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Time and Technology in Woolf and Potter's *Orlando*

Abstract

Technologies of time are central to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, symbolism that is equally present in Sally Potter's film adaptation of the novel. Both Woolf and Potter advance narratives that detail a journey through time, achieved through an exploration of external devices, all of which serve to embody the self, and resolve it with the surrounding environment. In this paper, the concept of external devices, specifically in relation to technologies of time, as examined in both Woolf's novel and Potter's adaptation, will be analysed thematically. This paper will begin with a delineation of social and cultural theories relevant to this discourse, before offering theoretically-informed criticism of the aforementioned works.

Keywords: *Orlando*, Time, Technology

"Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?" Such was the question posed by Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers in a 1998 issue of *Analysis*, the central thesis of which was to identify the point of demarcation between the body and the external environment (*The Extended Mind* 27). Their theory is one of "active externalism", within which the "relevant parts of the world" are seen as contributors to human cognition (29). One such analogy that they use in the defence of their theory is that of the amnesic villagers in *100 Years of Solitude* – by attaching labels to objects, they attempt to overcome their condition (37). Cognitive apparatus, thus, are technologies, or more simply, man-made artefacts, which referentially assist in our neural calculations; our ability to make sense of the world around us through evocative objects. These artefacts are memory media, instruments which form a connection between the mind and an external memory field. "We depend on external cues," argues Merlin Donald, cues which provide "our awareness with a stable framework" (21) so that we might develop a sense of self, a "convenient fiction" facilitated through culture (40), which allows us to traverse the existence which we have constructed for ourselves through such external devices. The clock is such an instrument, a technology of time central to the symbolism of *Orlando* and its complex dealings on the matter. Theories of consciousness, expressed by Clark, Chalmers and Donald, are but formalised psychological frameworks of that which was already explored in 1928 through the fiction of Virginia Woolf, who, in *Orlando*, examines "how different contexts, including spatial as well as temporal contexts, require different selves" (Goldman 68). Many cognitivists adhere to this thesis, and contend that, were it not for our capability to create and use symbolic tools like the clock, there would be chaos – the dominion of social and cultural constructs would halt were it not for our instruments. In this essay, I hope to explore time, and the symbol of the clock as a technology of time, as represented in both Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* and Sally Potter's film

adaptation, *Orlando*, delineating its significance in relation to the treatment of time in both works. I will argue that Woolf, and Potter, present two texts which problematise the notion of time, technologies of time and the importance of external memory media of a cultural origin. For the purposes of this essay, I will refer to both works as *Orlando*, and collectively, unless distinguished otherwise.

Time is interrogated in *Orlando*, a narrative which sees the life of its protagonist span some four centuries, from the reign of Elizabeth I to, in the novel, "Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen hundred and Twenty Eight" (215), and in Potter's film, sometime close to the release of the film in 1992, as signified by the director's use of Jimmy Somerville's song, "Coming", released in 1993 as a promotional single in the US. Somerville plays the part of the angel that appears at the end of the film – incidentally singing in the falsetto register, which ties in with text's problematisation of gender – which suggests that the director sought to conclude her narrative's passage with precision emblematic of Woolf's approach, as Somerville and the song are entities with which the viewer can contextualise the date on which the relevant scene occurs. Both Potter's rendition and Woolf's novel are laden with contextual devices – the recital of *Othello*; the presence of Queen Elizabeth I; the negotiations between King Charles II and the Turks – serve as a reminder that both Woolf and Potter are conscious of the importance of external instruments in our relationship to time. Somerville's song choice additionally serves to reiterate much of the film's sentiment: "Yes at last, at last / to be free of the past / and the future that beckons me" (Potter). Somerville's lyrics, to my mind, do not necessarily celebrate a freedom from the past and an embracing of the future, but rather, celebrate a freedom from both the past and a future that beckons, perhaps undesirably, or forcefully. Even the regenerative powers of the future, so often championed by cultural works associated with time, are problematised. These lyrics reflect Woolf and Potter's rejection of conventional time, the undisputed beginning, middle and end; the past, present and future. Time in *Orlando* is more akin to that proffered by Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity, which Potter makes clear not only in the aforementioned lyrics, but right from the outset of her film, where, shortly after "1600" is displayed on the screen, we are presented with the word "DEATH". Potter inverts time by explicitly associating death with the beginning of her narrative, a practise of inversion which is consistent throughout the film, birth reserved for the closing scenes. Let us delineate this issue further as we progress; turning our attention to the clock as a technology of time and symbol within *Orlando*.

