

# Postfeminism and Sally Potter's Orlando

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SVEUČILIŠTE U RIJECI  
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET

Lara Božić

Postfeminism and Sally Potter's *Orlando*

Diplomski rad

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SVEUČILIŠTE U RIJECI  
FILOZOFSKI FAKULTET  
ODSJEK ZA ANGLISTIKU

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Postfeminism and Sally Potter's *Orlando*

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Diplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i pedagogije

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## **Abstract**

This thesis offers an analysis of Sally Potter's cinematic adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*, with a particular focus on the depiction and exploration of postfeminist themes within the film. Since there is not a unilaterally accepted definition of postfeminism, this thesis tries to account for all the different classifications associated with the term. The initial section provides a brief historical overview of postfeminism, showcasing the emergence of the term, as well as the societal structures associated with it. Also, it discusses the relationship between postfeminism and third wave feminism as both movements succeed (or even appear as a reaction to) second wave feminism, and thus provide a great insight into why and how certain ideas emerged. Furthermore, it investigates the intersection of postfeminism with film theory, drawing upon Laura Mulvey's seminal work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," to explain postfeminist perspectives on the representation of women in cinema. The subsequent section examines heritage cinema and period drama. These two terms serve as an introduction into the film's genre, and they provide the historical and societal context in which *Orlando* was made. In the third part, this thesis brings forward a discussion about *Orlando*. It addresses the differences between Sally Potter's and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, discussing the outcomes these alterations have, especially as they relate to the notion of androgyny in the film, as well as the portrayal of imperialism. Finally, it brings the discussion back to the present time, comparing the postfeminist ideas of the 1990s and 2000s with feminist viewpoints of today, rendering Orlando's story relevant and timeless through its engagement with gender, identity, and societal constructs.

**Keywords:** postfeminism, *Orlando*, heritage cinema, costume drama, androgyny, essential self

## Sažetak

Tema ovog diplomskog rada jest analiza filma *Orlando* u režiji Sally Potter s fokusom na prikazivanje i istraživanje postfeminističkih elemenata unutar samog filma. Budući da ne postoji jednostrano prihvaćena definicija pojma postfeminizam, ovaj rad nastoji obuhvatiti i objasniti različite klasifikacije povezane s tim pojmom. Početni dio pruža kratki povijesni pregled postfeminizma, prikazujući nastanak pojma i povezanih društvenih struktura. Također, raspravlja se o odnosu između postfeminizma i trećeg vala feminizma, s obzirom na to da se oba pokreta pojavljuju kao reakcija na drugi val feminizma, čime se pruža uvid u nastanak određenih postfeminističkih ideja. Nadalje, istražuje se veza između postfeminizma i teorije filma, temeljem ključnog eseja Laure Mulvey, „Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,“ kako bi se objasnio postfeministički pogled na prikazivanje žene u filmskoj industriji. Sljedeći dio propituje pojmove *heritage cinema* (hrv. film baštine) i *costume drama* (hrv. kostimirana drama). Ovi pojmovi uvode u žanrovsku klasifikaciju filma te pružaju povijesni i društveni kontekst njegova nastanka. Treće poglavlje donosi analizu filma. Ispituju se razlike između *Orlanda* Sally Potter i *Orlanda* Virginije Woolf, s naglaskom na ishod tih promjena s posebnim osvrtom na pojam androginije i prikaz imperijalizma u filmu. Na kraju, rasprava se vraća u sadašnjost, usporedbom postfeminističkih ideja 1990-ih i 2000-ih godina s feminističkim motrištima današnjice. Na taj način, *Orlando* se promatra kao bezvremenski film čiji ga angažman o pitanjima roda, identiteta i društvenih konstrukcija čini i dalje relevantnim filmskim štivom.

**Ključne riječi:** postfeminizam, Orlando, film baštine, kostimirana drama, androginija, essential self

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## 1. Introduction

As the 1990s began, the (Western) world seemed on the lookout for a new understanding of feminism. Second wave feminism, which started in the 1960s and ended by the 1980s, brought many changes to women's lives. Second wave feminists focused on issues such as workplace discrimination, (un)equal pay, reproductive health, etc., ultimately improving the livelihood of numerous women. As the 1980s were coming to an end, it was logical for one to expect that the years to come would only push further women's accomplishments. And yet, ideas like equality or sexual liberation were starting to be depicted as old and outdated. This new version of feminism of the 1990s was called "postfeminism" (sometimes written as "post-feminism"). In fact, postfeminism came about as a reaction to previous feminist movements as it often claimed that women were no longer experiencing inequality in their everyday lives and were thus able to make their own choices. Meaning, women were no longer passive victims of patriarchy, but rather active individuals in control of their own decisions. Consequently, two main approaches to postfeminism crystallised – postfeminism as a liberation from feminism, and postfeminism as antifeminism. Another important aspect of postfeminism also became clear: its elitism – it was mostly directed at white, middle-class western women, completely disregarding the intersectionality of feminism.

This "postfeminist duality" transferred to other spheres as well. One of them is the film industry. Some of the most popular films of the 1990s were so-called Chick Flicks – an almost pejorative term used to describe films dealing with love and romance targeted specifically at women. Besides Chick Flicks, period dramas were also a popular film genre of that time. Period dramas refer to films (as well as television productions) that are set in a specific historical period. They aim to recreate the look, feel, and atmosphere of a particular era, often focusing on the customs, social norms, and events of that time.

This thesis will focus on postfeminism in film, zooming in on postfeminism in period dramas. It will be divided into three main parts: an overview of postfeminism as a concept, a heritage film and costume drama overview, and an analysis of Sally Potter's *Orlando*. In the first section I will explore the history of the term "postfeminism" focusing on its beginnings in the 1990s and the two separate currents that have arisen and which have been briefly outlined above. Furthermore, I will compare postfeminism to third wave feminism, trying to outline the differences and similarities



between the two movements. Lastly, I will look at postfeminism in film, focusing on Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and discussing how postfeminist ideas are conveyed in cinema. This will serve as an introduction to the later film analysis.

The next section will focus on the terms heritage cinema and costume drama. More specifically, I will discuss the definition of costume drama while trying to account for its elements in the film *Orlando*. Moreover, I will examine this film's relationship to heritage film, since it is a complex term that describes a peculiarly British film production context in the 1980s and 1990s from which the film arose.

The last section will offer an analysis of Sally Potter's film *Orlando*, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography*. The analysis will be carried out through a postfeminist lens, drawing from a range of scholarly works, but more specifically it will involve Rosalind Gill's approach to postfeminism – the understanding that postfeminism should be regarded as a sensibility (Gill 148). Since postfeminism is a highly debated term without a unified definition, this conception will enable me to dissect the film's feminist and anti-feminist elements and explore the intricate interplay of gender, power, identity, and representation in *Orlando*. Rather than regarding postfeminism as a fixed ideology, this approach will try to account for the different nuances that are conveyed when discussing postfeminism. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, I aim to offer a nuanced analysis of the film. Through a close examination of various scenes, character dynamics, and narrative choices, this chapter will illuminate how postfeminism influences the construction and interpretation of gender within the cinematic realm. This kind of approach will permit a more comprehensive analysis of *Orlando*, shedding a light on the film's contributions to the ongoing conversations surrounding postfeminism and its implications on gender discourse in our society.

## 2. What is “Postfeminism”?

### 2.1. The History of the Term “Postfeminism”

According to Lynne Alice (7),

postfeminism, (usually written as ‘post-feminism’) was coined in the period between the achievement of women’s suffrage in the U.S. and the rise of ‘second-wave’ feminism during the 1960s. It denoted the successful outcome of struggles by women for the right to vote, hold public office and the choice to occupy many more personal spheres (qtd. in Brooks 2).

In the 1990s, the term started to gain popularity, especially in popular media where its meaning began to change. This resulted in, as Alice stated, postfeminism gaining a new currency, one that is rather opposed to and targeted specifically at feminists. More precisely, it gave way to two major ideas within postfeminism itself – postfeminism as a form of anti-feminism, and postfeminism as liberation from feminism (7).

On the one hand, the author Shelley Budgeon (12) points out that authors such as Susan Faludi or Marilyn French argue that postfeminism is in fact anti-feminist as it insinuates that women’s equality has been reached and encourages young women to seek their own liberties at the expense of a collective female identity. Additionally, it has been said that rather than being a movement that offers solutions to the issues women encounter, postfeminism promotes the idea that feminism is to blame for the dissatisfaction women feel as a result of attempting to “have it all”, meaning a career, marriage and motherhood (Budgeon 12).

