: 'We [Sally Potter and engineer/producer David Motion] went into a studio and I recorded on an eight-track all the tunes I could hear in my head' (Indiana 1993: 91). An analysis of this music that runs throughout much of the film demonstrates that the case against Potter may not be clear-cut at all; and for those that care to poke amongst the tangled musical layers of this film, quite a different message emerges, one that is at once both superficial and profound and, to put it bluntly, contradictory.

The music in the film is woven through a series of seven scenes and six reincarnations that span various historical periods. Death, Sex and Birth belong to the corporeal world, Poetry and Love to the world of the emotions, while Politics and Society are organisational constructs. The musical soundtrack for the film consists of the following thirteen musical pieces: 'Eliza', 'In the Garden', 'Ice', 'Pavanne', 'The Kiss', 'Broken Ice', 'The Poem', 'The King's Tulips', 'After the Battle', 'A Change of Sex', 'The Maze', 'Eye to Eye' and 'Coming'; plus two pieces not included on the CD and not given credit in the film: 'Where E'er You Walk' by Handel, and a nameless traditional folk melody sung while Orlando is in Turkey (at least, nameless in the credits).

'Eliza' and the 'Pavanne' ('Belle Qui Tiens Ma Vie') are both pieces from the sixteenth century. As the film begins we are drawn into the *mise-en-scène* – a stately Elizabethan manor house – by the song 'Eliza is the Fairest Queen', originally written by Edward Johnson in 1591. Denis Stevens, in his article 'Music in Honour of Queen Elizabeth I', describes the original setting:

The fourth day's entertainment at Elvetham included a charming song for soprano and four instruments by Edward Johnson. It was performed with

appropriate actions and gestures, and 3 contemporary accounts record that 'this spectacle and musicke so delighted her Majesty, that shee desired to see and hear it twice over'.

(1960: 698–9)

In the film, Queen Elizabeth I is played by the male actor Quentin Crisp and the main character Orlando (who begins the film as a man) is played by the female actor Tilda Swinton. So from the moment the film begins, an astonishing mix of cross-dressing, cross-gender and cross-sexual references abound.

In this first scene it is night and through the burning lanterns we hear a singing voice. There is a peculiar quality to this voice: is it female or male? The vocal range would suggest a soprano but the timbral resonance denotes something quite different. As the camera pans across the scene it finally settles upon the physical presence of a countertenor, played by pop singer Jimmy Somerville, standing in a small boat. We then see a larger, more opulent boat being rowed towards the jetty of a large mansion. The song text brings to our attention the fact that 'Fair Eliza', Queen Elizabeth I, is the boat's most important occupant:

Eliza is the fairest Queen
That ever trod upon the green.
Eliza's eyes are blessed stores,
Enduring peace, subduing wars.
O blessed be each day and hour
Where sweet Eliza builds her bower.
Come again, sweet Nature's treasure.
Whose looks hold Joy's exceeding measure.

However, the image presented as the boat comes closer belies the image presented to us in the song text. The Queen is old, her heavily powdered face lined and creased – and if she ever was 'fair', she certainly is no longer, nor do her looks 'hold Joy's exceeding measure'. Instead we see a resigned, dour face. These immediate contradictions and ambiguities between the film's visual track and its audio track are common throughout the film.

It is significant that the ambiguous voice of the countertenor is both the first and last thing we hear in the film, as Potter even adapted the screenplay, in part at least, to accommodate this idea. She says, 'I rewrote the ending so that the film would be bracketed by Jimmy' (Ehrenstein 1993: 6). The prominent singing voices that are heard in the film are those of the countertenor and an overdubbed female voice – which happens to be Sally Potter's own voice.

The way the musical score is manipulated in the film also creates a multiple web of ambiguity. In this opening scene the music begins with synthesized drones and brief electric guitar motifs that seem at odds with the pastoral scene presented of England in the late 1500s, a mismatch between the aural track and the visual track. At this initial point the music is extra-diegetic. Slowly and almost imperceptibly, the song 'Eliza is the Fairest Queen', beginning in a Dorian mode on D, fades in and merges with drones on A. As the visual image of the countertenor comes into view, the music becomes diegetic – or does it? Certainly, the singer is a part of the scene, but there is no sign of the instruments that faintly accompany, which is a play on the blurring of boundaries between the diegetic mode and the extra-diegetic mode. One other small point – perhaps coincidental but worth noting – is that the mode of the song itself is ambiguous, swinging between D Dorian and D Aeolian.

