



HE is Paul and she IS Orlando: review of Paul Preciado's 'Orlando' by Johnny Rodger

 TheDrouth



The film *Orlando: My Political Biography* only went into cinemas in general release here this summer, so, although it was first shown at the EIFF in August 2023, it seems to be up for discussion again. The gender issue(s) is/are, indeed, still way up on the social agenda – as *Johnny Rodger* puts it, 'We are all on our social stages ... all in our social cages.' Preciado's openly self-constructed cage is a particularly intricate one, and he inhabits it with his own peculiar and provocative panache.

The film *Orlando: My Political Biography* written and directed by Paul B. Preciado



In the French language the term *genre* covers for both genre and gender as the latter two are used in English. As such the writer and director of the French film *Orlando: My Political Biography*, Paul Preciado, can fairly be said to be a *genre*-buster, in senses. Preciado is not originally French though, having long ago crossed the border from his native Spain and changed his name from Beatriz along the way. Yet it's not clear – at least to a non-Francophone – if his strong Hispanic accent with its melodic waltzes gives a sexy edge to his narration of this film.



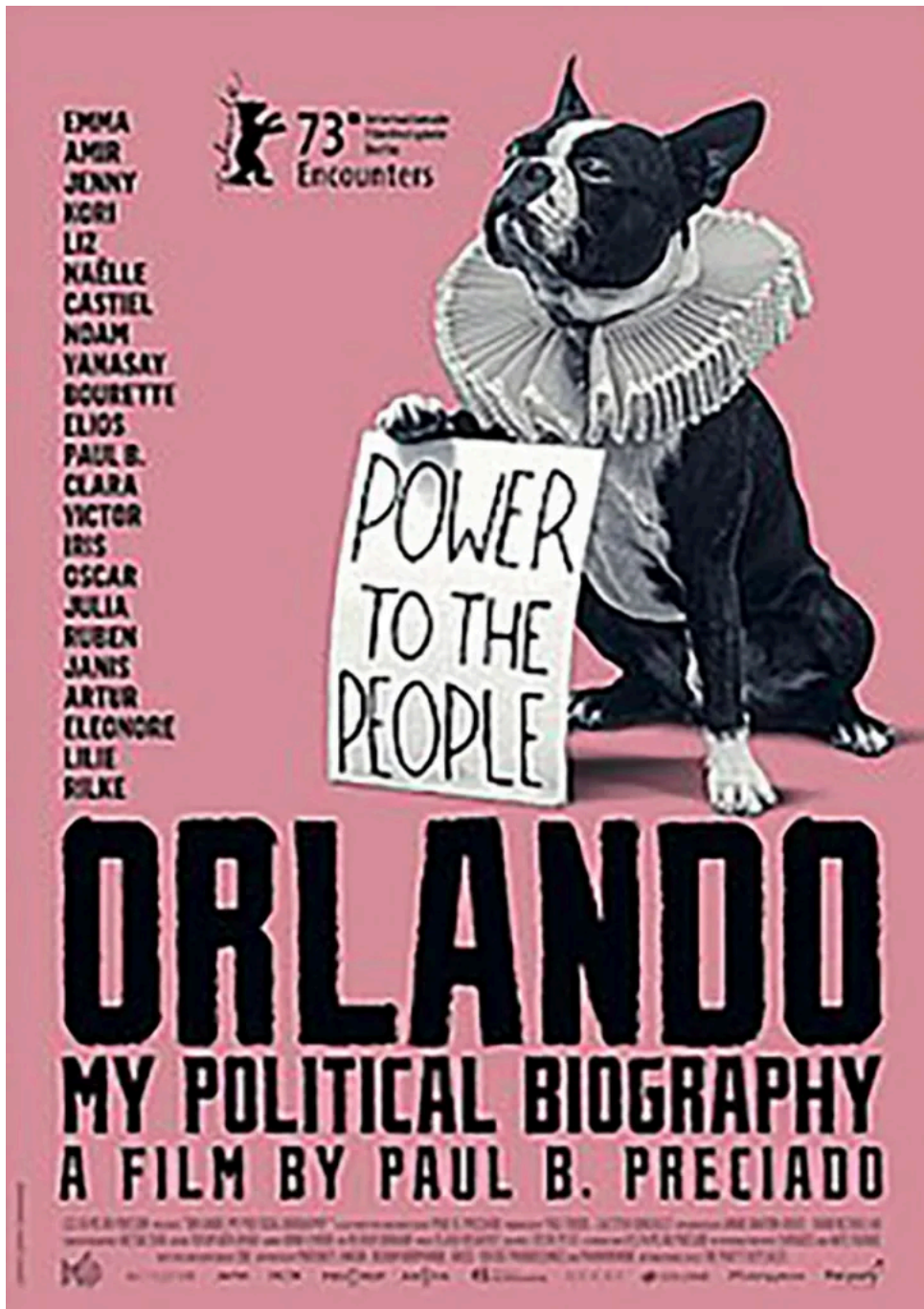


And why would it not? It's easy to see how for Preciado, much of whose previous work has constituted an investigation and exposé of the manipulation of the force and direction of the vectors of desire by the pharmaceutical and porno industries, that sexy edge might be an express and experimental aim. In his book *Testo Junkie*, (originally published by Beatriz Preciado in Spanish in 2008) he shows how, in what he calls the 'third form of capitalism', that is, after the slave dependent and industrial systems, sex and sexuality, and the provoking of sexual excitement and pleasure in subjects have become the main objects of production and political activity. He refers to the age as pharmaco-pornographic, and says of it,

Our world economy is dependent on the production and circulation of hundreds of tons of synthetic steroids and technically transformed organs, fluids, cells (techno-blood, techno-sperm, techno-ovum etc.) on the global diffusion of a flood of pornographic images, on the elaboration and distribution of new varieties of legal and illegal synthetic psychotropic drugs (bromazepam, Special K, Viagra, speed, crystal, Prozac, ecstasy, poppers, heroin) on the flood of signs and circuits of the digital transmission of information, on the extension of a form of diffuse urban architecture to the entire planet in which megacities are knotted into high concentrations of sex capital. (*Testo Junkie*)

