

THE SOUNDTRACK OF *ORLANDO* AS A MICROCOSM OF POTTER'S FILMIC ADAPTATION

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Abstract : This study analyses the soundtrack of the film *Orlando* (1992), directed by Sally Potter, a recreation of the novel by the same title, written by Virginia Woolf (1928). Despite the fact that Potter and Woolf have lived in different times, both focused on matters of gender and, each in her own way, challenged the hegemonic power, denouncing the role of women as marginal and silent figures in a repressive patriarchal society. The soundtrack of *Orlando* can be viewed as a microcosm of the film, where the androgynous angel, who sings the *Coming* song, might be suggesting a conflict between opposing forces embodied by its hybrid character.

Keywords: audiovisual translation, filmic adaptation, *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf, Sally Potter.

Introduction

Living in a world between wars, the novelist and essayist, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), suffered the influence of her age, especially if one takes into account that her essay, *A room of one's own*, was published in 1929, one year after her novel *Orlando* came out. So the publication of those twin books coincided with the end of the First World War, a period characterized by a clash of old values and disillusionment. Besides that, during the war period, the growing power of women became visible, since they had to earn a living and try to substitute their partners that had gone to the battle field.

After the war, however, the old patriarchal system denounced women of usurping man's power, but females were more conscious of their importance in the labor force and fought for their right to voice their own opinions. They were bound to revolutionize the realm of their representation in society and did not want to get restrict to the sphere of the domestic space of their own home, any more. It was high time for them to fight for ruling public spaces as well (Pearce, 1991).

This thirst of freedom and autonomy are traces present in the essay *A room of one's own*, but also in the novel *Orlando*, and in Sally Potter's film, having the latter appeared at the end of the twentieth century. Same feminist concerns, but different artists, different ages, different semiotic languages.

Woolf's *A room of one's own* and *Orlando* as twin books that inspired Potter

Virginia Woolf believed that women had to have a voice. It would be just a matter of opportunity and time for the voice of women writers to be heard:

My belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the crossroads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. This opportunity, as I think, it is now coming within your power to give her. For my belief is that if we live another century or so- (...) and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and courage to write exactly what we think (...) then the opportunity will come (Woolf, 1992: 113-114).

In this essay, written to be conveyed as a lecture at a school of girls, Virginia Woolf points out relevant concepts that work as the backbone of the novel *Orlando*. A relevant hypothesis defended by the author in this essay is that great minds are androgynous, and the protagonist that stars in the film and, also in the novel *Orlando*, illustrates such a concept:

A great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. (...)
The androgynous mind is resonant and porous; it transmits emotion without impediment (Woolf, 1992: 98).

A room of one's own, besides exploring the possibilities of an androgynous mind, shows Woolf's concern with feminine tendencies, since the text deals with the obstacles and prejudices that have hindered women writers for centuries. On the other hand, hypothesis and gender concepts defended by Woolf in this essay are embodied by the protagonist of *Orlando*, in a fantasy novel that traces the character's search for his or her own identity. But is there a proper identity to be sought for, in a world where splitting identities seem to give the tone? This is the question that not only Virginia Woolf asks herself in her novel, but also Sally Potter seems to pose in her film.

A splitting personality at the core of the soundtrack

The song *Coming*, by Sally Potter, Jimmy Sommerville and David Motion is an integral part of the soundtrack of Sally Potter's *Orlando*; it deals with themes connected to sexual liberty and the androgynous condition, thus helping to construct the final scene of *Orlando* in the voice of the Sommerville Angel, a post-modern device added by Sally Potter in her filmic adaptation. The semantic force of that song plays with elements such as division and unity,

past and future, masculinity and femininity, earth and cosmic space, birth and death. So, the song can be seen as a melody of contradictory elements, in search for a fusion that expresses wisdom:

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
(Potter, 1994: 62).

The angel celebrates the breaking of ties with time and space, the duality of gender and the ability to unite man and woman in a single being. So, the film emphasizes the androgynous theme, which is also central in Virginia Woolf's work. This androgynous figure hovers in the air, between Lady Orlando and her daughter, located between the sky and the earth. It floats in space and time, occupying an ambiguous position, which seems to suggest the search for a possible identity or identities, a theme related to the concept of gender. In the film, Jimmy Sommerville, who sang for Queen Elizabeth, four hundred years earlier, also sings, in the contemporary

epoch, when playing the part of the angel (Shaughnessy, 1996: 45). This feminine tone shows the fluid subjectivities of the film, thus expressing both the masculine and feminine.

The representation of the angel, which invades the final scene, is a meta-cinematic post-modern means by which the methods of the creative process of the actual film itself are revealed. Perhaps, it deals with a dramatic strategy that leads the audience to reflect upon the impossibility of filming Virginia Woolf's text such as it is (Shaughnessy, 1996: 49). This scene leaves the narrative of the film open, suspended, like the angel itself.

The inclusion of music in the film is an act of recreation of Woolf's novel and can be considered a diegetic element; that means an element, which is part of the narrative, connecting the song with whatever is happening on the screen. In 1953, before the critic Metz imported such a concept to film theory, the term 'diegesis' had been used to describe a story 'which is re-told'; a synonym of 'história' or 'histoire' or 'story', refers, in the cinema, to that which is represented; or to all the meaningful elements of the story, including the actual narrative, the fictional setting, the characters and the narrated events. (Stam, 1999: 38)

This diegetic element in the film is the singing angel, singing the story of an equally androgynous protagonist. The post-modern subjectivity is implicit in this visual impact of the novel, which tries to express through images the stream of consciousness of a splitting protagonist; so a fragmented subjectivity is shown on the screen by a camera that works as a story-teller. Commenting on the visual impact that Virginia Woolf's novel had on her own reading the book for the first time, Sally Potter explained:

When I first read *Orlando* as a teenager, I remember quite clearly the experience of watching it in my mind's eye, as if it were a film. The experience was visual (...). The process of adaptation was, of course, not as simple as I had anticipated. But my first instinct was that the book worked primarily through imagery, and was therefore eminently cinematic (Potter, 1994: ix).