On the other hand, Budgeon (13) claims that the (then) younger generation of feminists, such as Naomi Wolf and Katie Roiphe, believe that the principles of “old” feminism are outdated and have unfavourably proscriptive connotations. Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Barbon (13-4) suggest that these authors promote a libertarian, individualistic agenda based on the idea of choice and presupposition that the political objectives of first- and second-wave feminism have been met (enfranchisement, equal pay, sexual liberation etc.). This view is especially supported by the popular media. In fact, as Alice argues, several book-marketing strategies, intended to create a generational opposition to second wave feminism, have emphasised the connection between postfeminism and “the backlash”, eventually interpreting postfeminism “as an escape from the

imposition of being ‘superwoman’ in order to fulfil a feminist image of success” (qtd. in Brooks 3). This could be seen in numerous newspapers and articles as well. In her book *Backlash*, the author Susan Faludi states that

In the last decade [referring to the 1980s], publications from the New York Times to *Vanity Fair* to the *Nation* have issued a steady stream of indictments against the women’s movement, with such headlines as WHEN FEMINISM FAILED or THE AWFUL TRUTH ABOUT WOMEN’S LIB. They hold the campaign for women’s equality responsible for nearly every woe besetting women, from mental depression to meager savings accounts, from teenage suicides to eating disorders to bad complexions (2-3).

This kind of reporting of women’s equality activities continued in the 1990s as well. In her article “Feminism, Incorporated”, Amelia Jones (317) illustrates an advertisement for the 1990 *Time* magazine with the title “Who says you can have it all?” which shows a cartoon image of woman crying and saying “I can’t believe it. I forgot to have children!” From this advertisement it is visible how “it sets the stage [for an] overall anti-feminist orientation [and] labels our period unequivocally as the postfeminist era” (Jones 317).

However, the term “postfeminism” goes beyond the narrow lens of anti- and pro-feminism perspectives. Instead, some scholars try to account for its multi-faceted nature, acknowledging its various layers of meaning and adopting a more comprehensive approach to its definition. In the book *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (3), Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff try to outline these distinctions between postfeminism as a phenomenon and postfeminism as a theoretical concept by arguing that postfeminism can be described in four different ways. Firstly, it can be used as an indicator of an epistemological break within feminism, which marks “the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including post-modernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism” (Brooks 1). As Yeatman points out, in this context, postfeminism is viewed as an analytical viewpoint and a sort of maturation or “coming of age” of academic feminism (qtd. in Gill and Scharff 3). Moreover, postfeminism can also be viewed as the period that came after the second wave feminism. Besides explaining its temporality, Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon (3) claim that the meaning and directionality of prefix ‘post’ in postfeminism is still unresolved. In that sense, ‘post’ could indicate the termination of feminism, something that is obsolete. Furthermore, and in line with Faludi’s writing

on postfeminism as an anti-feminist phenomenon, the third way to describe postfeminism could be by referring to it as a *backlash against feminism*. As it was already stated, this anti-feminist stance was described by Budgeon who claims that postfeminism is to blame for women's frustrations and encourages individual liberties as opposed to (or even sometimes at the expense of) a collective female identity. Moreover, the author Imelda Whelehan (11) asserts that 'retrosexism', based on genuine concerns about the demise of masculine hegemony, frequently characterises current postfeminist discourses. In her work, she points out this nostalgic sentiment that the contemporary media displays, going back to times when there were real women and charismatic men. She argues that women's representations, ranging 'from the banal to the downright offensive', are being 'defensively reinvented against cultural changes in women's lives' (qtd. in Gill and Scharff 3)

Lastly, in the fourth approach to defining postfeminism, Gill proposes that, other than as an analytical perspective, "postfeminism should be conceived of as a sensibility (...) and postfeminist media culture should be our critical object – a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should inquire -- rather than an analytic perspective" ("Postfeminist media culture" 148). Moreover, she indicates that this approach does not necessitate a fixed understanding of a singular, genuine form of feminism as a benchmark for comparison. Instead, it draws upon postmodernist and constructionist viewpoints and aims to explore the unique characteristics of present-day expressions of gender within the media (148).

## 2.2. Postfeminism and the Feminist "Waves"

If we look back on these varied definitions of postfeminism, it becomes clear that, no matter how postfeminism is defined, it is usually regarded as a reaction against second wave feminism. More specifically, as Braithwait claims, feminism is seen as hopelessly outdated and confining, where everything about one's personal life was and is allegedly controlled through a rigorously constrained set of "politically correct" behaviours and ideas (338). Postfeminism tries to break this presumed confinement by placing the control in the hands of an individual. In fact, Braithwait argues that this current postfeminism admits and supports everything that earlier feminism denied women. The focus of this self-described "fun feminism" is on examining women's lifestyle preferences and pleasures rather than setting forth goals for more overt and obvious forms of social activity (338).

In her article “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” Angela McRobbie points out that the idea of subjectivity and the methods through which cultural forms and dominant social processes construct women as subjects, while seemingly only describing them, highlight the problematic nature of the pronoun “she” rather than the unproblematic pronoun “we.” This indicates a shift towards the emerging politics of post-feminist investigation (256). Moreover, when it comes to inclusivity of the postfeminist movement, Germaine Greer states that postfeminism is primarily driven by market forces, as multinational corporations perceive women as their target audience. Its promise to women that they can achieve everything – a successful career, motherhood, beauty, and a fulfilling sex life – positions them as consumers of various products and services such as pills, cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, fashion, and convenient foods. Ultimately, this is a luxury only wealthy western population can partake in, simultaneously ignoring that one person’s exercise of freedom may be directly related to another person’s oppression (qtd. in Gamble 42).

Third wave feminism is also a reaction to second wave feminism and has tried to “respond to a wide range of economic, political and cultural features of contemporary Western society which have affected the ways in which gendered subjectivities are articulated and enacted” (Budgeon 279). Also, according to Budgeon, third wave feminists claim that while feminism is still a powerful and active force in modern society, it frequently manifests itself in ways that are not readily connected to earlier types of feminism (281). Particularly, as Ann Brooks notes, second wave feminism has failed to adequately address the lived experiences of racism and has not sufficiently acknowledged the existence of various “sites of oppression” and the potential for different “sites of struggle” (17). So, third wave feminism tries to account for these different experiences, and as Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (3) argue, can be defined “as a movement that contains elements of second wave critique of beauty culture, sexual abuse and power structures while it also acknowledges and makes use of the pleasure, danger, and defining power of those structures” (qtd. in Braithwait 339). Moreover, they declare:

We know that what oppresses me may not oppress you, that what oppresses you may be something I participate in, and that what oppresses me may be something you participate in. Even as different strands of feminism and activism sometimes directly contradict each other, they are all part of our third wave lives, our thinking, and our praxes: we are products

of all the contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism, beasts of such a hybrid kind that perhaps we need a different name altogether (qtd. in Gamble 43).

Therefore, it can be argued that postfeminism and third wave feminism, even though they are a reaction to second wave feminism, rest on fundamentally different premises. Heywood and Drake mark this distinction by pointing out that postfeminism emphasises individualistic and experiential perspectives and, when it does employ the word “feminist,” it is almost always done in a criticising manner. On the other hand, they identify third wave feminism as social and activist, a movement that draws inspiration from and incorporates some aspects of second-wave feminist political understandings (qtd. in Braithwaite 336).

The connection between postfeminism and third wave feminism becomes particularly significant when examining what the ‘post’ in postfeminism stands for. As I have already stated, third wave feminism builds upon the foundation of second wave feminism, expanding its scope and inclusivity. This also shows how third wave feminism is unified in its intentions. Postfeminism, on the other hand, comes out as a rather divided and contradictory (i.e. characterised by conflicting viewpoints within itself) movement which often emphasises individualistic and experiential perspectives while critiquing feminism itself. This has also led to several different understandings of the term itself and especially its prefix ‘post.’

The meaning of ‘post’ comes across as rather ambiguous and vague which can be seen in strikingly different, if not contradictory, interpretations that various authors provide. For instance, the ‘post’ in postfeminism could be used to denote a complete rupture, standing as a symbol of some sort of termination, designating whatever it prefaces as finished, over, or obsolete (Genz and Brabon 3). Faludi effectively summarises this stance as describing

feminism [as] “so ‘70s,” the pop culture’s ironists say, stifling a yawn. We’re “postfeminist” now, they assert, meaning not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care (86).