Testo Junkie is Preciado's written record and study of his own attempt to evade those normative pharmaco-pornographic controls on his own person by dosing himself with illegally obtained testosterone to effect his own non-op woman to trans-man transition. He declares that the book is not just a memoir of his experience, and as seen from the passage above, it is certainly not just an autobiographical tract, nor a simple piece of 'creative writing'. -So, to what genre, if any, might it belong? It has been categorised as autotheory, in other words a hybrid, or cross-genre between an autobiographical account and a theoretical or research investigation in which the two forms are intimately entangled. The strictly indefinable indeed, is not so much a formal genre as Preciado seeks out in his works (take his 2020 book *Can The Monster speak?* which, as a lecture given to the annual international conference of Freudian psychoanalysts, apes Kafka's short story 'A Report to the Academy' where a learned monkey

speaks to a group of scientists...) but is an inevitable consequence of a life where, as Virginia Despentès puts it in the introduction to Preciado's *An Apartment in Uranus* (2019), 'the possible is a prison, and he is a fugitive.'



No surprise then, that this film should be equally difficult to tie down in terms of genre. The full title itself sets up several lines of tension and contradiction, and also poses questions about its relation to the content of the film. Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel, *Orlando: A Biography* charts the aristocratic family history of the writer's lesbian lover over centuries, with the protagonist defying human life scale and undergoing a man to woman transition. As a narrative it has been used since publication as framework for numerous literary, stage and cinematic adaptations, including, notably, the 1992 film starring Tilda Swinton and Quentin Crisp. Preciado's take adopts a slight variation on the subtitle as *'My Political Biography'*. At face value, this change may seem of little substance, and relatively innocuous, besides, there is no doubt that Preciado engages his version very much within the political context of events. Yet, it is that merest two letter addition of the possessive adjective that troubles the titular waters. For, should a work authored by 'me' as 'my biography' not, in strict terminology, actually be referred to as an 'autobiography'? In fact, in the film itself we are presented with twenty-one different trans individuals (including Preciado), who, as protagonists, each relate something of their own life, and each one claims to be not just playing the role, but *to be* Virginia Woolf's Orlando in this film. This could, of course, be some species of exploration of the biography/autobiography formal relationship, and of the limits and mutual and exclusive territories set out between the two, along the lines of an 'I am every/man/woman/trans/gender type trope. As such the action takes us as far as an extreme ontological questioning of those epistemological limits when one protagonist declares, in character, that a life is not a series of episodes, but a metamorphosis of oneself.