Musical ambiguity is abundant in this film, from expanses of musical silence where there is a sense that the ordinary sounds of the everyday become, in a Cagean way, part of the film's conscious music-scape, to other moments when the extra-diegetic music is so indiscernible, so indistinct, that a question again reappears: is this music we are hearing, or not? There are two basic types of music used in this film that I will refer to as 'external music' and 'internal music'. By differentiating between music which is a part of the intrinsic action and drama – connected with physical locality of place and responding to, and heightening, external stimuli – and music that is connected primarily to a character's inner emotional state, some significant aspects of the role of the music within this film can be revealed. The external music can be further subdivided thus:

- 1 Existing music from the actual historical time period (or place, in the case of the traditional folk singer in Turkey), such as 'Eliza is the Fairest Queen' or the 'Pavanne'. This music appears mostly diegetically.
- 2 Originally composed music, consisting of minimalist canons and ostinati with some time-period references – by time-period references, I refer to such things as the use of rippling piano octaves in 'The Maze', a favourite device of Romantic composers such as Liszt. This music sits as extra-diegetic.

Together these musics most often refer to the external world of Orlando – the events or activities in which s/he is involved.

The second type of music, the 'internal music', consists primarily of drones, supplemented by disembodied breathy female voices, rhythmic

female vocal chanting and electric guitar motifs. This type of music most often refers to the internal world of Orlando – revealing his/her emotional reaction to what is taking place, expressing Orlando's innermost desires and fears, and sometimes contradicting external impressions.

The pitch used for the drones is derived from a motif that begins on the pitch A and insinuates itself throughout much of the film. This three-note motif is taken from the opening song 'Eliza is the Fairest Queen', and the text set to this motif is the three syllables of the word 'Eliza' (Figure 1).

Figure 1: 'Eliza motif'



The 'Eliza motif' saturates this second type of music on both macro and micro levels. In this music that reveals the interior world of Orlando, the symbolic presence of the Queen is ceaselessly reiterated through the music. Orlando's relationship to the Queen is undoubtedly significant in the film, and three scenes highlight this:

- 1 The first time the Queen and Orlando meet, the Queen, who is preparing for a great feast in her honour, places her hands in a bowl of water (water being one of the greatest symbols of the feminine in mythologies across the globe), symbolising the ritual act of cleansing. As she does this, her gaze falls on Orlando kneeling before her, holding the bowl. Orlando steadfastly meets this gaze, revealing something of himself in the process. A lasting connection between the two is made in that very special moment. The Queen likes what she perceives in Orlando – his naivety – his innocence – his good looks – all these things summon feelings that are deep, and profound, latent mother instincts. At that point an unspoken understanding arises between these two, and although Orlando is clearly bemused and somewhat perplexed by the Queen, a mutual friendship nonetheless forges an enduring bond between the unlikely pair.
- 2 In the scene 'In the Garden', the Queen beckons for Orlando to kneel at her feet and she utters the words, 'Come. Your leg. I want you here in England with me [surely a reference to Woolf's book where Orlando was nearly sent overseas to war]. You will be the son

of my old age. The limb of my infirmity. My favourite. My mascot.' The Queen binds them together in the profound relationship of mother and son, and Orlando is to be her mascot – in other words, her symbolic representation.

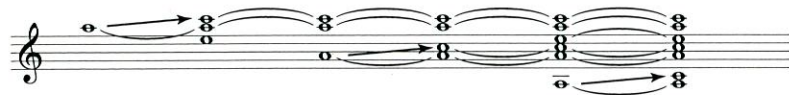
- 3 In one of the film's most powerful scenes, the Queen bestows on Orlando the gift of life. The setting is the rich opulence of her bedchamber, lit by the warm glow of a fire, where the Queen rests on her bed before beckoning to Orlando and drawing him up beside her. In this most intimate of moments, in this the most intimate of rooms, she bequeaths to Orlando the house and the estate on one condition – that he stay eternally young. So the Queen – symbolising the 'Great Mother' – accepts Orlando as 'the son of her old age' (possibly a biblical reference to Sarah in the book of Genesis), and in this role of surrogate mother bestows the gift of life upon him – but this gift of life is miraculous, for it is immortal.