Moreover, Genz and Brabon (4) further explain that the prefix ‘post’ also denotes a process of a continuing transformation. More specifically, the ‘post-ing’ of feminism simply refers to the fact that it continues to exist inside a postfeminist framework rather than necessarily implying its rejection and extinction. Thirdly, the interpretation of the prefix ‘post’ locates it “in a precarious

middle ground typified by a contradictory dependence on and independence from the term that follows it” (Genz and Brabon 4). Gamble further explains this notion by adding that the prefix ‘post’ does not always direct us back to the starting point. Instead, its path is remarkably unclear. While it may imply a regression to past ideological beliefs, it can also signify the continuation of the original term’s goals and ideologies, although on a different level (37). This implies an evolution or transformation of feminist ideas rather than a mere return to the prior state.

### 2.3. Postfeminism and Film

In 1975 Laura Mulvey published her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” where she posited Hollywood and the classical narrative cinema as the holders of “the dominant ideological concept of the cinema” (7). Mulvey argued that the language of classic Hollywood films was the language of patriarchy, one where women are shown as signifiers for the male subject, bearing the meaning instead of making it (7). This patriarchal connotation is transferred to pleasure as well where Mulvey claimed that Hollywood influences and manipulates visual pleasure and codes the erotic into the language used by the dominant patriarchal system (8). Furthermore, she introduced the idea of the male gaze – that the pleasure in looking is divided between active/male and passive/female. In this sense, women are simultaneously looked at and presented in their traditional exhibitionist roles, with their appearances coded for strong erotic and visual impact so that they could be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (12). In fact, as Brooks notes, when it comes to narrative structure, the man is the one controlling the film fantasy and the narrative dynamic (166).

In her analysis of films and film theory, Mulvey employed psychoanalysis which she saw as “a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (Mulvey 6). Brooks noted that Mulvey saw psychoanalytic theory and semiotics as central to liberating feminist aesthetics because they establish a fluidity and instability of meaning in representations and introduce ideas that highlight the many discrepancies between images and the objects they purport to represent (177).

Mulvey’s work generated a number of debates among feminist scholars. As Brooks pointed out, there was a discussion about the limitations of the use of psychoanalytic concepts, and psychoanalytic theory in general (168). This becomes especially apparent when considering two female audience groups whose cinematic pleasures and identifications appear figuratively unimaginable inside such psychoanalytic terms: lesbians and black women (Thornham 80-81). Sue

Thornham goes on to suggest that feminist film theorists' perspectives can be hindered by their inability to recognise that feminist theories grounded in the perspective of a "male gaze" may overlook the possibility of understanding a lesbian's unique standpoint. Similarly, they may fail to acknowledge the implications when white feminists adopt Freud's depiction of woman as the enigmatic "dark continent" to define their marginalised position within a patriarchal system. Such oversight can restrict the theorists' understanding of these specific dynamics and their significance (81). Black spectators, especially black female spectators, place themselves "outside the structures of cinematic visual pleasure proposed by Laura Mulvey [...], and [develop] instead a critical or oppositional gaze [where her] opposition of 'woman as image, man as bearer of the look' can be deconstructed and negative images of black women reclaimed" (81). Additionally, Thornham points out that women are not simply passive spectators. More specifically, female viewers are not solely passive recipients of the text's ideological structures. Instead, they are socially engaged individuals who actively interpret and construct their own readings, often in opposition to the dominant narrative. Furthermore, female viewers are not confined to a singular identity as "woman," as the text may suggest. Rather, their identities as women are shaped by multiple intersecting factors such as race, class, language, and location, extending beyond the singular division of sexual difference (Thornham 80).

Postfeminism accounts for these different ideas by "celebrating a kind of gendered 'freedom' from both patriarchy and feminism, whereby women are apparently free to become all they want to be" (Banet-Weiser 154). Still, as Banet-Weiser argues, at the heart of postfeminist studies are once again white, middle class Western girls and women. In postfeminist cinema, notions of individuality and freedom are central. Feminism is rejected and reduced to something that's obsolete and no longer needed in the contemporary postfeminist environment. Gill believes that ideas such as 'being oneself' or 'pleasing oneself' are at the heart of postfeminist sensibility in the Western media culture (153). Indeed, Gill continues by identifying this idea of free will as central to the postfeminist discourses which depict women as autonomous beings free from all power disparities and inequities (153). However, it is here that postfeminism fails to recognise the societal impact on the individual, as well as the differences between class, race, and gender. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue that:



postfeminist culture's centralization of an affluent elite certainly entails an emphatic individualism, but this formulation tends to confuse self-interest with individuality and elevates consumption as a strategy for healing those dissatisfactions that might alternatively be understood in terms of social ills and discontents (2).

In fact, postfeminism goes hand in hand with neoliberal capitalist politics. More specifically, the unique relationship between postfeminism and late capitalist culture includes the types of labour, leisure, and, most importantly, consumerism that flourish there. Indeed, a lot of postfeminist rhetoric aligns with the directives of the "New Economy" of the 1990s and the replacement of democratic imperatives with free market ones (Tasker and Negra 6).

These themes are reflected in cinema as well. In her article "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility", Rosalind Gill points out several features that are crucial to postfeminist discourse:

These include the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference (149).

Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992) is an epitome of postfeminist cinema. The film, a loose adaptation of Virginia Woolf's eponymous novel from 1928, follows Orlando (played by Tilda Swinton) through 400 years of British history. At the start of the film Orlando is Queen Elizabeth I's (Quentin Crisp) favourite male courtier; halfway through the film – and its timeline – he undergoes a major transformation and becomes a woman. According to Cristina Degli-Esposti, *Orlando* engages in a politically charged exploration of gender identification by reintroducing the ancient myth of androgyny into contemporary discourse. The film in fact goes beyond gender and addresses the interconnected issues of power, class, and economics. By doing so, it expands the notion of the self beyond the confines of gender (86).

In her interviews about the film, Sally Potter stressed the importance of the notion of the 'essential self' for her work:

I really think that the film's contribution to that area is not so much about gaining identity as it is blurring identity. It's about the claiming of an essential self, not just in sexual terms. It's about the immortal soul (Ehrenstein and Potter 6-7).

Moreover, she claimed that that the word "feminist" had transformed into a trigger word that restrains open-mindedness instead of fostering it (Ehrenstein and Potter 6).

This parting with the term "feminism" is at the heart of postfeminist debates. In that sense, Sally Potter tries to escape from the feminist confinement into a new postfeminist realm. She explained her vision as follows:

If by feminist you mean in favor of the liberation and the dignity of the female sex, then that's great. But mostly when people use the word it tends to mean a movement with a rather limited appeal, with a certain kind of date on it. I think the film is for both men and women, and it's about celebrating, really, both sexes (Dowell and Potter 17).

Therefore, with *Orlando*, Potter tried to imply that we reached a postfeminist era where feminism had become obsolete, and women were now able to become what they want.

In stark contrast with Potter's use of the term, in the chapters that follow I will employ Rosalind Gill's perspective that postfeminism should be regarded as sensibility. As I have already stated, this approach does not require a rigid comprehension of a singular and authentic feminism as a standard of comparison. Instead, it embraces postmodernist and constructionist perspectives, seeking to examine the distinctive qualities of contemporary gender expressions within the present context. This emerging concept highlights the inherent contradictions present in postfeminist discourses and the complex interplay of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them ("Postfeminist media culture" 148-49). This way, I will be able to examine how *Orlando* fits in this narrative, i.e., to unravel the nuanced layers of postfeminism and critically analyse its implications for the film's gender discourse.

### 3. Heritage Cinema and Costume Drama

#### 3.1. Costume Drama

When thinking about this film adaptation in generic terms, Sally Potter's *Orlando* could be described as a costume drama belonging to the (British) heritage cinema. These two terms have been highly debated in British film theory as various authors draw different conclusions about their definitions and influence. According to Antonija Primorac, costume drama can be read as an umbrella term that includes heritage cinema, history film, romantic drama and other related genres that explore the representation of the past (12). Furthermore, Julianne Pidduck argues that costume drama can be seen as a specific type of period drama, deviating to varying degrees from the constraints of realism and instead embracing playful elements found in costume exploration, fantastical settings, romance, and melodrama (*Intimate Places and Flights of Fancy* 68). All these elements can be found in *Orlando* as well. As the audience follows Orlando through the 400 years of his/her history, they are immersed in different historical periods through the costumes, settings, and overall *mise-en-scène*. Furthermore, *Orlando* explores themes related to social class, societal norms, romance, and cultural traditions of each era, which is another characteristic of the genre.