The clock is a man-made artefact, an instrument which offers an objective means through which we can measure time and thus function socially, yet "[c]lock time threatens an individual's sense of continuity, because it takes no account of the lived experience of time," (Hussey 122), a contention that will be explored in greater depth throughout this discourse. Indeed, the clock is a barometer of time, but solely of objective time, and time can be manifested both objectively and subjectively. Subjective time is a more complex matter, as while a minute will always be sixty seconds on the clock, a minute may be any number of seconds to the self, a reflection that is aptly

portrayed in *Orlando's* narrative progression: where the events of a single day can occupy pages, decades are traversed in a line. Furthermore, this tension is explicitly outlined by the narrator, though it is some time yet before the protagonist comes to a similar conclusion:

> […] Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. (59)

As already noted, it is in such ways that we evolve as conscious and social creatures, as Mead states in his seminal text on the self and society:

> The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process. (135)

Woolf and Potter explore this concept in very similar fashions; time and its technologies the tools with which they do so. For now, let us remain focused on the clock, before expanding outwards to the notion of time and its problematisation in a broader sense. The clock chimes throughout Woolf's *Orlando*, sounding, it would seem, alongside many of Orlando's most troubling moments. Woolf's clock rings "remorselessly" to confirm the "superstition of a lover"; "her deceit and his derision" (34), a scene which is powerfully re-enacted in Potter's adaptation, but without the clock's chime. Where Woolf relies on the clock, Potter makes use of other technologies of time, as we will discuss in due course.

Woolf's awareness of time as both an objective and subjective measure is made apparent through her use of the clock. It not only sounds in greeting to Orlando's many personal milestones, but it heralds in an entirely new age:

> Orlando then for the first time noticed a small cloud gathered behind the dome of St. Paul's. As the stroke sounded, the cloud increased, and she saw it darken and spread with extraordinary speed. [...] With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun. (144-145)

"All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion" problematises conventional periodisation. Female oppression did not immediately evaporate with the close of the Victorian age, and to make cultural distinctions in such a chronological fashion is, to Woolf, an arbitrary endeavour. The objective clock may well be a cultural tool to which we refer for a necessary framework, but its significance is questioned when Orlando demonstrates difficulty in identifying with any culture, regardless of the time or period. Orlando is always having to fit into culture; culture never seems to suit Orlando: she is oppressed by English property laws; bored by the world of the Archduke; misplaced within the society of the Turks; frustrated by the clothing of women and angered by the attitudes found within literary circles. Orlando's dichotomous relationship with time is one in which the subjective holds the greater significance. Orlando does not realise this herself until the final chapter of the novel, at which point the stream-of-consciousness technique allows the author to achieve, firstly, an internalised version of her protagonist, thus allowing us to see that Orlando has indeed realised the great subjectivity of time, and secondly, suggest that she too, as an author, has come to this conclusion, signified by her adoption of this particular modernist and extremely introverted style late in the narrative. These final passages, in which Orlando realises the dialogic nature of her species, all emerge from her identification of the tension between objective and subjective constructs of time, her coming to terms with the "extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in mind" (59).

Hussey states that "Woolf's concept of time is essentially Romantic", forwarding the following argument, based on such a premise:

> A sense of transcience, of the deficiencies of human life in time, pervades her writing and, with no belief in a supernatural agency, any possibility of transcending the horizon of time must be rooted in actual experience. (116)

My own position is such that, in *Orlando*, Woolf isn't suggesting that there is that which transcends time, but rather, that subjective time transcends its objective counterpart. This position is continually reinforced through the image of the clock as a technology of time. The clock chimes to mark Sasha's deceit, and later Orlando is "assaulted" by the clock (200). When Orlando fails to wake at his "usual time" – "a quarter to eight, precisely" (39) – his groom is alarmed because of the relation between Orlando and this objective measure: he arises at a precise time each morning, and when he fails to do so, there is immediate alarm, alarm which arises because Orlando is not behaving in accordance with objective time as determined by the clock. Even though we create time, and it has absolute social power, it doesn't hold absolute personal power, as we all experience it differently. The conclusion of this is that technologies of time are not absolute, and are simply instruments designed for convenience. Even the clock as an objective power is problematised by Woolf. It's validity as an objective object is reiterated each time the narrator feels to need to specify the time at which the clock

