

Cinematic Prosthesis:

History, Memory and Sally Potter's *Orlando*

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In the heyday of figurative painting, it was customary to classify and evaluate works of art by their subject matter. This tendency is reflected by French chronicler of the arts André Félibien, writing in 1667 that “the most noble of all these [kinds of painting] is that which represents History in a composition of several figures” (qtd. in Duro 2). While the genre of historical painting in contemporary Western art has almost vanished, re-presentations of historical subjects in other forms of art, such as film, occupy very prominent positions. As filmmaker and film scholar Jeffrey Skoller suggests, “fiction and history are genres that signify in the same manner, producing the effects of self-contained verisimilitude” (xxii). Some movies, like Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Titanic* (1997), create their own verisimilar narratives, providing a mediated experience of official history shaping national and cross-national collective memory. Curiously, other films, such as *The Alamo* (John Lee Hancock, 2004) and *Miracle at St. Anna* (Spike Lee, 2008), despite having what seemed like the right ingredients and following the usual recipe, fail in all possible respects.

Movies created with some degree of independence from studio systems (either from major entertainment industries, like Hollywood, or from state-sponsored ones) tend to display more flexibility in form, content, and audience impact. Oftentimes, alternative cinema dealing with historical subjects strives to unsettle both historical and fictional verisimilitude. Skoller characterizes James Benning's *Utopia* (1998) as a film that “constructs history as a complex interplay between ‘what actually happened’ and the virtualities and imaginings to which such events give rise” (101). On a more mainstream end of the spectrum, Mabel O. Wilson discusses Jim Jarmush's *Mystery Train* (1989) in comparison to the re-presentations of official history in The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, Tennessee, concluding that the latter displays “static historical nar-

rative,” while the former with its “playful fusion of local myth, collective memory, and popular culture captures the polyvalent leitmotifs of the blues” (20).

The above examples address historical narratives from the perspective of film production; equally important is the examination of the effects of such narratives on the audience. The impact of movies on the formation of individual and collective memory cannot be understated. Anton Kaes suggests that “surpassing schools and universities, film and television have become the most effective (and paradoxically least acknowledged) institutional vehicles for shaping historical consciousness” (112). Rather than considering alternative production modes, in this article I intend to look at a particular alternative mode of reception. The mode in question was theorized by Alison Landsberg in her 2004 study *Prosthetic Memory*, exploring the process and effects of memory prosthesis in fiction and in reality, creating a more optimistic (and arguably, more constructive) approach than, for example, Kaes'.

In order to formulate a model of alternative spectatorship, I apply use Landsberg's theory of prosthetic memory to analyze Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel of the same name. The circumstances of *Orlando*'s production are quite unusual: the film is a co-production of the UK, the USSR, France, Italy and the Netherlands, and was filmed in the UK, Russia and Uzbekistan. The film is far from a conventional historical blockbuster. When discussing its funding, lead actor Tilda Swinton claims that “the Americans didn't understand it at all” (qtd. in Glaessner 13), hence the necessity of finding financing for the film within Europe. The subject matter of the film is equally far from that of a typical historical epic: the title character is a man who later becomes a woman, and who does not age (at our first encounter of Orlando in Elizabethan England he is sixteen; at the end of the novel, in 1928, she is thirty-six). Both the film and the novel span

four hundred years, from Elizabethan to twentieth century England. While Woolf attributes this to Orlando living in a different time than our clock time, Potter attempts no explanations, except for a mysterious invocation on Orlando by Queen Elizabeth in the beginning of the movie: “Do not fade. Do not wither. Do not grow old.” Orlando experiences four centuries of England’s history, transforming it into his/her own experiential archive.

Contrary to Orlando’s experience, prosthetic memories as defined by Landsberg are “memories of experiences through which [the rememberer] did not live” (25). As an example, she cites a short fiction film *The Thieving Hand* (J. Stuart Blackton, 1908). The plot of the film centers on a one-armed beggar who acquires a prosthetic arm, which, unbeknownst to him, previously belonged to a robber. Latent memories contained in the prosthetic arm force its new owner to repeat crimes committed in its previous incarnation, ultimately landing the beggar in jail. In addition to *The Thieving Hand*, Landsberg suggests *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982) and *Total Recall* (Paul Verhoeven, 1990) as two texts with examples of (literally) implanted, prosthetic memories.

Landsberg’s central thesis is that all mass media, mainstream or alternative, contain the potential of becoming such prosthetic memories (48). Landsberg, however, is not the first scholar to suggest this—Kaes presented a similar thesis in 1990, arguing that, for the most part, history experienced through cinema would most likely “overwhelm and colonize the audience’s historical imagination instead of stimulating and liberating it” (118). Searching for alternatives, he discusses three films—Alexander Kluge’s *The Patriot* (1980), Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985), and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg’s *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977)—as having “one thing in common: they defy the all-encompassing, homogenizing power of mass media and their control over public memory” (124). Kaes acknowledges that these films are “marginal phenomena,” yet he does not lament this fact; on the contrary, he suggests that “in today’s culture hope comes from the margins” (124).