In her book *Contemporary Costume Film*, Juliane Pidduck defines contemporary costume film as an investigation of “the intimate tradition, where the past is depicted on a smaller canvas through the prisms of romance, desire, and the body. This is a limited theatre of action that amplifies a nuanced boudoir politics, and an oblique narrative economy of detail often associated with femininity” (*Contemporary Costume Film* 6). She states further that costume drama set in the 19th century revolves around the feminine ‘private sphere’, invoking the pleasures of comfortable, elegant, period interior spaces – what she calls intimate spaces which also limit the female agency to domestic spheres (*Intimate Places and Flights of Fancy* 1-2). Belén Vidal builds upon this notion and states that the traditional heroine of the costume drama was either confined to the taming spaces of gardens and drawing rooms or, on the contrary, enjoyed fantasy scenarios of adventure and social mobility (121). This can be seen in *Orlando* as well. After his transformation into a woman, we are immediately made aware how female Orlando is much more constrained and limited when it comes to her mobility. She is restricted to domestic spaces and her elaborate, tightly laced 18<sup>th</sup> century (and later, corseted 19<sup>th</sup> century) gowns only reinforce her immobility.

Pidduck argues that by examining the costume drama's preoccupation with the contrasting yet intertwined elements of opulent beauty and stifling restrictions of social decorum, one could argue that this genre delves into a distinct historical aspect characterised by white, upper class societal constraints. She continues by saying that this experience is explicitly framed within the context of gender relations and femininity ("Travels with Sally Potter's *Orlando*" 172), a topic that is central to *Orlando*.

### 3.2. Heritage Film

From the very opening of the film, *Orlando* represents the epitome of white English aristocracy. His class and wealth (and immortality) allow him to freely stride through several periods of English history. The film showcases elaborate period costumes and meticulously crafted production design to recreate the visual aesthetics of each historical era depicted – an idea that is essential to heritage films. Even though heritage film is intertwined with costume drama, there are some differences between them. Heidi Brevik-Zender declares that "in the British context, costume drama has been condemned as cinema that perpetuates ideological traditionalism through nostalgic, and typically inauthentic, reworkings of the past" (205). This can be seen in the debate around heritage film as well. Heritage film is a term that goes hand in hand with costume drama, and (especially in the British context) can be regarded as a sub-genre of costume drama. As Vidal claims, heritage film is not recognised as a genre in the technical sense of the term. Instead, it is rooted in British film studies, and has grown to be associated with a strong undercurrent of nostalgia for the past shown through historical dramas, romantic costume pictures, and literary adaptations (1). This means that heritage cinema could be described as a collection of films made in the 1980s and 1990s that deal with the representation of the British past. They share a romanticised and nostalgic portrayal of British history, usually focusing on the upper classes. Most of these films are adaptations of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century literary classics, such as *A Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987), *Howards End* (1992), and *Sense and Sensibility* (1995). Moreover, as Monk observes, besides the term heritage films, these works were often labelled as 'Brit. Lit.', 'white flannel films' or 'nostalgic screen fictions' by authors such as Andrew Higson or Tana Wollen (116).

There were two main movements within the heritage film debate – heritage film critics and heritage film defenders. One of the more prominent heritage film critics, Andrew Higson, wrote that "the heritage cycle and its particular representation of the national past is in many ways symptomatic

of cultural developments in Thatcherite Britain” (604). As he further explains, the Thatcher years happen simultaneously with an international capitalist recession that only hastened Britain’s collapse as a major economic power. Indeed, traditional ideas of national identity were inevitably challenged by these processes, which were further troubled by the realisation that British society was becoming more multicultural and multiracial (604). As Primorac points out, critics of heritage cinema saw it as a genre that embraced the traditional values and perspectives of the Thatcher government (1979–1990), which oversaw its production and initial release. This political administration sought to identify itself with specific Victorian era values, and heritage cinema was viewed as a means of promoting these (59). In fact, the National Heritage Acts of 1980 and 1983 enforced a top-down view of heritage and endorsed a culture of private entrepreneurship, which included trade with the symbols and landmarks of the country’s past (Vidal 10). Because of this, as Belen Vidal notes,

the heritage film typically dwells on an iconography of upper-middle class and aristocratic privilege. For Higson, such iconography produces a highly selective vision of Englishness attached to pastoral and imperial values where the past as spectacle becomes the main attraction (8).

On the other hand, authors such as Claire Monk argue that these films were aggressively attacked as ideologically complicit with Thatcher’s radical economic and social restructuring and reinvention of the ‘nation’ in addition to being collectively dismissed as escapist nostalgia with no relevance to the issues and identities of contemporary Britain (Monk 116). She claims that the connection between heritage films and heritage sector that emerged in 1980s Britain is not clear-cut or without difficulty. Rather, she tries to highlight how contested and ambiguous this connection is, as well as the problems that anti-heritage criticisms that take it for granted, inevitably run into (118):

It is possible, therefore, that critical hostility to these films – which in some cases reaches an hysterical and irrational intensity – may have more to do with the cinematically unusual (and, for some heterosexual male critics, uncomfortable) ways in which gender and sexuality function in these personal journeys than with the films’ focus on a privileged class and their ‘incorrectness’ as expressions of the national past (which is what the anti-heritage discourse presents itself as objecting to) (Monk 120).

If we go back to Laura Mulvey and her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, we can find an interesting parallel where she observes that the

determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (19).

In that sense, Monk argues, the main peculiarity of the most well-known heritage movies is that the audience, which, according to scientific research, is primarily made up of women and gay men, does the looking while the males onscreen are presented as the spectacle to be gazed upon (120). This is quite an entertaining idea when heritage film sought to represent the conservative nostalgia for British past. And, more often than not, women and gay men were purposely excluded from this narrative and deemed as second-class citizens. With this in mind, it could be argued that, to some extent, heritage films subvert the idea of a penetrative male gaze, for a more all-encompassing gaze.

The Monk vs. Higson debate is not only exclusive to the British context as other countries (both in Europe and across the globe) had their own versions of heritage film and discussions about it. In his article “Questions of genre,” Steve Neale argues that it is important to regard the heritage film as a genre that is constructed from a critical or theoretical perspective, rather than being solely defined by industrial aspects (qtd. in Vidal 2). Vidal goes on to say that heritage film has evolved into a flexible term used to describe how national cinemas, at various points in their histories, delve into the past to explore their own foundational myths (3). For Ginette Vincendeau, “‘heritage cinema’ emerged in the 1980s with the success of European period films such as *Chariots of Fire*, *Jean de Florette* and *Babette’s Feast*, followed by many others, including E.M. Forester adaptations by the Merchant-Ivory-Jhabvala team” (xvii). The success of these films continued in 1990s as well. Vincendeau defines heritage cinema as costume films produced in the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, typically adapted from popular classic works. While most of these films are of European origin, there was a shift towards greater internationalism in the 1990s, with productions embracing a pan-European production approach (like in the case of *Orlando*) or featuring significant American involvement (xvii). Indeed, as Vidal suggests, *Orlando* was partially filmed in Russia and Uzbekistan, and involved collaboration between British, Russian,

French, Italian, and Dutch contributors. Drawing inspiration from the modernist literary tradition by adapting Virginia Woolf's novel, the film presents a postmodern deconstruction of the traditional realism found in costume films and thus it challenges the conventions of British heritage cinema (Vidal 92). Potter manages to do that by utilising *avant-garde* elements (such as intertitles and the breaking of the fourth wall), employing costumes to point out the fashions' absurdity (such as Orlando's inability to move with ease through her castle after becoming a woman), and playing with stereotypes found in British heritage cinema (such as Orlando's first encounter with the Khan). This way she breaks the conventions or expectations about how historical stories should be told and opens up a space for discussion about its practices.

In addition, the term post-heritage has emerged as a way to describe films that fall under the category of heritage, but do not have all the heritage "characteristics." One of the most important heritage film characteristics is the fact that they show "visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively" (Higson 602). Meaning, they provoke a sort of melancholy in the spectator, longing for the picturesque representation of the British past, purposely disregarding (or even venerating) any wrongdoings. Post-heritage films, on the other hand, try to challenge this idolising of the British past found in heritage films. As Vidal suggests, the use of post-heritage labels highlights the necessity of examining the hybrid styles of period films beyond the outdated connection between period aesthetics and conservative nostalgia, which is no longer fulfilling (104).

In fact, a lot of post-heritage films explore themes such as sexuality, gender, or queerness. Monk agrees that post-heritage films are undeniably connected by a clear focus on sexuality and gender, specifically exploring non-traditional and marginalised identities: feminine, non-masculine, fluid, androgynous, and ambiguous. The subversive sexual politics depicted in post-heritage films position them in direct contrast to the mainstream Hollywood cinema of the 1990s, creating a genuine opposition in terms of their portrayal of gender and sexuality ("Sexuality and the heritage" 33). Vincendeau agrees and claims that while there has been a move towards increased sexuality and violence in post-heritage literary adaptations, these films, with their focus on art, quality and decorum, and the inclusion of women, as well as gay and lesbian characters, offer alternatives to the aggression, fast pace, and masculinity prevalent in Hollywood's action and spectacle films (xxii-xiii).