Consequently, the visuality of the novel has been adapted to the film, and the presence of the melody sung by a subversive angel implies identity instability. The androgynous angel, at the centre of these anti-illusionist themes, conforms to the actual construction of the filmic narrative, since Orlando, who assumes a primarily masculine identity, is played by the actress Tilda Swinton, who also has an androgynous appearance. On the other hand, a homosexual male plays the part of the Queen; and Lady Orlando's companion, the gypsy (She)lmerdine, contains in his own name, the opposite gender (she), thus subverting the conventions that fix gender relations (Potter, 1994).

With the presence of the androgynous angel, an alternative narrative emerges to challenge the canonic model dominant in the cinema, and, as in Brecht's theatre, this new narrative determines a certain distance with the audience, destroying any illusion that the viewer is watching a film. So, the moment when the angel sings 'Coming', at the end of the story, and when the video camera substitutes the pen used by the protagonist at the beginning of the film, Orlando's gaze insistently interacts with the camera, thus reminding the viewers that they are in the cinema, watching a film.

But what is illusion? What is reality? Taking into consideration that the post-modern era is the media age, and that what is shown on camera seems as real as an event in everyday life, it is possible to conclude that the electronic images can be seen as another form of reality, which blurs the limits between fact and fiction, which proposes many levels of 'reality'.

In fact, the aura of a work of art can be, in a way, somewhat changed as a result of mass reproduction. Jean Baudrillard even notes that post-modern culture "is dominated by 'simulacro', a word originating from Plato, which refers to the copy with no original". Thus, today's experience of art is in the form of mass reproduction, challenges a different kind of public reception, and in the simulacro, the copy, or the image itself takes the place of the convention so-called 'real' (Baudrillard *apud* Allen, 2000: 182-3).

At the end, a video camera is held by a child, Orlando's daughter, in the film, and the protagonist's last gaze at the camera is accompanied by the song *Coming*, sung by the angel. In the final scene, when the child appears filming, it is as if she wanted to transmit to the viewer a meta-communication about the act of filming itself. A view of the contemporary amateur's images presented from the point of view of a child, whose art form is spontaneous. This theme of liberty is expressed by the angel's song, and also by Sally Potter's recreation of Virginia Woolf's novel.

So, the story ends in the same way as it started: as a path to personal development and search for liberty. As for Orlando's final appeal, 'Look!' that might be a way of asking the viewer's attention to Woolf's novel, and also, to Potter's film. And it is possible to observe that the actor Sommerville, who embodies the figure of the angel, not only witnessed the moment when Orlando received the mansion from Queen Elizabeth I, because he had sung a song at the beginning of the film, but now also witnesses the last instant in which Orlando bequeaths the family property. Then the same actor witnesses losses and gains and seems to say to the audience that "Life is winning and losing". Unlike the novel, with the loss of property, that the protagonist has a male heir and keeps the mansion, Sally Potter's Orlando severs the family lineage, passing the ancient house – which represents colonial power, the weight of tradition and English nobility – into the hands of strangers. But Sally Potter seems to imply that the house representing the past, the English tradition of history and literature, should be left behind:

The present time endorses all of this, including the androgynous appearance of Sommerville, who sings these values, wishing to establish new paradigms. Potter's Orlando, brought forward into our time, is not a poet, but a writer. She is no longer the mistress of a great house. This is viewed more as a liberation than as a loss, since the past is seen as a trap, like something which strictly reinforces inappropriate gender identities (Ferris & Waites, 1999: 114).

The protagonist of Sally Potter's film needs neither marriage nor offspring, being capable of leaving behind her class consciousness and exalting in the idea of sexual ambivalence. In the words of Sommerville, this sexual ambivalence appears, especially, when the angel says: "Here I am! / Neither a woman or a man", because then, that figure seems to be completely liberated. Finally, a voiceover can be heard, and that is the last song of the film.

In the final sequence, when Orlando's daughter films her mother sitting on the roots of an oak tree, the viewer realizes that the future, in the film, overcomes its literary past, making it clear that Sally Potter's narrative, born of a novel, has managed to transcend it. So, in the same way, the film is surpassed by a video-camera held in the trembling hands of a child; the final view is that of the next generation in harmony with the angel's song of freedom.

Final reflections

The song *Coming* in the film, celebrated by the figure of an angel, is an icon of freedom, inspired by Virginia Woolf's twin books, *A room of one's own* and *Orlando*. Sally Potter and Virginia Woolf, both tried to break free of sex and class restraints, turning that angel into a vivid sign of the sexless, timeless mind, not trapped within social feminine or masculine constructs of gender.

Orlando's soundtrack and that angelic vision, at the end of the film, come together to surprise the audience with a last gaze. A gaze that celebrates the androgynous mind, with its creative and positive power associated with it. This gaze points to the role of gender performance in a world where parody manages to deconstruct the male domination of patriarchy.

In sum, it may be said that the film is a contemporary adaptation that uses postmodern devices to revisit the novel and, at the same time, to go beyond its source of inspiration. The target audience, challenged by Sally Potter's fairy tale, has intermittently had the op-

portunity to interact with the camera and thus reflect on social and political matters proposed by the mythical character of *Orlando*. Irony and good humor have proved to be the spice of such filmic parody where colonialism and gender can be seen as seminal topics.

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