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THE PHOTOGRAPH, THE PORTRAIT AND
ORLANDO'S DOUBLE NATURE

From the time she worked on her first draft of *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf was interested in the selection of photographs and paintings to insert into her work¹. The fake biography was to include an iconographic apparatus which would mirror not only Orlando's chameleon-like personality, but also the character of Vita Sackville West, the woman who had inspired the novel.

The photograph, in fact, reveals the tie between the literary character, who swings between the sexes, and the object of Virginia Woolf's desires. The ambiguous gender of Woolf's fictional protagonist would be empowered by the image because through the photographs his referent in the real world would appear for the first time. However, the homosexual liaison is at one and the same time made manifest and concealed. By appearing as Orlando, Vita is transfigured into a literary character – essentially, a fake. This process of objectification protects her by placing Woolf's erotic desire and West's androgyny into a separate, self-sufficient reality, a work of art where "Woolf can love Vita in Orlando. She can love her in disguise" (Moore: 1995, 186).

On the one hand, the picture acts as an allegory and the mask of a personality. However, photography is also a means of unveiling or 'undressing' the subject. A portrait is, in fact, a symbol of a predatory act:

To photograph is to violate them [the sitters], by seeing them as they never can see themselves, by having a knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed (Sontag: 1977, 81)

¹ "While Virginia was writing it [*Orlando*], my brother and I went with her more than once to pace the long galleries [of Knole], and she would ask us, pointing at a picture, 'Who's that? What was she like?', and as we never knew, she would invent a name and a character on the spot, so that we came to guess something of her intention." (Nicolson: 2001, 91)

Not only Vita Sackville West, but Orlando himself, in the novel, becomes the victim of the esoteric power of representation. Through the picture, Vita is ironically transformed into a fetish, while the literary protagonist is entrapped in a more dangerous situation, since his portrait attracts the attentions of an ambiguous and threatening character: the Archduchess Harriett. This noblewoman, who will later turn out to be an Archduke, falls in love with Orlando through a painting which sums up all the charm and androgyny of Woolf's creation. Not surprisingly, Harriett soon finds a strong similarity between the male subject in the portrait and the features of one of her closest female relatives: "she had seen his picture and it was the image of a sister of hers who was – here she guffawed – long since dead." (Woolf: 1993, 78)

Orlando's changeable personality becomes apparent in the painting and reveals how every representation implies a certain kind of discovery. The protagonist's portrait makes the true nature of his sexuality clear and, above all, the female part of his sexuality, his other, 'buried' self. Like Dorian Gray's, Orlando's image thus becomes a ritual which gives shape to the darker side of his identity. This happens thanks to the mystical relationship which is set up between the painter or the photographer and his sitter. The portrait gives rise to a process whereby the subject becomes more than human, a process which reveals "the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man. The photograph [or the painting] thus taken has been almost the embodiment of a prayer" (Cameron: 1890, p.158), as Julia Margaret Cameron, one of the most famous Victorian photographers, as well as Virginia Woolf's great aunt, so succinctly put it.

The writer will be strongly influenced by the style of her photographs and her aesthetic conception (Gillespie: 1993, 117-120). In the pictures appearing in *Orlando* at least two fundamental characteristics of Cameron's own work become clearly visible: the sacred value ascribed to the portrait and the mixture of artefact and reality which pervade her allegorical photographs². Virginia Woolf chooses the paintings from Knole, adding to their historical meaning a symbolical one: she transforms them into effigies in order to visualize the phys-

² "(...) while earlier women had seen their subjects as an integral part of their surroundings, (...) Cameron displaced them, making village girls into characters of Arturian legend, picturing her servants as holy virgins, sanctifying or making heroes of women who, in Fanny Jocelyn's or Harriette St Claire's photographs, would have been indistinct figures, hovering behind the main family group" (Williams: 1986, 17)

ical shape of her imaginary character; she analyses the portraits in search of features that are faithful to her idea of Orlando and capable of mirroring his ambiguous sexuality. As a result, every male portrait of Orlando is characterized by callow youthful faces, baroque clothing with silken ribbons and embroidery – thin, fragile, markedly androgynous figures.