trans experience, of at once of ceaseless change and development and as a rejection of the binary, either/or, and hence as a category of the undecidable, is posed here as the paradigmatic mode of authentic being for our day. It is little surprise to hear then, that Preciado was a doctoral student of Jacques Derrida, the great philosopher of the undecidable as that fusion and

confusion of, and standing ever-between, and at the same time containing of all oppositions. Again, Desportes, long-time collaborator and ex-lover of Preciado, says of Preciado's operation as a trans-man that his life is characterised by 'not going from one place to another, but wandering and between-ness as the place of life.'

Yet, things are more complicated than that. Right from the moment the film begins to roll, that title is compromised or at least riven by other sets of tensions, and Preciado's narrative continues on and off with critical, poetical and philosophical asides and commentary throughout the film. In the opening scene we see Preciado himself pasting up a wall poster for the film, while his voice-over declares that '*fucking Virginia Woolf*' (in English) has already written his biography – which is possible because 'life begins before birth and ends long after our death'. Subsequently he apologises for sneering at her, but does not withdraw the remark, instead claiming that this film will be in the form of a letter to her. 'I am writing to you because I believe I am your Orlando,' he says.



Beyond this brewing mix of genres – documentary, drama, biography, epistolary, autobiography, fiction and authorial critical, poetic, political and philosophical commentary, the film is already framed as a cinematic re-enactment or version of the original *Orlando*. The protagonists, in turn, don 16th century style ruffs around their necks, and recite long passages from the original novel, often in appropriate settings, like the sylvan scene for a passage on the beauty of nature. It's on record in his eclectic and thoroughly referenced publications that Preciado the writer knows how to source a text, and evidently Preciado the filmmaker knows where to set one. The updating and/or reanimating of a given literary text for a new age is a well-known and oft-practised phenomenon, as seen most notably in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Preciado's *Orlando*, however, is studded with verbatim reproduction and performance of long passages from Woolf's original by the 'actors'. This unavoidably brings to mind another specific work, a commentary on such a reproduction of a text, namely 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', a short work published by Jorge Luis Borges as one of his 'Fictions'. Similarly studded with verbatim passages from Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, this is a fictional critique of an imaginary writer (Menard) who set out to recreate the great 1605 novel in the early to mid-20th century. The fictional character Menard sets himself the 'absurd' task (and according to Borges's bogus commentary achieves it (at least in part)) of completely rewriting the *Quixote* word for word not as 17th century Cervantes, but as 20th century Menard.

What can it mean to make such an attempt to rewrite the old text, word for word, as the real Preciado and the fictional Menard do, and present it as something new? ('I am your Orlando') It is something Michel Foucault discussed in his opening professorial speech concerning the political implications and control of discourse. Foucault seems to take the Borges story to be a type of allegory for the work of commentary in general and describes the spirit of such an operation from an original text thus,

The Borges-style play of commentary which is nothing but the solemn and expected reappearance word for word of the text that is commented on; or the play of a criticism that would speak forever of a work which does not exist. The lyrical dream of a discourse which is reborn absolutely new and innocent at every point, and which reappears constantly in all freshness, derived from things, feelings or thoughts. (*The Order of Discourse*)





Foucault then goes on to plot the relationship of the commentary or secondary text to the original, in that it is always seeking to reproduce what was articulated in that original,

The commentary must say for the first time what had, nonetheless, already been said, and must tirelessly repeat what had, however, never been said.

There is no doubt that Preciado is tireless. He is also apparently effortless; his great erudition is diffused throughout the work in reference, allusion, framing and structure; sometimes up front and nominated, and at others laid back behind the action and only perceptible and conceivable to those who have both the desire and the cultural capital and will to penetrate beyond. Take the scene, where the young trans-boy, with ruff, in front of a studio painted flat representing a scene in the book, is filmed speaking of his own life and transition, and also reciting long passages from the original book. As he speaks the set is dismantled around him and the painted flat wheeled away to reveal the utilitarian studio walls and the non-picturesque mechanics of staging equipment. The allegory of a revelation of sexuality and gender as a constructed set is clear. 'We are fiction and flesh' says Preciado. But the reference to Gore Vidal's novels on Myra/Myron Breckenridge, who as a trans man/woman in the 1930s becomes trapped backstage on the set for a Hollywood blockbuster starring Maria Montez – hence trapped without the social structure to allow him/her to lead a full life – seems palpable. The intention here, then, is not to present the trans life, or an awareness or engagement with the social structure of gender as a freedom from those structures. No such naivety – for as Preciado pointed out to the psychoanalysts in his take on Kafka's talking monkey in *Can the Monster Speak?*

I was assigned female at birth and, like the militant ape, extricated myself from that confined 'cage', in order to enter another cage, granted, but at least this time through my own initiative.

