

Notes on the Adaptation of the Book *Orlando*, by Sally Potter (1992)

My task with the adaptation of Virginia Woolf's book for the screen was to find a way of remaining true to the spirit of the book and to Virginia Woolf's intentions, whilst being ruthless with changing the book in any way necessary to make it work cinematically.

It would have been a disservice to Virginia Woolf to remain slavish to the letter of the book, for just as she was always a writer who engaged with writing and the form of the novel, similarly the film needed to engage with the energy of cinema. And although the book was already a distillation of 400 years of English history (albeit an imagined view of that history, told with a liberal amount of poetic license), the film needed to distill even further.

The most immediate changes were structural. The storyline was simplified - any events which did not significantly further Orlando's story were dropped.

The narrative also needed to be *driven*. Whereas the novel could withstand abstraction and arbitrariness (such as Orlando's change of sex) cinema is more pragmatic. There had to be reasons - however flimsy - to propel us along a journey based itself on a kind of suspension of disbelief.

Thus, Queen Elizabeth bestows Orlando's long life upon him ("Do not fade, do not wither, do not grow old...") whereas in the book it remains unexplained. And Orlando's change of sex in the film is the result of his having reached a crisis point - a crisis of masculine identity. On the battlefield he looks death and destruction in the face and faces the challenge of kill or be killed. It is Orlando's unwillingness to conform to what is expected of him as a man that leads - within the logic of the film - to his change of sex. Later, of course, as a woman, Orlando finds that she cannot conform to what is expected of her as a female either, and makes a series of choices, which leave her, unlike in the book, without marriage or property - and with a daughter, not a son.

These latter changes seemed to me entirely consistent with Virginia Woolf's views in her other works on the condition of women's lives (especially *A Room of One's Own*) and crisply logical within the framework set up in the earlier part of the story.

Orlando is at its heart a story of loss - the loss of time as it passes - a meditation on the impermanence of love, power, and politics. I simply carried that logic through to include Orlando's loss of property and status in the 20th century. Whilst the loss of property in the story is a symptom of the second-class status of women, there is also an aspect, which is worthy of celebration: the loss of privilege and status based on an outdated English class system.

Orlando was of course originally written as a spoof biography of Vita Sackville-West. Where the book holds most tightly to apparent biographical facts it occasionally loses its power as a story (such as Orlando's "keeping" the house at the end of the book - which was a way for Virginia Woolf to restore the lost Knole to Vita Sackville-West).

I tried to restore *Orlando* on film to a view more consistently detached and biting ironic in its view of the English class system and the colonial attitudes arising from it.

At the same time I needed to ensure that Orlando was a loveable character. The clue was to highlight Orlando's essential innocence. He happens to have been born into a class, a place and time, and is shaped by it - but as the essential human being remains; the patterns of behavior and attitude are transformed.

Other obvious changes from the book include dialogue (and poems) which have been invented from sometimes slender clues on the page - and Orlando's words and looks to the camera which were intended as an equivalent both of Virginia Woolf's direct addresses to her readers and to try to convert Virginia Woolf's literary wit into cinematic humor at which people could laugh out loud.

Finally, the ending of the film needed to be brought into the present in order to remain true to Virginia Woolf's use of real-time at the end of the novel (where the story finishes just as she puts down her pen to finish the book). Coming up to the present day meant acknowledging some key events of the 20th century - the two world wars, the electronic revolution - the contraction of space through time reinvented by speed. But the film ends somewhere between heaven and earth in a place of ecstatic communion with the present moment. (Extrait du dossier de presse https://www.sonyclassics.com/orlando/orlando_presskit.pdf)

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"[The novel *Orlando*] is more broadly about history, identity, reading, writing and remembering. Although Woolf works in a lot of literary jokes, we are not making a film about literature. What interests me is how the book explores the way the English place themselves in the world in relation to their past. There is an addiction in English culture to mythologies of the past, which is not the same thing as having a sense of history. And many of these mythologies are rooted in the reign of Elizabeth I, which provides the origin for a particular understanding of national identity. It is a familiar accusation that the English are unable to let go of the past. In the film, Orlando gradually achieves this: she loses everything, but gains herself in the process." (Sally Potter quoted in "Fire and Ice" by Verina Glaessner, *Sight and Sound*, August 1992 : https://www.uah.edu/woolf/orlando_sq.htm)