Not only is this evident in the painting ‘Orlando as a Boy’, where the youth of the character justifies his female features, but also in the following illustration ‘Orlando as Ambassador’, in which the dual nature of his gender identity is highlighted. Here, the thin moustache creates an ironic contrast with the pale complexion and the delicate shape of Orlando’s brow. The soft taffeta suit and the long curly hair seem to predict visually the transformation of Orlando into a woman which is to follow. The power of the portrait immortalizes the potential sexual metamorphoses of the character. These iconographic details can be noticed in another male image in the biography: the fake portrait of Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Orlando’s lover in the XXth century. Again, the man’s face seems child-like, but his look betrays the mature attitude of an adult; his dress and posture are typically male, even though his gentle, delicate features remind us of the sensual spirituality of several Pre-Raphaelite female subjects. The expression of the androgynous nature of Shelmerdine’s character is realized through the harmonic coexistence of contrasting elements within the same image.

In the filmic adaptation of the novel, Sally Potter reproduces the visual ambiguity of these male portraits by means of static shots and close-ups of those characters who best embody the image of a changing, polymorphous type of sexuality. This is the reason for the extremely close-up shots of Orlando and, most of all, of Quentin Crisp³, disguised as Elizabeth I. The continual use of this technique functions as a ‘reminder’ of gender instability throughout the film. The mystical pallor of the paintings from Knole, which recalls the works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti or Millais, is transformed by Sally Potter into the artificial shades of a carnival mask. The unnatural make-up which is used for the Queen’s face, along with the splendour of her clothes, creates a baroque image where the aesthetics of

³ Quentin Crisp, actor, writer and gay icon with his autobiographical book, *The Naked Civil Servant*, published in 1968, embodies the perfect androgynous type that Sally Potter wanted to play Elizabeth I. “[Peter Travers]: What made you decide to use Crisp? [Sally Potter]: Just a moment of divine inspiration. And once thought of, it was impossible to let go. He is the true queen of England.” (Travers:1993, 90).

excess coexist with a taste for transvestitism and allegory. The close-up of Quentin Crisp seems to anticipate the elaborate effeminacy that will reappear later in the shot of an XVIIIth century Farinelli⁴. Here, too, a visual, filmic approach is diametrically opposed to the one that characterises the male illustrations in the novel; but the focus on gender instability is ever present nonetheless. The recurrence of references to transvestitism in these shots is linked to one of the main sources of inspiration for the novel: the legend of The Ladies of Langollen. The story of the two Irish noblewomen who lived disguised as men for fifty years is explicitly recalled in Virginia Woolf's diaries, when she states her intentions with regard to Orlando:

Suddenly, between twelve and one I conceived a whole fantasy to be called "The Jessamy Brides"... Two women, poor, solitary at the top of a house... on the ladies of Langollen... (Nicolson: 1977, 429)

The symbolic background of the literary work is presented from the very beginning, through the image of a masquerade, a vehicle for androgynous sexuality expressed principally through the mystifying power of representation. Thus the pictorial aesthetics of the scenes in the film referred to above reproduce the Woolfian concept of gender as the interpretation and acting out of different sexual identities, and is strongly linked to the burlesque subtext of the iconographic apparatus chosen for the novel.

The cross-dressing of Quentin Crisp and Tilda Swinton, in fact, reproduces the ironic use of transvestitism which characterises a photograph taken by Vanessa Bell for her sister's novel. In the picture 'The Russian Princess as a Child', the writer's niece, Angelica, is wrapped in sumptuous clothes, and the oval of her face is surrounded by a luminous halo of white pearls, while the girl's eyes are mystically turned to the sky.

The illustration, a mixture of photograph and collage, combines the ethereal spirituality of Julia Margaret Cameron's costume portraits with the parodic conception of photography Vanessa Bell was experimenting with: "I feel that the subject matter of a photograph should be a little absurd" (Bell: 1981, 13). Angelica's youth ensures that her disguise will be seen as playfulness, but in other circumstances the