We are all on our own stage sets then, all in our social cages. If that means that some of us, less interested or experienced in literary readings, are less equipped to trace some putative embedded literary allusions, then so be it. These points of reference have at least been important for Preciado in terms of building the structure – the cage – for his film. At any rate, it is arguable that a more problematic cage than the literary cultural one for the viewer approaching this film might, for many, be a linguistic one. For just as the relationship for French speakers between the concepts (in English) of genre and gender is more complex, so equally is the meaning of the word 'sex'. In the English language that word can refer to two different things: the collection of physical characteristics that define whether one is male or female, or, the act of sexual intercourse between two or more people. In French, the word 'sexe' can mean both of these, and also physically the sexual genitals themselves. So, *mon sexe* might be translated in turn as, perhaps, my penis, or my vagina. Clearly this creates a very specific and concrete understanding in French, of the difference between sex and gender – a nuance only available through logic to English monoglots, rather than everpresent in everyday simple language practice. One particular scene illustrating this language barrier, and one of the many comic aspects of the film – is a dramatic encounter between a psychiatric doctor and a trans woman. When the doctor asks her about her *sexe*, she responds that she has 'un pénis féminin'. In other words, she has a penis which is only in a masculine mode of the feminine. It is because of the linguistic structure of English regarding gender (or often the lack of it) that the English version misses all the non-binary nuances of the trans undecidability there.





So far, so good, and so entertaining too (and let's not forget the music here, brilliantly bounding from funk to death metal, and Preciado's killer chanted ritornello, '*I'm not my doctor's bitch!*'). Yet, the film is not without some potential inconsistencies and points of critical contention. Amongst those is the presentation of a problematic which has been common to the struggle of many marginalised and oppressed groups including women, black and people of colour, and the range of LGBT groups: namely, the tension, in the struggles between the aim of establishing difference and of gaining equality.

Virginie Despentes (again in the Introduction to *Uranus*) recounts how, on finally managing to attain identity papers with his new name 'Paul' on them, Preciado announced in print (in his column in the French leftist daily newspaper *Libération*) that he had, however, no intention of adopting masculinity as his new gender. 'You want a utopian gender' wrote Despentes. It is strange then that notwithstanding his apparent rejection of state recognition (the ID papers), and his personal sustained and insistent striking out for the flourishing of difference rather than a gaining of or being granted equality, that the final joyous and triumphant scene in the film should come with an imagined future where there is state recognition that the assignment of binary sex at birth is mere fiction. In that scene Despentes plays a magistrate, reads out the decree and awards an official non-binary passport to each in turn of the Orlandos of the film, now gathered in a courtroom.

Notwithstanding the jubilation of the Orlandos at this point, we must ask if this state recognition is really what Preciado's personal life-long queer campaign has been aimed at? To be accepted as part of the mainstream and equal to all the others in it? Or, have his literary and journalistic exposés of mainstream imposture, his critical and philosophical unravelling of the power politics of the binary, and his mocking of and sneering at the normative 'community' that we find in all his writings not, in fact, always held in view a type of separatism in difference that is invariably found in a Utopia -usually a place secluded and set on a remote island for that purpose...

This is, however, just Preciado's Orlando – his other voices, other modes, other sites, other moods and viewpoints are available. As Foucault wrote in summing up his assessment of the rewriting of a classic text, 'The new thing here lies not in what is said but in the event of its return.' Orlando will be back, as will Preciado – we just can't guess in which *genre*.



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The Drouth ('The Thirst') is a website and magazine published in Glasgow, Scotland. Founded in 2001 by Mitch Miller and Johnny Rodger, we continue to pursue our original remit, to give space to writers and artists to stimulate debate on literature, film, politics, reportage, visual culture, music, and architecture.

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