

Les Films du Poisson, 24images and Arte present

ORLANDO

MY POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

A FILM BY PAUL B. PRECIADO







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France, 98 min, Documentary, 16:9

World Premiere - Encounters Selection
Berlin, February, 18th 2023

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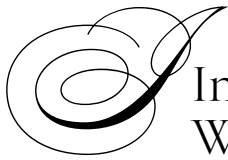
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POWER
TO THE
PEOPLE

LOGLINE



In 1928, Virginia Woolf wrote *Orlando*, the first novel in which the main character changes sex in the middle of the story. A century later, trans writer and activist Paul B. Preciado decides to send a film letter to Virginia Woolf: her *Orlando* has come out of her fiction and is living a life she could have never imagined.



SYNOPSIS



A century after the publication of “Orlando: a biography” by Virginia Woolf, Paul B. Preciado, philosopher and trans activist, addresses a letter to tell her that her character has come true: the world is becoming Orlandesque. Preciado calls a cast: “Who are the contemporary Orlandos?” 25 different people, all trans and non-binary, from 8 years old to 70 who come to play Woolf’s fictional character while also narrating their own lives; and a series of mid twentieth century trans archives that evoke the real historical Orlandos in their struggle for recognition and visibility.

The spectator gradually finds Orlando’s bearings as the portrait emerges of a collective being with multiple faces, voices, bodies. The film follows the same structure as the Virginia Woolf’s novel: a travel diary through history, both intimate and political. “I first read Woolf’s book when I was a teenager in Spain, well before I knew that gender transitioning was possible. Woolf’s fictional character allowed me to imagine my own life, to desire and to embody change. It turns out that with the years, I have become an Orlando. My biography is made of the collective history of thousands of invisible Orlandos. It is a history of struggle within an oppressive gender and sex binary regime. Being trans is not just to transition from femininity to masculinity (or vice versa), but to engage in a process of internal “orlandisation”: a poetic journey in which a new language to name oneself and the world is invented.”

A gender transition is a transformative voyage, a movement of disidentification, a practice of freedom, rather than a mere production of identity. Thus, the film draws the portrait of a changing world and the ongoing gender and non-binary revolution.

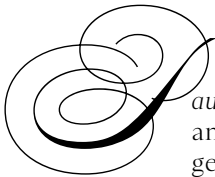
Link to trailer

<https://vimeo.com/790886599/8329e8366c>





PAUL B. PRECIADO



Paul B. Preciado is a writer, philosopher, curator, and one of the leading thinkers in the study of gender and body politics. Among his different assignments, he has been Curator of Public Programs of documenta 14 (Kassel/Athens), Curator of the Taiwan Pavilion in Venice in 2019, and Head of Research of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (MACBA). His books, *Counter-sexual Manifesto* (Columbia University Press); *Testo Junkie* (The Feminist Press); *Pornotopia* (Zone Books); *An Apartment in Uranus* (Semiotexte and Fitzcarraldo), and *Can the Monster Speak* (Semiotexte and Fitzcarraldo), and *Dysphoria Mundi* (Grasset, Graywolf and Fitzcarraldo) are a key reference to queer, trans and non-binary contemporary art and activism. He was born in Spain and lives in Paris.



IN CONVERSATION WITH PAUL B. PRECIADO



When did you first read Orlando by Virginia Woolf, and at what point did the desire to make an “adaptation” of it, or rather use it as a starting point for a potential autobiography arise?



I read Woolf’s book as a teenager in Spain. It was the first time I’d ever read or heard a story in which the main character changed gender in the middle of the story. Reading it was a shock. And yet, at the time, I wasn’t thinking of becoming a trans person like I am today in the sense that even the political existence of a trans person was completely unknown to me back then in the mid 80s. But reading the book probably made this transformation possible somewhere in my imagination. This is why this book is crucial for me: my future existence became possible not in reality but in fiction and thanks to fiction.

Orlando, this “foundational narrative” as you call it, has accompanied you since adolescence?

No, not that long. I didn’t read it again for years. When Sally Potter’s film adaptation of *Orlando* came out, *Orlando* became punctually present again. But Sally Potter’s film was disappointing for trans and non-binary people like me. It’s very much anchored in a culture of tranvestism, of a binary imagination, and a gay aesthetic that is fascinating if you’re interested in the London of the 80s and 90s, but which has paradoxically contributed to making trans and non-binary culture invisible. I love Tilda Swinton but, unfortunately, she couldn’t play Orlando without erasing the gender transition. So, in a way, Potter’s film distanced me from the book.