Therefore, I would argue that Sally Potter's *Orlando* belongs to post-heritage films. At the heart of her film is Orlando, a character who, seemingly unchanged, lives through 400 years of (British) history. I say seemingly because Orlando does experience something drastic – that is he becomes a woman somewhere in the middle of the film. Still, that does not change who Orlando is, or their “essence”. As a result, *Orlando* deals with themes such as androgyny, gender fluidity, and sexuality, which are at the heart of post-heritage films. Also, Potter addresses issues such as colonialism and British imperialism, refusing to celebrate or show nostalgia for this part of British history.



#### 4. *Orlando*, the film: An analysis

The film starts in the Elizabethan era, where Orlando, at the deathbed of Queen Elizabeth I, is ordered by her: “Do not fade. Do not wither. Do not grow old” (*Orlando* 11:18-27). This order becomes true and, besides the gift of immortality, the Queen also gives Orlando a piece of land and a country estate, which he could keep as long as he stays young. After the death of Queen Elizabeth I., the audience is transferred to a wintry London with the river Thames completely frozen and under the rule of King James I. It is there that Orlando meets Sasha (Charlotte Valandrey), the daughter of a Russian diplomat, and madly falls in love. At first, she reciprocates his feelings, but after she fails to elope with him, he expresses his disappointment by stating: “The treachery of women” (*Orlando* 29:33). After his heartache, the audience encounters Orlando sitting in front of a bookshelf reciting poetry. The year is 1650 and Orlando has transferred his passions onto poetry. In order to become a great poet, he invites another poet, Nick Greene (Heathcote Williams), to stay at his country seat and help him with his work. Orlando anticipates receiving valuable feedback on his literary endeavours, but Greene’s focus primarily revolves around discussing his own experiences and lamenting the death of poetry in England. Upon his departure, Greene composes a bitter poem targeting an unidentified aristocrat, who can be recognised as Orlando. Humiliated, Orlando orders the poem to be destroyed, but keeps paying Greene his pension.

After his failed poetry ventures, Orlando decides to become an ambassador in Constantinople. At first, the Khan (Lothaire Bluteau) suspiciously follows Orlando’s doings, but as time passes, they become friendly companions. One night, Constantinople is being attacked and Orlando is asked by the Khan to join the fight. Unable to witness the horrors of the killings, Orlando refuses to take part and falls into a deep sleep that lasts for several days. The carnage he had seen prompted a change in Orlando and he transforms into a woman. Still, Orlando claims that nothing had changed: “Same person. No difference at all. Just a different sex” (*Orlando* 57:22-32). Upon her return to England, the female Orlando is confronted with a multitude of overwhelming changes. It is the year 1750, and Orlando finds herself joining the English literary circle of the time. Attending these literary gatherings, she becomes painfully aware of the humiliating treatment women endure as the male writers belittle and insult her. Furthermore, she is informed that since she is a woman now (and a dead person) she cannot legally keep her property. In an attempt to rescue her from this

predicament, Archduke Harry (John Wood) proposes marriage only to be refused, and as a result he labels Orlando as a spinster. Unable to deal with such wrongdoings, Orlando runs off into her garden maze.

Finally, when Orlando comes out of the maze, the year is 1850. There she meets a handsome American called Shelmerdine (Billy Zane) who she falls in love with. He wants her to follow him to America, and “live for the future” (*Orlando* 1:21:22) which Orlando refuses and remains in England. In the next scene a pregnant Orlando finds herself in the midst of war, trying to escape the horrendous bombing. Finally, she arrives to the present day (i.e., the 1990s), and accompanied by her young daughter, Orlando tries to find a publisher for her book. Interestingly, the literary editor who is assessing her work (an eventually saying it is quite good) is played by the same actor who plays the poet Nick Greene. In the end, having lived a truly extraordinary life, Orlando finds a moment of rest under the same tree we see her/him at the start of the film, with her daughter casually pointing out an angel (Jimmy Somerville) singing in the sky to her.

Sally Potter made quite a few changes while adapting Woolf’s novel, altering both the plot and the narrative style. Firstly, she modified the beginning of the film. In the book, the omniscient narrator/Woolf introduces Orlando as quite a manly character: “He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of time did something to disguise it – was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters” (Woolf 5). With this scene of cutting a Moor’s head, which typically symbolises the physicality and brutality often linked with traditional masculinity, the readers are in no doubt that Orlando is in fact male. In the film, on the other hand, Tilda Swinton is cast as male Orlando, and the scene opens with him pacing under an oak tree reciting poetry. When the voice-over states “There can be no doubt about his sex” (*Orlando* 01:04-05) the audience is indeed left in doubt.

Besides the beginning, Potter makes considerable changes to the ending of the film as well. In the book, Orlando is back at her cherished estate. She marries Shelmerdine and bears a male child. In the end, Shelmerdine appears in an airplane, soaring above the mansion while Orlando stands below. He boldly jumps down from the aircraft as a stray bird passes overhead. In a moment of exhilaration, Orlando joyfully exclaims, “It’s the goose! (...) The wild goose...!” (Woolf 162). The story concludes precisely at midnight on Thursday, the eleventh of October 1928, which coincides with the day of the novel’s publication. Potter modified this ending quite a bit. Orlando

has returned to the oak tree from the beginning of the film, sitting under it and gleefully watching her daughter. By giving birth to a female child, Orlando loses her estate. The voice-over claims “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” (*Orlando* 1:27:32-44). The film ends with a close-up of Orlando, tears running down her face, declaring that she is happy, while a golden angel floats in the sky.

Furthermore, Potter changes the reason for Orlando’s sex change as well. In the book, as Hollinger and Wintehalter describe, this transformation is prompted by Orlando’s realisation of the interconnectedness of masculinity and warfare within history (240). He falls into a deep sleep that lasts for seven days and wakes up as a woman. Similarly, Potter also raises the issue about warfare, but places Orlando’s transformation exclusively as a reaction to the horrendous killings he had witnessed in Constantinople. Moreover, there is also a striking difference in how Woolf and Potter depict this scene, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Lastly, in the book, after her transformation, Orlando continues to explore her sexual nature. She often cross-dresses as a man and has numerous lovers. The narrator explains “her sex changed far more frequently (...) and (she) enjoyed the love of both sexes equally (Woolf 108). The film, however, shows Orlando to be celibate after her sex change, that is until the 19th century, when she encounters Shelmerdine during the implicitly heterosexual sequence titled “SEX.”

By altering and modifying Woolf’s text, Potter tries to assert her film as postfeminist. She plays with the ideas of androgyny, gender-fluidity, and cross-dressing, claiming that underneath all our society-imposed gender rules and clothing we wear there is an “essential self” which constructs our (basic) identity. Even though her concept of an “essential self” comes out as controversial (which will be addressed later), it still shows the film’s engagement with societal imposition of gender representation through fashion and costumes.

On the other hand, Sally Potter’s reimagining of Woolf’s text, particularly her decision to depict Orlando with a daughter instead of a son, may initially be perceived as a reflection of anti-feminist sentiment of postfeminism. Notably, her alterations, as Hollinger and Winterhalter point out, challenge the enduring influence of male heirs in perpetuating historical moments of destruction (16). However, the shift that occurs when Orlando gives birth to a daughter, leading her to give up Knole, the country estate, invites for a nuanced interpretation. While it might seem, on the surface, to signify a break from the male-centered traditions of the past, it also raises some questions. Does

this shift genuinely represent a departure from patterns of dominance, or does it eventually affirm that property and social status, things associated with male power, once again remain out of reach for women?

Moreover, one could argue that the act of Orlando's daughter holding a camera could symbolise that women are now free to choose their destinies. This assertion requires further examination. In reality, does this represent a true exercise of choice, or does it merely offer the illusion of empowerment? Can one really exert freedom, or is that freedom bound by societal rules and limits? Orlando did not really have a choice; society's impositions made that choice for her. In essence, does true choice exist when there are limited options available? These questions underscore the need for a deeper examination of the film's portrayal of female agency and the extent to which it aligns with the ideals of postfeminism.