Landsberg takes the idea of cinema’s influence on public memory much further. While Kaes sees most historical films as cluttering public memory with homogenized narratives (112), and alternative cinema only puncturing these narratives “in some small fashion” (124), Landsberg begins exploring the nature of memory prosthesis through cinema withholding value judgments. She suggests that the technologies of mass culture not only change the concept of an authentic experience (48), but also, through market mechanisms, make such experiences portable and transferable (27). Moreover, the vividness of film—achieved through means such as invisible editing, suspension of disbelief and

identification with the protagonist—“might affect [people] so significantly that the images would actually become part of their own archive of experience” (30). Thus, Orlando’s direct experience of centuries of history becomes a model for the effects of contemporary cinema: we all can obtain similar historical memories vicariously, through the process of cinematic prosthesis.

This observation raises the question of the authenticity of prosthetic memories. Initially, this question may seem to have a very obvious answer: these memories are implanted in the recipient, unconsciously and without prior consent; in Landsberg’s words, they defy “the power of biological logic and of ‘organic memory’” (28). Surely then, the recipients of such memories must get rid of them in order to reveal their true selves, as seen in, for example, the Wachowski brothers’ science-fiction blockbuster *The Matrix* (1999). Such a notion has been addressed within Western liberal philosophy most famously, perhaps, in Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, where he devises a thought experiment of the Experience Machine. This machine, through the use of neuropsychology, “would give you any experience you desired [...] you would think and feel you were writing a great novel, or making a friend, or reading an interesting book. All the time you would be floating in a tank, with electrodes attached to your brain” (42). Nozick proceeds with three reasons why one would not want to be plugged into such a machine: “First, we want to *do* certain things, not just have the experience of doing them. [...] A second reason for not plugging in is that we want to *be* a certain way, to be a certain kind of person. Someone floating in a tank is an indeterminate blob” (43, *emph. orig.*). Nozick’s final objection to such a machine is that the experiences would be man-made, predetermined and ready for our consumption—much like prosthetic memories are.

Landsberg addresses the problem of the authenticity of prosthetic memories, arguing that, contrary to claims made by both Baudrillard and Jameson, even people having mediated experiences, experience them as real (33). Landsberg proceeds with a number of different examples (‘experiential museums’, historical reenactments, historical fiction blockbusters) where prosthetic memories allow individuals “to experience history in a personal and very bodily way” by providing them “with the collective opportunity of having an experiential relationship to a collective or cultural past they did not experience” (33). Thus, it is possible to provide the first reply to Nozick’s three objections—while humans in the Experience Machine are stimulated to feel as though they are having the experiences they desire, in the case of prosthetic memories they are actually *having* the experiences related to prosthetic memories. Even if the acquisition of the memories leading to the experiences may seem inauthentic, the experiences themselves are indeed authentic.



Though perhaps the most conspicuous, the question of the authenticity of such memories is secondary to the question of their impact on the audience's subjectivity and the formation of collective memory. Traditionally, as suggested above by Kaes, all but fringe filmic narratives are used to 'colonize' viewers' historical imagination. *Orlando* is by no means a 'marginal phenomenon' (Glaessner reports a £6.5-million budget [13]), yet it provides alternatives to at least two kinds of homogenized narratives.

Challenging the first and most obvious of the homogenized narratives involves unsettling the mythologies of four hundred years of English history. A notable difference between Woolf's novel and Potter's film is that the latter deliberately tries to move away from the (ironic) historical-document feel of the former. Woolf employs techniques such as specific dates, uses of (fictional) primary sources (e.g. Orlando's conference of Dukedom is narrated from "the diary of John Fenner Brigge [...] His manuscript is full of burns and holes, some sentences quite unintelligible" [117]). Woolf's fictional biographer also makes numerous attempts to explain incongruities in Orlando's chronology (91–3) and even provides an index at the end of the novel (297–9).

Potter's treatment of history is different from Woolf's. She abandons exact dates in favour of half-centuries, puncturing the film's flow with intertitles: 1600—death; 1610—love; 1650—poetry; 1700—politics; 1750—society; 1850—sex; birth. (By contrast, in the novel, Orlando's son is born "on Thursday, March the 20th, at three o'clock in the morning" [Woolf 266].) Period music is mixed with a contemporary score, and the costumes and sets are very

stylized, created by the production designers using "only a few, typical objects from each period" (Glaessner 14). Finally, Potter herself admits that *Orlando* "is not a historical film. Orlando is a completely contemporary character" (14).