strikes – regardless of the symbolic connotations, the clock simply sounds its knell at a time predetermined by the machinations of man – but even this absolute objectivity is inverted, and what once "assaulted" Orlando and marked his "derision" becomes the very thing that signals the personal triumph which she secures at the last. To further reiterate, Woolf sets up a tension with nature. The clock holds no dominion over the timepiece of the subconscious, she suggests, for while the consensus would generally hold that objective time as a technology is based on around our activities, our thoughts and feelings measured through subjective time, in *Orlando*, Sasha's emotions, her comings and goings, are regulated by the seasons. Her activities, her schedule, that which would traditionally be regulated by the clock, are in the text at the mercy of the elements, for when the ice cracks, she departs. It seems that Woolf constructs her narrative around the symbol of the clock so that she might deconstruct its linear constitution, casting the present in something of an ignominious role within a temporal classification system which she utterly rejects.

As noted earlier, Potter places less emphasis on the clock, but nonetheless uses technology and its relation to time in a complex manner. Potter, in a typically modernist fashion, alludes to another work by Woolf. In *Mrs Dalloway*, "[t]he distinction between psychological time and clock time, the *durée* and *temps* of Bergson's philosophy, underlies the modernist experiments with time and narrative form" (Whitworth 146), a comparison which may of course be drawn with Woolf's *Orlando*, but also with the way in which Potter utilises technology. Potter insists on defamiliarising established narrative conventions with her associations between the beginning and death and the birth and the end, as remarked upon previously, and her inward allusions, present throughout: the Archduke commenting, ironically to Orlando, that the Turks don't hold punctuality in high regard; the portrait on the wall seen hanging in the house during the modern era. Potter uses these modernist techniques to show that no such forced dichotomy can form a lasting relationship, faithfully depicting Woolf's "world where the shredding and slicing of clock time is challenged by the complex intermingling of past and present" (153). It is perhaps worth noting that Woolf also takes such an approach in *Jacob's Room*, depicting time "as a relentlessly flowing continuum which brings the past into the future but also, paradoxically, as the agent of a kind of constancy" (Deiman 52), showing consistency in her philosophical position and attempts to defamiliarise time as an established convention. Potter's *Orlando* is not entirely modernist in its aesthetic, however, and is in many respects a work of postmodernism. The scene in which Shelmerdine and Orlando spot a train, sees the former reply, "the future", to Orlando's question, "what's that?" This of course alludes to a similar scene in the novel, which in itself alludes to the aeroplane passage in *Mrs Dalloway*: "Away and away the aeroplane shot, till it was nothing but a bright spark; an aspiration; a concentration; a symbol" (30). Modernist art provokes new ideas through the use of original techniques, reinforced by cultural comparisons pronounced through allusion. Potter is alluding to Woolf as Woolf is alluding to other works within her own canon, a commentary perhaps on the dialogic realisation that Orlando comes to at the end of the narrative – technology is used as a symbol of progress, the trains and planes in *Orlando*, as in *Mrs*

Dalloway, are aspirational, they are "bright sparks", one could say hope or optimism. And of course, they are yet another manifestation of the antithesis which makes *Orlando* so effective: it paints a dialectic portrait, with the clock as a technology of restraint, yet other technologies ones of optimism. In this sense, *Orlando* is full of the optimism of modernity. This is not to say that Woolf and Potter don't problematise such optimism. Orlando's melancholic response to his love affair with Sasha sees him unable to enjoy the present, fearful of what the future might hold. This reinforces the notion of time as both an objective reality and subjective consciousness, but also challenges, or at least tempers, the narrative's portrayal of the future as a moment in time that should be looked to with optimism, for it emerges that Orlando's fears are indeed realised. This issue is further examined in Potter, where Orlando queries Shelmerdine's faith in the future: "This future of yours Shelmerdine, when shall it begin - today, or will it always be tomorrow?" she asks.