Then, the book also might have come back to me when I started to realize the extent to which it existed outside



© Pierre et Gilles, Sunset on Uranus, Paul B. Preciado, 2022

the traditional narratives; I'm thinking of the stories that formed the backbone of the construction of transsexuality as a psychopathology in the 20th century; the trans person as an asocial person, the trans person as a criminal, the trans person as a danger to "natural femininity". But, in 1928, that is to say, while these powerfully pathologizing medical and media narratives on sex change were beginning to take shape, Virginia Woolf took a step aside and proposed a poetic, almost metaphysical version of gender transition.

Orlando goes beyond the social fantasy...

Yes. We can look at Hitchcock's *Psycho*, one of the first mainstream hits in the history of film, as the seminal film of a construction of fear around the figure of the trans person, with the invention of the trans person as mentally ill and a serial killer. It would almost be funny if the fantasy hadn't persisted in the mainstream discourse of anti-trans feminism where it's necessary to defend oneself against men who dress as women to attack them in restrooms... When has that ever happened in history outside of horror films? From *Pyscho*, to Brian de Palma's *Dressed to Kill* or *The Silence of the Lambs* and on to Julia Ducournau's *Titane*, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2021, this necropolitical representation of trans people remains dominant in film to this day, despite increasing visibility and legal recognition. We talk a lot about the hegemony of the "male gaze", but we should also talk about the "binary gaze", and its pervasiveness in the history of cinema.

When did you, as a philosopher, think about reworking Orlando and, moreover, in the form of a film?

Over the years, *Orlando* has become a talismanic book for me, and I ended up taking it with me on many trips. Even when I didn't it have it with me, when I was traveling too much, it would happen that I would arrive at a hotel and discover that the book was there on a table or at the library hotels made available for their clientele. As if it were waiting for me. I gradually came to think of *Orlando* as a counter-trans-history or a dissident heterotopia that allows you to invent an exit from the regime of sexual difference. From there to making it something that takes

the place of a film... The impetus came from ARTE, which was preparing to develop queer programming and, after lengthy exchanges, wanted to make a film about me. My first reaction was to think, "Let's clear this up right now!" So, I went to see them with the intention of politely refusing this proposal, as well-intentioned as it was. After a fairly long conversation, I proposed some alternatives: make a film about Monique Wittig, that's more urgent! Or about the Commandos Saucisson in the 1970s or the Gazolines (*a group from the Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire, or Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action, an autonomous Parisian movement founded in 1971 resulting from a collaboration between lesbian feminists and gay activists*) from the same era...! Then, silence: it didn't ring any bells for them, and the references fell flat. So, in a last-ditch effort, I tried to tell them: If you want to make a film about my gender transition, make a film about Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

So, that's where the line at the beginning of your film comes from: "My biography exists, and it's fucking Virginia Woolf who wrote it in 1928..."?

On this, at least, there was agreement from the channel. Everyone was familiar with the subject of *Orlando* and liked the idea of a cross dialogue between Virginia Woolf and me. "What if Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* were still alive? What if it was me? And what if it was me or others...? What if we looked for other Orlandos who are still alive and who bridge the gap between the written *Orlando* and me? They eventually said: "If anyone is going to direct it, it should be you...". I had no idea how to make a film as a director, but the chance to make a film as a philosopher instantly excited me: to make a film about my transition through a book written in 1928 and that takes place over 500 years. It was a crazy idea — a philosophical idea.

But beyond the circumstances, did you want to make films?

I'd spent ten years working with a lot of artists, people who are very dear to me: Virginie Despentes, Shu Lea Cheang, Dominique Gonzalez-Foester, Banu Cenetoglou, Roe Rosen, PostOp, Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens... and had seen them make films. I sometimes wrote proposals for them that looked like scripts, including a project

about the Marquis de Sade's obesity or the relationship between the philosophy of liberty and BDSM in Michel Foucault for Shu Lea Cheang on the occasion of the 2019 Venice Biennale. The work done with Liz Rosenfeld, who played Sade, or with Felix Maritaud, whom we chose to play Foucault, once again fascinated me. I'd spoken a lot with Dominique Gonzalez-Foester about the possibility of adapting one of my books into a filmed version of an opera. This is undoubtedly where the desire to make films originated: observing the passage from the written word and the filming mediated by bodies. It isn't a translation: it's a transformation, a cinematic transition as one might say a gender transition.