While in strict terms *Orlando* is not a historical film, it nevertheless deals with history. Potter explains the film as her attempt to address "an addiction [of] English culture to mythologies of the past" (qtd. in Glaessner 14). As Potter is working from Woolf's novel, these mythologies are already twice or thrice removed from their origin before reaching the viewer. Mainstream historical cinema, on the other hand, tries to fuse historical mythologies and filmic texts. Marc Ferro discusses four strata of American "visions of history": Protestant ideology, the Civil War, melting pot policies, and the reaction to melting pot policies, showing indelible links between official history, American myth and narrative cinema (146). Potter, contrary to the tradition of the historical cinema of Hollywood, aims to deconstruct the fusion of historical myth and the filmic text.

William Guynn, dwelling on Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (places of memory), states that "film can be a place of memory insofar as it engages the public in a collective recollection that revivifies or creates meaningful links between a past event and the identity of a social group in the present" (178). To Potter, the Elizabethan era is a particular point of origin for common conceptions of English identity, and the dramatic arc of the film is determined by the tension between the burden bestowed by the past, and Orlando's search for personal identity. Potter warns that vicarious memories, even (as defined by Landsberg)

when rightfully belonging to a particular ethnic group, can be excessively burdening. In the course of the film, according to Potter, “Orlando gradually [...] loses everything, but gains herself in the process” (qtd. in Glaessner 14). At the film’s conclusion (in distinction to that of the novel), Orlando has a daughter, writes her own biography, and is seen visiting the estate she lost. Potter uses voice-over narration reminiscent of the opening of Woolf’s novel to describe this unburdening:

She—for there can be no doubt about her sex—is visiting the house she finally lost for the first time in over a hundred years... She has lived for four hundred years and hardly aged a day; and because this is England, everyone pretends not to notice. But she has changed. She is no longer trapped by destiny. And, ever since she let go of the past, she found her life was beginning.

The second kind of prosthetic memory in *Orlando* is that of a search for personal identity. While the exploration of historical and national identity is dictated by the historical (or mock-historical) nature of the novel, an even greater identity probe in *Orlando* revolves around gender. The film complicates conventions of gender and sexuality, particularly through casting: Orlando is played by the infamously polyamorous Tilda Swinton; Elizabeth I by English gay icon Quentin Crisp; and another prominent gay figure—singer Jimmy Somerville—appears as a castrato and an angel. The iconography of the film furthers this ambiguity—androgynous Swinton resembles portraits of the young Queen Elizabeth (despite a completely different description of Orlando by Woolf); the sense of androgyny is furthered by the costumes: men look quite effeminate, while Orlando’s daughter in the very end of the movie, prior to revealing a braid she wears, could be mistaken for a boy. It is important to note that to Potter “*Orlando* is not so much about femininity and difference as about Woolf’s notion of an essential self that lies beyond the gender” (qtd. in Glaessner 14). After Orlando undergoes a sex transformation during the second trance, she looks at her now female body in the mirror and utters, “Same person, no difference at all. Just a different sex.”

One of the most influential feminist critiques of mainstream narrative filmmaking has been formulated by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” where she argues that the techniques of narrative filmmaking privilege an active male gaze (that of the spectator as well as the characters on screen), while the female characters are either constantly fetishized or constantly punished (348–9). Defying one of the most prominent conventions of filmmaking, Orlando often gazes back at the spectator, making her the possessor of the active gaze. Moreover, even though working from Woolf’s stylistically rich material,

Potter rewrites most of the dialogue and voiceover, insisting on giving Orlando her own voice, and making Orlando, as suggested above, a contemporary character in non-contemporary settings. Such a quest to establish a character identity that defies the confines of gender, property and cultural myths presents a prominent challenge to patriarchy in cinema and historiography.

Landsberg suggests that in “the modern era, the urgency of memory projects and remembering is an attempt less to authenticate the past than to generate possible courses of action in the present” (45). *Orlando* seems to be a history-based film striving to let go of the past, a prosthetic memory permitting one to redefine identity beyond gender and cultural mythologies. While Kaes saw memory prosthesis through mass media as leading towards, quoting Bruno Strauss, “swiftly spreading identical memories over the earth” (112), filmic texts may also, as my study of *Orlando* highlights, lead to the creation of alternative modes of reception, concurring with Landsberg’s suggestion that films as prosthetic memories “may become the grounds for political alliances and the production of new, potentially counterhegemonic public spheres” (34). Thus, the concept of prosthetic memories provides the possibility of not only seeing non-mainstream movies as containing such a counterhegemonic potential, but also of making the audiences central in choosing alternatives to official history and homogenized narratives.

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