Similar to Woolf, Potter uses such modernist techniques, but as noted, a postmodernist approach also resonates. While postmodern aesthetics can look towards the past – which of course is also true of modernism and its need to soak its works in history if it is to achieve its desired effect – they do so when pastiche or parody is the intent, otherwise they typically present a conscious awareness of the present. Such an awareness is evident in Potter's film, where the child offers the viewer a glimpse of a new and modern technology of time, the camcorder: a memory medium which, unlike the clock, records the present, so that, as it becomes the past, it too can be repeated in the present. Again, the Theory of Relativity and the deconstruction of established chronological conventions as externally dictated to us are at the heart of this particular scene. This is reinforced by the narrator, who comments that Orlando "is no longer trapped by destiny, and ever since she let go of the part, she found her life was beginning". Indeed, Orlando seems to build her own clock, and is thus content at the end. This is symbolised in the submission of her manuscript to a publisher, a manuscript visibly centuries in the making and soaked in history, time and context, which signifies that, in the technology of writing, she has found her own memory machine, her own technology of time; an instrument and framework within which she can situate herself and become resolved with the environment in which she is immersed. Literature is undoubtedly the technology of time from which Orlando achieves her solace. In addition to Potter's scene in the publishing house, in Woolf's novel, Orlando is never without "The Oak Tree", the centre that resolves her position in a world of deconstructed time and a multitude of dialogical, and quite opposing, selves. "However capricious it may be, memory, with its associational ties, gives proof that the individual has a self or identity which resists flux," argue German and Kaehele (38). The poem seems to give structure to the chronological chaos, yet another example of Woolf's perpetual and dialectic treatment of time and the memory media through which we interact with it.

It is clear that subjective time is also explored without the use of the clock in Potter's *Orlando* – twice the protagonist closes his eyes after a romantic relationship is drawn to a conclusion, and once reopened, time has progressed. This is reiterated in both the novel and the film in the scene which

features the Great Frost that bore witness to "[b]irds froze in mid-air" and "a whole herd of swine frozen immovable in the road" (16). These passages and scenes present a time in which a "petrification sometimes ensued" (16), a period in which time is wholly subjective, aptly captured by the scene in which Potter's presents a woman and a basket of fruit in suspended animation. For such creatures, the birds, the swine and this woman, the subjectivity of time has been made brutally apparent by nature, a force in the ascendancy in this particular instance. In Potter's opening scene, we find Orlando is sitting under a tree, reading. The narrator, the viewer's own external device, remarks: "There can be no doubt about his sex, despite the feminine appearance that every young man at time aspires to." This echoes Woolf's opening lines: "[…] there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it […]" (3). Of interest in both openings, though it is perhaps more prevalent in Potter's film, is that Orlando is presented as being particularly relevant, externally, to his time. Furthermore, he appeared naturally relevant; naturally at home – he *was* what the other males of the time were *aspiring* to, it was he who was to be encapsulated within a technology of the time in the "portrait on the wall", and it was he who was "heir to name that meant power and land and property". He was naturally relevant to his time in his appearance, in addition to his possession of all the appropriate social constructs that made him possible to be so; and yet, Orlando appears an unwilling product of his time. This is reinforced in the film of course, where Orlando is in the latter stages described as "tall and slim, with a slightly androgynous appearance that many females at the time aspire to": again she appears relevant to the time, but uncomfortable within such a context. Evidence for this claim is found in Orlando's lack of punctuality where the Queen is concerned. Minow-Pinkney argues that "Orlando's inability to structure time into a meaningful teleology arises from the fact that as a woman she is excluded from the temporal order itself – from history, politics, society" (146), but I would reject this on the grounds that Orlando is equally uncomfortable regardless of gender. Like the Turks, he is late for the Queen's ceremony, hesitant to participate in the society in which he resides. Happy he would have been to have remained under his tree, unhindered by the demands of time and the manner in which it regulates human relationships and dictates social interaction. Orlando's house is a further symbol, like "The Oak Tree", which serves as a device through which Orlando is able to bring order to chaos, as, like the poem, it remains constant through the narrative, when all else is in flux. The significance of the house is of course commented on by Woolf, who notes its 365 bedrooms and fifty-two stairways.

Orlando is a journey: a journey across time. Time may be perceived as a creation of society, but it is not merely a social construct. It is lived, felt and experienced. It is not until Orlando makes herself a product of her own time – achieved with the aid of her external devices – that she becomes an embodied self. By externalising her internal monologue, her words become a dialogue between her and the environment, allowing her to exist – *in her own time*.

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