How did you work to achieve the current form of the film — that of a mille-feuille — which unfolds like a great collective economy of the narrative?

I started by taking out and rereading everything I had on Virginia Woolf. Confinement came soon after and I was able to really immerse myself in it. To the point of sometimes feeling like I was sharing the solitude of my Parisian apartment with Virginia Woolf. Then, when it became possible, I was able to visit her archives in New York. But in Paris, I'd already filled five notebooks with notes on Woolf alone. That was the preliminary work. It was impossible for me to take on this project without first learning about Woolf and undertaking a close rereading of her work from *Orlando* onward. *Orlando* is often considered a book apart, minor, bizarre compared to Woolf's major works like *The Waves* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. For me, it's the opposite: reading it today, it sheds a different light on the entirety of Woolf's work. It isn't the blind spot, but rather the invisible infrastructure. It was at that moment that the form of the film was born, which would be a letter to Virginia Woolf. She committed suicide in 1941, at the age of 59, but her *Orlando* lives on, and much more so than she could have ever imagined.

Despite its title, Orlando: My Political Biography is not a film about Orlando. Nor is it a biography of Paul B Preciado. It is, however, a work on the political dimension of a narrative you've taken seriously, as a myth of sexual

indifference. Is Orlando still a fiction in your rereading? Is it already absolutely a documentary?

I wouldn't say sexual indifference but rather the invention of a non-binary paradigm. That's very important to me. And it's the same for the segmentation between fiction and documentary. I didn't want to choose between one genre and another. Once again. I wanted to make a non-binary film. Throughout history, *Orlando* has been read in different and datable ways. In 1928, it was like a mockery, a science fiction novel like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, if not a picaresque novel. In the 1960s, the book was reread as feminist. A critique of the patriarchal society of the 19th century. Then, in the 1980s, it was reread as a lesbian story. *Orlando* as an autobiography of the loving entity formed by Vita and Virginia. The book is now starting to be read from the point of view of trans politics. I wanted to make a non-binary reading of *Orlando*. In fact, I think of Virginia Woolf as a non-binary author. If she were alive today, she would probably say "they" ("iel" in French) to talk about herself. This is what sheds light on the point that's been debated for decades about Virginia Woolf's rejection of adopting a naturalistic feminist commitment. I personally think it's simply because she didn't only feel like a woman. She didn't fit into marriage either. She never just saw herself as a heterosexual woman. And that's what enabled her, from that place of eccentricity, to decode the games with masculinity and femininity of her time with such acuity.

The film also weaves a story of trans bodies that starts at the end of the 20s and continues through the 50s and 70s/80s before becoming a part of contemporary history...

In this film, I wanted to resist the temptation to play on the character's gender transformation as a medical, media, or pornographic show — starting with a boy and ending with a girl or a woman. For me, all the Orlandos are non-binary. They are everything all at once, both boys and girls, and none of any of it. We had to be careful that the film didn't binarize Virginia Woolf, by starting, as a reflex, from women's literature, for example, or the obsession to show the sex change. What interests me in the film is taking a snapshot of a world in epistemological transition, of the passage from a binary and patriarchal epistemology

to another way of thinking about subjectivity, the body, and love.

Is the first question you ask yourself as a filmmaker one about representation?

For a trans person, the question of representation is a question of life or death. The possibility of being considered a member of society, as a political subject, and not simply as a mentally ill person or a pathological case depends on the representation of the body and of subjectivity. That is why cinema is becoming crucial, both politically and philosophically at the same time. Filming an *Orlando* was a way for me to break away from the normative trans narratives. The terrifying primacy that medical, psychiatric, and psychoanalytical discourse has undertaken vis à vis the body and sexuality; this doesn't only concern the question of trans people, it concerns all of us. And this is fairly recent history. Before the 19th century, in the West at least, the narrative about sexuality was theological. The notion of sexuality didn't even exist. We used to talk about "the flesh", a word that was linked to temptation, to sin. The body was thus merely an envelope for the spirit. Then, starting at the end of the 18th century, and Sade comes onto the stage at this point, sexuality emerged as such, and a space for desire along with it. It was the time of the libertines, of the boudoir, it was the great moment of literature, of the need for a narrative, for the relationship between writing and desire. But it was also the moment of crystallization of the heteronormative and colonial culture. The space was very quickly territorialized by medical and psychiatric discourse and normative pornography. I was interested in *Orlando* because it offered the possibility of going back to that time before the capture by the medical, and also cinematic, discourse.