⁴ The term is commonly used to define castrato singers after the success of Carlo Broschi, alias Farinelli. The Italian Opera soprano became soon famous not only in Italy, Austria and Spain, but also in Great Britain since he first sang in London in October 1734. (McGeary: 2004, 1-15)

mask can represent an imposition by human society, especially when the subject of the image is a woman. In this case, the portrait will capture both the unease of the sitter and the invasive nature of unwanted representation. A similar situation arises in one of the most static sequences of the film, when Lady Orlando becomes the victim of Addison and Pope's misogynist remarks. As soon as the poets define the woman: "as a beautiful, romantic animal who should be adorned in furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds" (Potter: 1993, 46). Orlando reacts with silent disappointment, but her feelings are difficult to tame and are in fact clearly evident in the close-up of her angry face. The protagonist is immortalized in the passive, useless and unmoving role which the outside world attributes to all women against their will, and her fixed gaze into the camera underline the feelings of anxiety and pain that dominate the scene. This kind of static shot seems to force Orlando into a position which is completely different from, if not opposed to, her nature. An analysis of the first illustration of Orlando as a woman clearly brings to light several similarities with this sequence. Even though Vita's glance brims with feminine sensuality, it is also veiled with fear and uncertainty. In a letter to Harold Nicholson, Sackville West will openly declare her feelings of embarrassment when posing as Orlando in Lenare's studio:

I was miserable, draped in an inadequate bit of pink satin with all my clothes slipping off, but V was delighted and kept diving under the black cloth of the camera to peep at the effect (Glendinning: 1984, 38)

Again, in this episode – albeit with less dramatic tones than in the filmic counterpart – part of the anxiety that the power of representation and, more especially, photographic art in general can produce is clearly evident. The camera lens is, by its very nature, the sublimated version of a weapon. It can reproduce the sitter truthfully, but may also betray his inner nature; it can give birth to the simulacrum of an identity, or to its fake. The dangerous nature of the photographic portrait resides in the way it can create a double, an independent and deeply symbolic image of its subject. In addition, it is worthwhile remembering that there is a further level of ambiguity, typical of the photographic image, namely the coexistence of the purely mimetic nature of the photograph and the possibility of creating images that are illusory:

photographs are, of course, artefacts. But their appeal is that they also seem [...] unpremeditated slices of the real. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real (Sontag: 1977, 43)

The art of the portrait art thus brings with it the same ironic potential that Orlando sees in the subversive use of clothing. The protagonist dresses up, 'acting out' the sexuality which is more representative of his character at that specific time. In the same way, Vita embodies the most faithful image of Orlando: from an icon of feminine seductiveness to a free, independent and fully realised woman of the XXth century. As far as fashion is concerned, though, photography is a more suitable way of representing Orlando's double personality, since the portrait does not need to be changed or manipulated in any way to become a plurireferential object. The photographic image is itself ambiguous, and Virginia Woolf exploits this characteristic of it, transforming the illustrations of the novel into emblems of the protagonist's androgynous identity.

The film adaptation of the novel also reflects a similar, conscious use of representational devices which exalt the ironic iconographic apparatus of the novel. Through a strongly pictorial style, Sally Potter creates scenes which reproduce the optical illusion of a *trompe l'oeil* (Degli Esposti: 1996).

When the protagonist and Euphrosyne pose under the painting of Orlando's parents, the shot reveals an image laden with irony. This stems not only from the reversed sexual roles of the real characters with regard to those depicted in the portrait, but also from the double nature of the whole representation. Orlando's position, for instance, is ridiculous, because in the same scene the cinema audience sees a painting which is its mirror image, its double. Orlando's androgyny is affirmed through an image which is able to include his hidden side, the 'negative' of his identity.

Another element of parody in this scene is the image of the protagonist's fiancée. Her dress and her position are different from those of Orlando's mother, and recall the features of one of the most satirical illustrations of the novel: Archduchess Harriett's portrait. The painting, originally depicting Mary, the 4th Duchess of the Sackvilles, is not particularly ridiculous in itself, but when associated with a bisexual character and a cross-dresser transforms the painting into a caricature of pre-established sexual roles and gives a clear indication of Woolf's ability to create new parodic meanings through the artefacts of representation. By establishing a simile between this painting and the image in the film, the director attributes the sexual ambiguity of Harriett to Euphrosyne's role, thus creating a new icon of Orlando's androgyny within the sequence. Consequently, the protagonist finds his "gender bending" highlighted not only by the portrait of his parents above him, but also by the girlfriend standing at his side.