While the story moves on to other places and other times, the musical score retains the memory of this extraordinary moment and the Queen has aural presence throughout much of the film. The 'Eliza motif' travels with Orlando across the vast historical landscape and carries Elizabeth I along with it, thus endowing the Queen herself with a kind of immortality as well. Thus, the androgyne is symbolised throughout the film on a deep, subliminal, aural level.

The music reinforces the significance of the relationship between the Queen and Orlando in the film and, in fact, discreetly insists that this relationship is *the* most powerful of all the relationships that Orlando has. As mentioned, much of the music that uses this 'Eliza motif' is tied to the internal world, reflecting the emotional state of Orlando as s/he passes through various lives. However, what is particularly interesting is that the 'Eliza motif' provides a solid foundation for Orlando's desire. Orlando's desire is communicated to us, the audience, through musical material based on the 'Eliza motif' combined, or alternating with, minimalist pulsing.¹

When 'Love' flashes onto the screen and Orlando first becomes aware of the somewhat mysterious and secretive Sasha, the drones using the first two notes of the 'Eliza motif' spread out from a single high A, to the third above on C, followed shortly thereafter by A to C an octave lower, and then another octave lower still. The movement from the A to the C is distinctive in all octave ranges (Figure 2). So a truncated and extended 'Eliza motif' becomes the basis for the drones.

¹ Pulsing is a technique sometimes used by minimalist composers, particularly Terry Riley and Steve Reich, who began using this technique in their works of the 1960s. It is a fast iteration of notes – usually in quavers – that remain on the same pitch. Other pulsing notes on other pitches often fade in and out to create a shimmering textural effect.

Figure 2: Augmentation of the 'Eliza motif'

As Sasha first comes into our view, B natural is added, thus completing the 'Eliza motif', but in this context the B makes a discordant interval of a minor second – a disquieting sound that intimates to us that trouble lies ahead. Breathy vocals are added and as Orlando becomes more intrigued by Sasha's presence, the 'Eliza motif' becomes more and more prominent in the vocals, both by the frequency of entries and by a rise in the dynamic level of this particular part within the mass of sound. The motif is repeated many times based on the tonic A, but when Orlando lays eyes on Sasha, who is both bold and beautiful, the motif is transposed up an interval of a fifth to E, representing perhaps the lightening of his spirits at the very sight of her (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Transposition of the 'Eliza motif'

When Orlando and Sasha escape together for a few hours on a sled pulled across the frozen waste by skaters, they stop for a moment and kiss. This first kiss is set against a musical background of pulsing (reminiscent of the music of Steve Reich), which on a more corporeal level represents the pulsing of blood in bodies through sexual arousal.

Sounds of female breathy voices that do not articulate words but remind of *jouissance* – the pre-symbolic play of the infant – are then added. These breathy voices reiterate the three notes of the 'Eliza motif' (altered to E, G and F – F sharp is changed to F natural) as they build in texture (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Fragmentation of the 'Eliza motif'

It is the music of desire, but for whom? The imagery may deceive us into thinking it is desire for Sasha, but the aural track, reiterating without words a permutation of the musical motif for Eliza, Orlando's Queen and surrogate mother – suggests something else as well. For underlying the sexual attraction that Orlando feels throughout the film for a variety of lovers is a desire for something more primal – a desire that is ultimately connected with the Queen Eliza, the giver of life.

It is significant that this female voice never uses words whose meanings enclose and confine, but rather wordless sounds, sounds that are free and open in meanings and possibilities. The desire that Orlando feels for his/her lovers over the passage of time is entangled with a deeper longing. Could this longing be for the time of completeness between mother and infant; desire for a time before the rupture and entry into the symbolic with the acquisition of language?

The Voice sings from a time before the law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation. The deepest, the oldest, the loveliest Visitation. Within each woman the first, nameless love is singing. In woman there is always, more or less, something of 'the mother' repairing and feeding, resisting separation [...]

(Cixous 1986: 93)

In the love scene later in the film between Orlando (now a woman) and Shelmerdine, the music is very similar to that of 'The Kiss'. The pulsing is again present, based on C, with the female breathy voice articulating the interval of a minor third – the first two notes of the 'Eliza motif' – over and over. The sounds overlap and fragment, almost as if the sense of corporeality in the image is so strong that, as the two naked bodies entwine, the voices that emanate from the extra-diegetic realm become, as if in response, disembodied and fractured.