The very first image we see in the film is of you being filmed as an activist...

Yes... but I'm putting up poetry!!! (laughs) In a public space, ok. But now, I'm 50, and I've been doing politics differently for 35 years. I stopped working with collectives around ten years ago to move into other spaces like museums. But, once again, I wanted to bring together bodies

that are non-institutionalized. And not necessarily artists' bodies. No, bodies that were trying to tell their stories. And here, the film took precedence over my own ideas. It's the film that decided on this turn towards the collective. I didn't think about it straightaway. The cinema demanded it. I didn't want to physically embody the film on my own. I am not Orlando. Orlando is a political horizon, a collective Utopia. I am present in the film, mostly as a voice over. But the voice is also the body, contrary to the academic idea of cinema that favors image over sound.

Orlando is you and, immediately, it is most importantly not ONLY you...

And I started looking for bodies other than my own. Although I'd already taken the structures from the book and rewritten scenes in the first person. The real intervention of the film is the transition from the third person (that of Woolf's text) to the first person, and in the process, the question for me as to who could say this or that passage in the first person. So, we held auditions two years ago.

An audition during which you asked the unusual question: "What's your favorite line from Orlando...?" ...

Yes, I wanted there to be a connection between the book and the actors who auditioned. Insofar as they were potential modern-day Orlandos of all ages. One hundred Orlandos auditioned. Ultimately, there are 27 Orlandos in the film, ranging in age from 8 to 70. This immediately allowed me to see what that connection with *Orlando* was made of and, in a way, when I received the short films in which they introduced themselves to me and talked about the book, the film was already starting to write itself in a way that was different, intimate, and political all at once, with an interplay between what comes from the book, what comes from its transcription into the first person, and what comes from them.

How did you work?

We read *Orlando* together. And then, something incredible began to happen that sometimes occurs in political groups: we were talking about ourselves, about what was happening to us, but we were saying it in Virginia Woolf's

words. We thought of filming these groups as a political process, but quickly gave up on the idea: it exposed a fragility that I didn't want to show. I always think of the words of the feminist theorist Lucy Lippard: "*Don't film the processes of oppression, but instead the processes of political subjectivation.*" It's very different. It obliges you to pay attention to absolutely everything you're showing. We told ourselves: we're going to collectively invent a process of critical subjectivation with *Orlando*. And we're going to film it, and we'll see what it produces. We had to read it without a camera, just in a reading group, to get to know each other through the book. That allowed each person to grasp the text, to incorporate it to the point where, during certain moments in the film, we no longer know who is talking: Virginia Woolf, Paul B., or another trans or non-binary person who is on-screen. For example, I find that when Ruben, one of the younger trans people in the film, reads *Orlando*, or when Jenny Bel'Air, a mythical figure of the trans movement in France, repeats Orlando's lines in the first person, the book effectively transforms.

How did you come up with your staging? There's a constant transformation that starts with images with nature, then shots revealing the tricks of the staging. Then, yet another transformation wherein you move towards more classic documentary writing. And lastly, we'll come back to this, you finish with a tour de force, which is the scene of the operating table...

Yes, it ended up also changing the approach to the staging. When the film shows the behind-the-scenes of the set and deconstructs the representation, it doesn't only stop at the deconstruction of cinema – we've seen it often: it occurs because we are deconstructing gender. A montage of bodies. Gender is a montage effect. From the 20th century onward, the structure of subjectivity has been cinematic. The other thing is that I didn't want to give up beauty, because the dominant representation of gender transitioning has made us out as monsters. I have a certain aversion, if not anger, towards films made about trans people in which they feel obliged to use violent, creepy, porno-gore cinematography, an objectifying gaze somewhere between surveillance and pornographic exoticism.

It's not just a matter of disgust; it's a gaze that I call *necropolitical*, a gaze that kills. It's been going on for decades. It's about the destruction of trans people through image. A scopoc culture comes to destroy you. So, yes, I wanted a film that's beautiful and punk at the same time. I wanted to invent a non-binary and trans beauty. I wanted and needed it to be poetic. The eye of my cinematographer, Victor Zébo, was decisive in making the film: his way of showing things without objectifying them, of trying to find a place of visibility beyond the colonial and binary gaze, of letting the body come towards the camera, of creating a gap, a space of freedom between the gaze of the non-actors and that of the camera. So that we enter the film through poetry, through sensory images, through light. Because trans people are alive.