One of the last scenes of the film stresses once again the funda-

mental role of the portrait in defining both Orlando's nature and the attitude that the outside world has towards him. During this scene, set in 1992, the protagonist comes back to Knole – the mansion he has finally lost – and he looks at his portrait as a young XVIIth century Lord as part of a group of tourists.

In this episode, two different camera shots alternate. The first captures Orlando among the Japanese visitors, while they are taking pictures of the painting. The following one shows Tilda Swinton from behind and hence reveals that the subject of the portrait is the protagonist himself. For the first time since the beginning of the film, Orlando's male and female identities appear simultaneously in the same scene. This detail seems to strengthen the ontological value of the portrait to such a degree that it confers on it the dignity of an existence almost independent from its human model and counterpart.

The painting becomes the twin, the double of the protagonist and the use of two opposite shots stresses the increased power of the image over the real character. In the first scene, in fact, the camera's point of view coincides with the position of the painting and clearly shows that the subject of the tourists' pictures is the portrait: Orlando's copy, not the real protagonist. The amateur photographers do not even seem to notice the strong similarity between the woman's features and those of the person depicted in the portrait.

Representation has almost usurped reality: "our era prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, the appearance to being" (Feuerbach: 1843, 50). Even though the predominance of the image can be a real danger for individual identity, in Orlando's case we notice, on the contrary, a sort of liberation. His double identity, which was never fully accepted by society, finds in the pictorial image a chance to reveal itself (openly). The voice off, which continues in the following scene, argues that Orlando has changed:

She's no longer trapped by destiny. And ever since she let go of the past, she found her life was beginning (Potter: 1993, 61)

The painting exorcises Orlando's otherness, his androgynous nature. By recognising herself in a male portrait, the protagonist, as a contemporary woman, finally takes possession of her personality and starts to live it more serenely.

This renewed self-consciousness, granted by Orlando's confrontation with the portrait and the harmonious feeling arising from this encounter, recalls the effect produced in the novel by one of the character's habits, that of observing the world from the viewpoint of

Knole. The description of Orlando appearing at the window in a meditative mood recurs frequently in the literary work. This image is one of the main emblems of perception and the square perimeter of the window is reminiscent of a painting or the frame of a photograph. As a result, the episodes where a similar representation occurs work as snapshots of the protagonist's identity. They are the most static and thoughtful moments of the novel, when Orlando casts his eyes across the world and, metaphorically, looks at himself. Both on a narrative and a symbolic level, the image of Orlando at the window is strongly linked with photography and its ability to capture and the interiority of its subject. A typical pose of Victorian female portraits, which reveals the sacrificial role reserved for women during that age, becomes for Orlando the icon of his clear vision of his identity and of the world surrounding it.

The sudden sense of revelation that he seems to experience at times such as these comes through clearly in the last sequence of the film. Here the protagonist appears in a close-up through her daughter's video camera, just as if Orlando were posing for a family portrait. Her features convey a sensation of quiet complicity, and the static image shows fully the sense of internal calm the character has finally achieved. In this way, Orlando's daughter embodies the visionary power of the photographer and of the future film director. The similarity of the protagonist and the last person to represent her, along with the understanding between them, allows the final image to transmit the ecstatic sense of epiphany of Woolfian "moments of being". Moreover, the pictorial style of the amateur camera shot seems to stress the natural evolution of photography into a series of images on film. Film, in fact, is able to mix the static, iconic nature of the portrait with the fluidity of the real world, thereby mirroring Woolf's own narrative style.

In the cinematographic image the iconographic apparatus of the novel and the literary text finally become a whole, but the coexistence of different expressive forms in the film is not the only element which enables Sally Potter to faithfully adapt the text. What makes the cinema a valid means for representing Orlando is, above all else, its similarity with the literary character and the double structure of the novel itself. The dynamic nature of the filmic image mirrors the character's ability to change gender and thus emphasizes the irony of the illustrations which appear in the original text.

The chance of recreating portraits within the film, through the use of static shots and close-ups, allows the director to symbolize Orlando's androgynous nature without betraying Virginia Woolf's aims. Thus cinematographic art translates the writer's desire to exteriorise

Orlando's consciousness by fixing it into images, capturing the double nature of the protagonist thanks to the ambivalence of the filmic representation itself.

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