Potter's *Orlando* does not fit into a 'typical' costume drama as she plays with several avant-garde elements. She breaks her film down into audiovisual chapters, finding "its speed limits in the framing device of subtitling" (Degli-Esposti 75). These interruptions are announced by intertitles consisting of a black screen with a year on it and a corresponding title. Thus, the film is divided into seven sections as follows: 1600 DEATH (06:09-16), 1610 LOVE (13:26-33), 1650 POETRY (31:36-43), 1700 POLITICS (40:47-54), 1750 SOCIETY (1:00:19-26), 1850 SEX (1:11:02-09), BIRTH (1:24:34-38). These intertitles serve as an interlude to changes happening in Orlando's life. As Degli-Esposti explains, the titles and sign-functions employed in the film deliberately evoke the explanatory and rhetorical techniques found in historical Baroque and eighteenth-century literature. These techniques often used ironic subtitles to explain concepts that were not entirely explicable. They attempt to bring order to something that is inherently challenging or sometimes impossible to organise while providing assistance and establishing a connection between the sender and receiver of any message (75). Thus, the spectators are made aware of the main theme and the time period that will follow.

Another, at this point in heritage drama, unusual narrative element that Potter employs is the breaking of the fourth wall as Orlando directly addresses the spectators. Orlando does this by directly speaking to the spectators "That is I" (01:36-38), as he acknowledges that the story is about him. Throughout the film he (and later she) also casts glances at the spectators, sharing personal moments with them. As Degli-Esposti states "the direct address to camera, as a way to

express possible mental courses, is an overt invitation to the viewer to join a mental interpretative line of “inferential walks.” It is to be considered an instrument of subversion” (82). In fact, with this technique, the spectators are not just passively watching the film. Instead, they are invited to share intimate moments with Orlando as he/she address them or simply gives a look.

#### 4.1. The Notion of Androgyny

For Sally Potter, the concept of androgyny, introduced by Woolf in the novel, is an important one. She declares: “I really think that the film’s contribution to that area is not so much about gaining identity as it is blurring identity. It’s about the claiming of an essential self, not just in sexual terms. It’s about the immortal soul” (Ehrenstein and Potter 6-7). According to Cristina Degli-Eposti, the film expands the concept of the self beyond the confines of gender (86). In order to achieve this, as already stated, Potter made quite a few changes in her reading of Woolf’s *Orlando*. The difference in the openings of the two works is already a striking one. Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter argue that by moving away from the manly representation of Orlando in the book (which perfectly fits into the behaviours associated with gender stereotypes), and casting Tilda Swinton as the male Orlando, the deconstruction of gender that is introduced in this aside loses its critical and subversive impact (240). Indeed, the audience is left to wonder whether Orlando really is male.

Furthermore, Potter took a playful approach to her casting as well. Choosing Swinton to play Orlando seemed like a perfect choice since her looks and appearance have often been described as androgynous, which was perfectly utilised in the film itself. Another interesting casting choice is the one of Quentin Crisp as Queen Elizabeth I. Crisp was a British gay icon known for his flamboyant character and experiments with cross-dressing. She also cast Billy Zane who became famous for his roles in films such as *Dead Calm* (1989) and *Back to the Future Part II* (1989). His striking physical appearance and classic good looks often made him a visually attractive figure on screen for both women and men. As Degli-Esposti argues, “Potter proposes a blurring of these two worlds (male and female) in a parodic, carnivalesque, self-conscious way, adding to the original literary source an ironic subtext with the gender-bending casting” (78). In fact, this goes hand in hand with her reasoning “that all this masculinity/femininity stuff is really a dressing up of an essential self. They’re identities you can choose or not choose” (qtd. in Silver 283).

Woolf proposed a similar notion in *Orlando*: “there is much to support the view that it is the clothes that wear us and not we them” (Woolf 92). Still, as Hollinger and Winterhalter argue, Potter further explains her understanding of the essential self as a universal essence that surpasses gender, societal roles, inheritance, and other external factors. According to her perspective, these aspects can be seen as mere masks or trivialities that highlight the fluidity of sexual identity and the arbitrary nature of masculinity and femininity as social constructs (241). Here, “she moves beyond Woolf’s critique of gender as a social costume and expounds her own program of transcending gender” (241). Catherine Craft-Fairchild comes to a similar conclusion. She claims that Potter took hold of Virginia Woolf’s idea in *Orlando* which states that sexual identity is imposed upon the individual. However, instead of acknowledging that societal constructions shape one’s identity, an insight that Woolf was among the first to delve into, Potter argues that there is something that exists beyond or separate from the constructed self (26).

One could question whether Woolf’s *Orlando* really did embody an “essential self beyond gender.” As Craft-Fairchild asserts, even though Woolf was attracted to the idea of an “essential self”, she ultimately refuses to portray Orlando as a transcendently free being (27). Instances of this sentiment can be traced when Orlando returned to England after becoming a woman. With a mere “change of clothes,” they can “change our view of the world and the world’s view of us” (Woolf 92). Still, from time to time, Orlando

found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another. [...] She had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive (108).

However, Woolf’s narrator often contradicts herself. On one occasion it is stated how if men and women had “both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same too” (92). In the very next paragraph, this narrator disagrees with this statement and claims “the difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath” (92). Therefore, as Christy L. Burns points out, this idea of an “essential self” is humorously diminished to a belief that Virginia Woolf’s narrator struggles to uphold. Through the parody of this narrator’s efforts, the novel ultimately reveals the modern understanding of subjectivity as a construct that is actively shaped and formed (346). Burns further emphasises that Woolf’s understanding of Orlando’s identity encompasses the potential for

participation in social and self-construction. The central question of Woolf's novel revolves around subjectivity, particularly when entangled with the complexities of historical change and sexuality (346).

Potter seems to purposefully ignore these nuances about the essential self that Woolf tried to examine. With all the alterations in the plot and narrative (i.e., changing both the beginning and the ending, along with the reasoning behind Orlando's sex change) Potter tried to reach the postfeminist ideal of not needing feminist values. As Hollinger and Winterhalter suggest, Potter simplifies the intricate matter that Woolf explores and moralises about the concept of the androgyne. Potter transforms this complex issue into a tale of liberation, catering to a postfeminist audience who admire Woolf's work. However, Hollinger and Winterhalter warn, this liberation narrative oversimplifies the complexities of gender, portraying it not as a nuanced interplay of cultural influences but as a confining prison that can be escaped by tapping into inherent qualities within oneself that transcend gender (242-43).

#### 4.2. The Film Adaptation's Portrayal of Imperialism

Woolf depicted Orlando's voyage to the Ottoman Empire as an attempt to escape from a persistent suitor. The narrator explains this decision by saying: "he did what any other young man would have done in his place, and asked King Charles to send him as Ambassador Extraordinary to Constantinople" (Woolf 57). Potter, on the other hand, makes Orlando escape eastward from badly written poetry and shame he felt because of it. Orlando makes his request to the King, to which he replies: "I feel you will be quite starved of conversation and amusement in such a remote corner of the world" (*Orlando* 40:26-31). The audience is immediately made aware of English imperialistic perspective and attitudes. Potter continues with the parody of Englishness as Orlando enters Constantinople carried on a camel in a lavishly decorated howdah. The close shot shows Orlando dressed in a heavy white full skirt coat while carrying two almost-wilted tulips, gifts from the King. This image is juxtaposed with the simply dressed and fully covered Ottoman locals roaming through the streets of Constantinople. In this scene, Orlando is the only person being carried on a camel, as if he is trying to place himself above the locals.

Orlando's arrival is further ridiculed as he meets the Khan of Khiva. Once again dressed in a pompous gown, he is brought to a dark veiled room and placed before the Khan:

Khan: My dear sir, please accept my hospitality. Feel that my home is your home and call upon me as you would a brother, for any of your needs.

Orlando: You really are too kind, and I must say I'm most impressed by your command of the English language. I hadn't expected... I mean... I wasn't led to believe...

Khan: Why... are you here?

Orlando: I'm here as a representative of His Majesty's government.

Khan: Yes. It has been said to me that the English make a habit of collecting... countries  
(*Orlando* 42:25-43:08)

Not only is Orlando being ridiculed, but he also displays behaviour typical of British imperialists. He is surprised that people outside England are able to speak English well, seeing it as something reserved only for the English population. As Pidduck argues, the deliberate casting of the Quebecois actor Lothaire Bluteau to portray the character of "Khan" in a stereotypical Orientalist kingdom is undoubtedly not a mere coincidence. In fact, Quebec also became a British colony after the Seven Years' War. Potter cleverly highlights the expansive and arbitrary nature of British imperialism, where one colonial subject is playfully substituted for another. This casting choice serves as a subtle commentary on the interchangeable nature of colonial representations (*Intimate Places and Flights of Fancy* 182). In fact, British imperialistic discourse often portrayed people from the colonies in a manner that reflected the power dynamics and prejudices of the colonial era. Common portrayals were often rooted in stereotypes, exoticism, and dehumanisation. Oftentimes, in film and TV white people were chosen to portray characters from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, using makeup or any other visual elements to create a superficial resemblance. This practice was known as "brownface" and "blackface" (such can be found in *Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book* from 1942 where only one actor was of South Asian descent and the rest had on a brownface). By choosing white actors, these portrayals deliberately erase colonial representation and experiences. Potter tries to subvert these stereotypes by exaggerating the formality of their encounter as well as their costumes. This way, she highlights the absurdity of the imperialist pomp and its pretensions, and the unintended humour that can result from it. One could argue that therefore Bluteau's casting choice, an actor originating from a former British colony, only adds to the absurdity of this colonial encounter and its contemporary representation. This challenges the audience's expectations when it comes to stereotypical oriental behaviour.