However, the film doesn't hide behind beauty, poetry, or utopia in action; difficulties, particularly the administrative ones, are at the heart of the most historic part of the film — the one where the archives recall something called a long struggle...

To make the film, I started by researching the representation of trans people in both film and in the media. I did this research in a more theoretical way for my books, but for this, I did it physically with an archivist who asked for rushes from this or that television channel... But there's a risk in incorporating these archives, this history, and that is that they could end up devouring the entire film. And the editing done on these rushes, on the place to give them, on the time to broadcast them, allowed me to weave a relationship between the historic representation of trans people and trans lives today.

The question of the economics of the film quickly came up. I wanted to make a philosophical film that also tells the story of my transition, the history of trans people, and that of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. But with what means? Philosophy is a very DIY medium in reality; you don't need anything (just time and your intelligence) to be able to do it. And it offers an enormous amount of freedom. But filmmaking is another matter entirely. The idea of making an *Orlando*, neither fiction nor documentary, with 25 actors and non-actors who are going to play the main character,

proved to be very challenging on a small budget. I activated a whole production process with Les Films du Poisson and 24 Images, my producers, Annie Ohayon-Dekel and Yaël Fogiel, and with help from the Centre Pompidou for certain spaces, to get, for example, a better camera, a studio, or longer editing time. I started shooting scenes with only 2 Orlandos to see if I was capable of making a film with this premise: to tell a personal and collective story based on the words and images of Virginia Woolf. The line I most often heard during the process of making the film was: “That’s not the way you do it.” But I wanted to do things differently, to make a film the way you do a demonstration or a fanzine. I worked in feedback between shooting and editing. I instantly loved editing as a philosophical exercise, as an interruption of the repetition of the history of violence through the image, to borrow the words of Walter Benjamin. The film’s editor, Yotam Ben David greatly contributed to finding the language and rhythm of the film. We share a queer image culture and we both knew what we didn’t want. At the risk of moving away from an academic grammar, we sought to avoid the dominant narrative on gender transitioning.

Your film reminds us that Christine Jorgensen (American, first person in the world known to have undergone a sexual reassignment surgery in Denmark in the early 1950s) worked as a film editor...

It was the trans researcher Susan Stryker who told me about this story. Jorgensen, who was a film editor, developed a cinematic theory on trans subjectivity: “Being trans”, she said, “means editing, having the right to edit one’s life differently.” Contemporary subjectivity is made cinematically. We are the effect of a process of editing. But this isn’t specific to trans identity: contemporary subjectivity as a whole is the product of editing. The question is: who is filming, who has access to the editing room, and who has the final cut?

*Interview by Philippe Azoury in Paris, Belleville,
Tuesday, January 23, 2023.*

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Violence was all.



CAST

Orlando

(in order of appearance)

Paul B. Preciado

Oscar S Miller

Janis Sahraoui

Liz Christin

Elios Levy

Victor Marzouk

Kori Ceballos

Vanasay Khamphommala

Ruben Rizza

Julia Jimmy Postollec

Amir Baylly

Naelle Dariya

Jenny Bel'Air

Emma Avena

Lilie Vincent

Artur Verri

Eléonore Lorent

La Bourette

Noam Iroual

Iris Crosnier

Clara Deshayes

Sasha: Castiel Emery

Goddess of Hormones: Tristana Gray Martyr

Goddess of Gender Fucking: Le Filip

Goddess of Insurrection: Miss Drinks

Psychiatrist: Frédéric Pierrot

Judge: Virginie Despentès

Armory Salesman: Nathan Callot

Doctors: Pierre et Gilles

Receptionist: Tom Dekel

Orlando's Dogs: Rilke & Pompom

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CREDITS

Director and scriptwriter

Paul B. Preciado

DOP

Victor Zebo

Editor

Yotam Ben David

Sound

Arno Ledoux

Sound editor and Mix

Olivier Goinard

Music

Clara Deshayes

Produced by

Les Films du Poisson, Yaël Fogiel, Laetitia Gonzalez

Coproduced by

24images, Annie Ohayon-Dekel, Farid Rezkallah

ARTE France

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