The ending is where book and film decisively part company. Potter maintains that she was trying to grasp the central meaning of the book while bringing it up to the present time – Woolf's book finishes in her present day of the 1920s. In Woolf's version, Orlando gives birth to a son, thus perpetuating the status quo; Orlando retains his house but only by producing a male heir through the inheritance laws of the time. Potter, however, has Orlando give birth to a daughter, ensuring she loses the house and the inheritance, reworking Woolf's story into something that is, while positive, nonetheless remarkably idealistic.

In the final scene, as Orlando sits under the same tree that featured in the beginning of the film, she looks up and sees an angel hovering just

above the treetops, singing the song 'Coming'. It is a moment of euphoric bliss, declaiming the message of a utopia beyond sex, beyond gender:

I am coming! I am coming!
 I am coming through!
 Coming across the divide to you.
 In this moment of unity
 I'm feeling only an ecstasy
 To be here, to be now
 At last I am free –
 Yes – at last, at last
 To be free of the past
 And of a future that beckons me.
 I am coming! I am coming!
 Here I am!
 Neither a woman nor a man –
 We are joined, we are one
 With a human face
 We are joined, we are one
 With a human face
 I am on earth
 And I am in outer space
 I'm being born and I am dying
 I am free

Orlando has transcended the constraints imposed by sex and gender which, through the blurring of boundaries, can no longer enclose. The message declaimed loudly by the angelic countertenor is that culturally imposed gender boundaries and restraints can be overthrown – they no longer have the power to bind us. It is possible to reach inside and expose the one essential commonality that resides within all human beings.

There is no doubt that for many feminists the simplicity and naivety of Potter's utopia is problematic. However, a closer consideration of the musical material reveals something not apparent at surface level. The drones used in the formation of much of the music based on the 'Eliza motif' still run through this last song. Furthermore, the drones are still anchored on the pitch A – the opening pitch of the drones at the beginning of the film, more importantly the same pitch as the original 'Eliza motif', and the tonic for both. Further, the song 'Coming' frequently uses variants of the 'Eliza motif' extended and in retrograde. Finally, and significantly, this song, with its suggestively sexual title, ends with the soft intrusion of the principal motif of the music 'In the Garden'.

So here in this song of transcendence that is celebrating our essential oneness, we have direct musical references to the Queen herself and to the crucial scene that elevates Orlando as her mascot – her symbolic representation; the same Orlando whose desire, or so the music suggests, springs from the Source – built upon the 'Eliza motif'.

Cixous describes the essential bond between feminine writing and the mother as the source and origin of the Voice to be heard in all female texts:

Voice: milk that could go on forever. Found again. The lost mother [...]
 Eternity: is the voice mixed with milk.

(Cixous 1986: 93)

And it is in this pre-symbolic realm inhabited by the wordless babble of the infant that multiple meanings may be found. It is in this realm of wordless sensual pleasure that women can fully explore and accept themselves and 'delight in difference, in multiplicity, in continuous awareness of "the other" within the self' (Gilbert 1986: xv).

While on one level Potter's vision may be for a single utopia, the message carried on the music is a desire for something quite different; a desire that allows for multiple selves; a desire that is bound by the symbolism of the mother and infant in the time of the pre-symbolic – a time before language enclosed. It is the echo of that all-consuming, joyful, ecstatic communion with the Source. So perhaps what we hear buried in the music and carried from the first moment of the film to the last on the musical score is, in Cixous's words, a 'decipherable libidinal economy' – the feminine voice – a voice ultimately accessible to both males and females. Perhaps the true utopia can be found in the wondrous union of Mother and Child – in the pre-symbolic – that enables women (and men) to truly find themselves in the richness of multiple essences.

And so through the visual track and the aural track, Potter's central message is more than a little contradictory. On the one hand, with legerdemain it presents us with a superficial solution that balances precariously on the narrow and slippery ledge of essentialism; while on the other, at the same time it carries, literally on the voice of the filmmaker herself, a deeper message – a message that speaks of many selves, a celebration of difference, of plurality, and of the boundless joy and freedom that this promises. And all this carried on the most ineffable of mediums – music.



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