As Orlando gets accustomed to the life in Constantinople, he undergoes a change in the way he dresses and how he behaves. This is especially accentuated in his encounter with the Archduke Harry after ten years of living there. A very assimilated, calm, and plainly dressed Orlando is juxtaposed to a shocked and very ornately dressed and be-wigged Archduke. In fact, as Pidduck says, “our Orlando has ‘gone native.’ In his polite, well-meaning way, Orlando fulfils all the clichés of Westerners who ‘discover’ themselves in the Orient” (*Intimate Places and Flights of Fancy* 183). Through the process of “going native,” Orlando undergoes a gradual transformation, embracing the culture of the “exotic” and oriental East. In this journey, he drops his imperialistic and condescending attitudes, evident in his first encounter with the Khan, and aligns himself more closely with the local society and customs. While running away from England, Orlando not only discovers a newfound connection to his “inner self” but also develops empathy and understanding for the Other.

Orlando’s stay in Constantinople also serves as the place for his transformation into a woman. In the novel, this change is “prompted by Orlando’s recognition of history’s imbrication of masculinity and warfare” (Hollinger and Winterhalter 240). In the film, this change is triggered by the slaughter Orlando witnessed when the city was attacked. The exchange with the Archduke when an enemy is shot, shows Orlando’s compassionate nature:

Archduke: Leave him. Leave him.

Orlando: This is a dying man.

Archduke: He’s not a man, he’s the enemy (*Orlando* 54:15-23)

This interchange serves to highlight the striking difference between Orlando and the rest of the English noblemen. Archduke Harry, who came to Constantinople only recently, is able to distinguish between the ally and the enemy which allows him to coldheartedly join the fight. Orlando, on the other hand, has now lived for quite some time in Constantinople, has befriended the Khan and accepted their customs. And yet, when he is supposed to identify the enemy and fight against it, he is unable to do so since he sees humanity in each of them. In fact, unable to cope with such atrocities, Orlando falls into a deep sleep that lasts several days and wakes up as a woman. Before Orlando can say anything, the audience is made aware that something has changed. The *mise-en-scène* shows Orlando looking at herself fully naked in the mirror. The mirror is shaped like a keyhole, which only highlights the curves of her now female body and serves as a sort of

peeping hole through which we look at Orlando looking at herself. The air is filled with glittering particles and the enchanted music accompanying the scene emphasizes the magic of the moment as the soft voices interplay with violins and clarinets. As Craft-Fairchild points out, when the female Orlando observes herself in the mirror, it does not grant her access to the symbolic realm; instead, it symbolises her exclusion from it. This act of looking in the mirror denies her affirmative power rather than amplifying it (38). This is already a striking difference when compared to male Orlando who was not subjected to such thorough camera examination.

The act of looking at oneself could also be explained as a variant of the postfeminist act of self-surveillance. Rosalind Gill uses this notion of self-surveillance and explains how “femininity is defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one” (149). She recognises that a woman’s body (especially in today’s media) is presented as a source of her identity. The body is depicted as both a source of power for women and as perpetually disobedient, necessitating continuous surveillance, discipline, and alteration (often through consumer spending) to conform to increasingly stringent standards of female beauty (149). With this act of looking at herself, Orlando also becomes aware of her own naked body, something male Orlando did not have to think about.

After looking at herself in the mirror, Orlando states, breaking the fourth wall again, “Same person. No difference at all. Just a different sex” (*Orlando* 57:22-32). Still, it is hard to believe that nothing has changed as both the camera work and Orlando’s behaviour tell us she is not completely identical to who she was. Craft-Fairchild notes how the camera work also changes with Orlando’s transformation. The male Orlando is often depicted as a powerful subject, as Potter allows him traditional cinematic authority through various scenes presented from Orlando’s perspective. By aligning him with the filmic apparatus, Craft-Fairchild points out, Potter gives Orlando subjective control over the narrative (36). On the other hand, female Orlando is much more restricted. After her transformation she must flee from the Ottoman Empire. This journey is shot from a bird’s-eye view which shows a veiled Orlando traveling on a camel accompanied by her servants. The angle makes Orlando barely recognisable, no different from the servants that are travelling with her. Also, this change makes Orlando’s movement much more limited. As she returns to her estate, she is now forced to wear dresses. She is shown almost painfully enduring a corset lacing and putting

on several layers of petticoats. As she slowly strides through the castle, the skirts of her dress collide with the furniture around her, only adding to her insecurity and constriction.

#### 4.3. *Orlando's* Echo in Today's World

When *Orlando* aired, Potter tried to minimise its feminist aspects to try to appeal to a broader audience. She tried to capture the “essential self,” an idea that surpasses gender and any complexity associated with it. In fact, with her anti-feminist stance Potter becomes the perfect example of postfeminist currents in her era. By that, I would also argue that *Orlando* is the epitome of postfeminist cinema. Meaning, it perfectly encapsulates the different and sometimes contradictory views (and feelings) on postfeminism. On the one hand, Potter is trying to erase the need of feminism by surpassing gender and creating a unifying universe, while on the other side she is able to acknowledge that gender inequality does exist as female Orlando re-enters upper society and is faced with discrimination and prejudice.

When looking through Potter's filmography and the reception of her work, I find her need to distance herself from feminist ideas unsurprising. Before *Orlando*, Potter directed a few short films such as *Thriller* (1979) which became an immediate success. Her first feature film, *The Gold Diggers* (1983) did not get such recognition. In fact, critics were very harsh, going as far as even questioning the state's funding of such films (Ehrenstein 2). As Hollinger and Winterhalter point out, Potter openly acknowledges that she was deeply saddened by the lack of success of *The Gold Diggers*. It appears she was very optimistic regarding its potential to resonate with diverse audiences and took personal responsibility when it fell short of her envisioned success (249). Nine years had to pass for Potter to try with another feature film.

As an avant-garde director is it especially hard to come up with enough funding and support to create a film. For female, let alone feminist, avant-garde directors, the obstacles are even greater. Consequently, it is unsurprising that during a period marked by intense postfeminist discussions, Potter made the deliberate choice to disassociate herself from the feminist movement. This way she was able, perhaps, to speak to a much broader audience, positioning her film within the realm of mainstream cinema.

Even though some of these postfeminist ideas of anti-feminism continue to persist today, the feminist movement became more intersectional, meaning much more inclusive and focused on

marginalised groups. This inclusivity, I believe, also prompted new understandings of the film itself. In the recent years, *Orlando* underwent a sort of revival. When I say revival, I mean that younger generations discovered the film and subsequently brought some new and fresh ideas to the discussion, moving away from the exclusive feminist vs. anti-feminist viewpoints. In their book *Orlando*, the author Russell Sheaffer points out how, when they teach the film in their Queer Cinema course, the students frequently interpret the film through the lens of trans and nonbinary perspectives. He continues by saying that these varied experiences while teaching *Orlando* consistently highlight the current, structural, and developing aspects of queerness that sparked their own admiration for the film (4). In another instance, the author Sam Moore states that “the complexity of gender – how it’s presented, performed, and what it means to appear as one binary gender or another – go to the heart of Orlando” (“The radically non-binary nature of Sally Potter’s *Orlando*”). Furthermore, the author Weston Leo Richey argues about the meaning of being trans in the film. In their article, they state that Orlando’s journey is, in fact, a quest for connection, and that

it’s tempting to intertwine Orlando’s quest for connection and Orlando’s transness as an odyssey that ends with fulfilment, to read his transness as powerful, important, or liberatory. [...] *Orlando* does not arc toward transness as salvific, symbolic, or rich with meaning. Instead, the movie’s performance of elusiveness demonstrates the shallowness of gender variance, the empty space where meaning should be (“On the Meaninglessness of Being Trans”).

After reading through recent books and articles on the film, it is visible that the discourse surrounding *Orlando* has undergone a notable shift. While the aim of my thesis has been to situate and interpret the film within its broader cultural and historical context, which gave me valuable insights into its connection with the postfeminist ideas of that time, I feel it is necessary to mention that the more recent work on *Orlando* opens up the film to new readings in line with new developments in thinking about gender and identity in particular.

If I were to look on *Orlando* through contemporary feminist lenses I would see (and understand) some of the discussed points differently. For me, *Orlando* is a transgender hero(ine) portrayed as an individual who questions and examines how gender is presented and performed. In fact, Sheaffer states that the film offers a multitude of queer readings, going hand in hand with the shift

towards non-binary understandings of queer identifications, and a continuously broadening range of LGBTQ+ identities (8). In one of these readings, one could say that Orlando's shift from a man to woman depicts the journey of self-discovery transgender individuals undertake. Indeed, the exploration of fluidity in gender identity is a central theme in *Orlando*, echoing the nuanced understanding of gender as a spectrum rather than a binary construct. The interaction between Orlando and Queen Elizabeth at the beginning of the film already challenges the notion of what performing gender looks like. Orlando, played by Tilda Swinton, and Queen Elizabeth, played by Quentin Crisp, bring an interesting dynamic to the screen, subverting the expectations on how gender is performed. Also, the fact the Quentin Crisp came out as trans later in their life and that Tilda Swinton is famously known for being androgynous brings an even more complex layer to their portrayal and interaction.

So, when Orlando transforms into a woman, we are left to wonder in what ways they did change. The shift, even though prompted by the atrocities he witnessed while serving as an ambassador, still feels as somewhat natural and intuitive. Orlando falls asleep and simply wake up as woman, no additional explanation. The transition is just a step in Orlando's journey of self-discovery. As Orlando returns to England, we can see that the change is happening outside of Orlando's mind and body. More specifically, what did change is other people's reception of Orlando. A good example of this is when Orlando re-enters the upper-class society. They are immediately made aware of the differences between men and women. When Lady Orlando is invited to a literary gathering (her love for poetry still persists), her butler warns her "but you could not possibly venture there. Alone" (*Orlando* 1:00:40-43). This short exchange only adds to female Orlando's restriction of movement she experiences after the transformation. And yet, it demonstrates how Orlando's interests and needs have not altered, but rather the world's perception of Orlando is the thing that has changed. In fact, Orlando's inner conflict becomes increasingly pronounced as they grapple with feelings of discomfort and alienation from their prescribed role. This internal struggle mirrors the experiences of many transgender individuals who feel a profound disconnect between their assigned gender and their true sense of self. It also shows the constraints of societal expectations and how they often dictate one's acceptance and freedom, reflecting the ongoing struggle for gender equality and understanding in contemporary society.

Another thing a contemporary spectator might discuss differently, and consequently not experience it as groundbreaking, is the breaking of the fourth wall. The first time I have seen *Orlando* was in my Reading Film class in 2019 and at the time I thought of it as very magical and dreamy. Breaking the fourth wall did not have that effect on me as it is something I had already seen lots of times in films such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), *Deadpool* (2016) or *Persuasion* (2022) and TV shows such as *House of Cards* (2013) and *Fleabag* (2016). The direct address of the audience does bring a more intimate and all-knowing effect – meaning, it can actively engage the audience, making them feel like participants rather than mere observers. Also, it can provide an insight into the protagonist’s thoughts, motivations, or the unfolding narrative. It allows for a more direct communication of information that might not be easily conveyed through traditional storytelling methods, which *Orlando* successfully achieved. And yet, from the point of view of a contemporary spectator, I do not see Orlando’s breaking of the fourth wall as innovative, but rather as another technique used to emphasise key moments in the film and build a more intimate connection between the viewer and Orlando.

Lastly, as already mentioned, *Orlando* is a great example of the postfeminist media’s influence in cinema. The film brings to the fore themes such as the deconstruction of gender norms where traditional gender norms and expectations are subverted through the protagonist who undergoes a transformation from a man to a woman and whose life spans centuries, prompting a critical examination of the fluidity and performative nature of gender. It also tackles societal impositions over individuals, highlighting the constraints Orlando experiences due to their gender, and the film prompts viewers to question and reflect on these dynamics. Moreover, at the heart of postfeminism is individualism (as opposed to collectivism in second wave feminism). Orlando’s journey, both physical and existential, explores the fluidity and construction of identity, aligning with postfeminist inquiries into self-expression and individuality. Consequently, *Orlando* is able to speak to a handful of people – whether they are heterosexual, homosexual, transgender, non-binary or queer: the need to make sense of one’s identity is a universal experience. And Orlando, almost unbothered and untouched by their transformation, is free to find themselves.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to explore which postfeminist notions can be found in Sally Potter's film *Orlando* and examine the ways in which this was done. In order to see how postfeminism is deemed in (Western) media and academic circles I have chosen to utilise Rosalind Gill's position that postfeminism should be regarded as a sensibility, an idea that does not view feminism, and consequently postfeminism, as something "set in stone" with a unifying definition. Instead, after the analysis of the term postfeminism, it can be concluded that it is a complex concept that generates several different (and sometimes conflicting) ideas. Therefore, it is not possible to produce a simple all-encompassing definition, but rather it is needed to regard postfeminism in the context of the historical period during which it arose.

Choosing *Orlando* for my thesis topic, I had to delve into heritage cinema and costume drama as well. In fact, *Orlando* could be described as a costume drama belonging to the British post-heritage cinema of the 1990s. Costume drama is a genre of film and television set in a particular historical period and is known for its meticulous attention to the recreation of the era's fashion, settings, and social norms. Costume dramas are also known for their focus on romance and relationships, oftentimes in rich and lavish settings. Therefore, *Orlando* is a perfect example of a costume drama, with Orlando's quest for love and relationships in the middle, accompanied by beautifully designed sets and rich costumes. Furthermore, the film does not fall into the heritage label completely because heritage cinema is often described as a genre of film recreating or revisiting historical periods, events, and settings with an undertone of nostalgia for the past. *Orlando* does not express these kinds of sentiments. Instead, it addresses issues such as colonialism and imperialism, simultaneously bringing forward topics like androgyny and gender-fluidity. This awareness of British colonial practices and exploration of non-traditional gender identities is what makes *Orlando* a post-heritage film.

Indeed, *Orlando* falls perfectly into the postfeminist category of conflicting idea(l)s. Potter denounces the word "feminism," stating that we have reached the time and place where there is no need to fight for any kind of equality anymore. She brings forward the notion of androgyny while expanding Orlando's journey as a quest for an "essential self," an entity free from the impositions of sexes. This is a concept discussed by Woolf as well, who eventually acknowledged there is a significant societal impact on the construction of gender. Potter had to

make several changes to the plot and narrative in order to accommodate her understanding of the essential self. By opting for these alterations (such as changing the beginning and ending, and giving Orlando a daughter), Potter tried to oversimplify the complexities of gender, presenting it not as an interplay of cultural factors but as a restrictive confinement that can only be escaped by finding the inherent qualities within oneself that surpass traditional gender boundaries.

Furthermore, Potter examined imperialistic depictions often found in British cinema. As I already stated, *Orlando* belongs to the post-heritage cinema movement as Potter revisits British colonial past in a scrutinising way. In fact, through her portrayal of Orlando and the Khan, she tries to exaggerate the British imperialistic worldview to the point of absurdity. By questioning how the “Other” is depicted in British cinema, Potter challenges the audiences’ expectations and consequently opens up a space for a discussion and reflection of these practices.

Lastly, *Orlando* has found a new place within the contemporary audience. This newfound interest brought novel readings and ideas, especially concerning queerness and non-binary. Therefore, when looked at from a contemporary feminist point of view (while at the same time distancing oneself from Potter’s ideas on “essential self”), *Orlando* becomes a great example of queer cinema. The film brings forward themes such as gender performance. Through its performances of the characters of Orlando and Queen Elizabeth I, it subverts conventional expectations of gender presentation, inviting viewers to question and redefine their understanding of what it means to perform gender. This is inevitably followed by notions of gender fluidity, as well as transgenderism. Orlando’s transformation is shown as a natural and spontaneous process, something that was bound to happen in their 400 years of living. Through Orlando’s transition one could outline the challenges and hardships transgender individuals endure, especially when concerned with how society views them. And yet, Orlando’s sense of identity is not tied to gender conventions as they still feel and act the same after their transition. To them, only their body has changed. This simple, yet powerful declaration, “Same person. No difference at all. Just a different sex” (*Orlando* 57:22-32), opens up a space for a discussion about gender identities, questioning whether we can really place them in simple binary constructs. It shows that there are many diverse ways in which individuals experience and express their gender identity, moving beyond rigid categories to embrace a more expansive understanding of gender as a spectrum.



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