

Mutations of Gender, Genre, and the British Home in *The Servant* and *Orlando*

By Caroline Ford

In his essay “England, Your England” (1941) George Orwell aimed to define the central characteristics of Englishness, claiming that an “English characteristic which is so much a part of us that we barely notice it [is] . . . the *privateness* of English life . . . the liberty to have a home of your own” (196). Here Orwell points to the importance of the home to a national sense of British identity. As with any national identity, British identity is a problematic term, referring as it does to a never-ending series of negotiations and transformations that are impossible to pin down to a specific set of traits. This centrality of the home in British consciousness is recurrent in British cinema, particularly in genres like “kitchen-sink realism,” which, as the name suggests, places great importance on the interiors of working-class homes, and later in heritage cinema which usually centres on an aristocratic manor house. In Joseph Losey and Harold Pinter's *The Servant* (1963) and Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992), the home plays a central role, both as the major site of action and as a space that both enables and denies certain figurations of gender and identity.

Although *The Servant* (Losey, 1963) and *Orlando* (Potter, 1992) stand thirty years apart, embedded in different genres and dealing with different stories, both are canonical films of British national cinema that take up innovative positions regarding British identity, fluidly negotiating borders of gender and genre that are typically viewed as fixed. *The Servant* follows the lives of aristocratic Tony (played by James Fox) and his manservant Barrett (played by Dirk Bogarde) as their clear-cut class-based relationship blurs in a power struggle that results in Barrett giving the orders and leaves Tony

powerless. Sally Potter's *Orlando* "updates [Virginia] Woolf's story of an Elizabethan man who is granted eternal youth and eventually turns into a woman, addressing changing attitudes to gender roles in different historical periods" (Leach 137).

These films have a number of similarities both in their production background and in the themes they address that make them interesting points of comparison. Both films complicate the "Britishness" of their background, defying the political-economic definitions of national cinema, as they are both transnational productions.¹ They also originate from marginalized perspectives, since both films are literary adaptations of British novels written by queer authors during eras of systemic homophobia². This background contributes to the rejection of any stable notion of gender or of British identity by highlighting the constructed nature of their generic conventions. Although both films appear to align themselves with well-established genres central to British national cinema—*The Servant* with classical realism and *Orlando* with heritage drama—both disrupt these conventions, drawing on other genres to highlight the inherently constructed nature of gender and genre. Through a close analysis of the depiction and transformation of the home, these films destabilize firmly held British modes of representation, these films signal the artificiality of restrictive definitions of gender and genre.

The Servant instils within its viewers a sense of security from the outset by using genre to establish its adherence to comfortable British ideals. Through its use of classical

1 Filmed and financed in Europe in the case of *Orlando* (Ciecko 19) and directed by an American in the case of *The Servant* (BFI n.p.)

2 Woolf had a lesbian relationship with Vita Sackville-West (Ciecko 22) and Robin Maugham's difficulty as a homosexual man navigating a time when it was a criminal offence echoes in his original work (Bradshaw ¶2).

film techniques, this opening reassures the viewer that it is embedded in the realm of classical cinema and British tradition. The opening shot depicts the large and impressive Royal Hospital and tree-lined road, tracking up to show the treetops and the roofs of the Georgian houses along the lane. The orchestral non-diegetic music accompanying this shot also satisfies viewer expectations as it swells with the warm, familiar tones of a classical film soundtrack. This opening suggests to the viewer support of traditionalism and an upholding of familiarity, inviting the viewer into a recognizable, comfortable depiction of British life. As the shot pans back down onto the street, this depiction is undermined by the royal insignia emblazoned upon the awning for “Thomas Crapper Sanitary Engineers.” This juxtaposition of the most established symbol of the British Aristocracy with the low-class association of “sanitary engineering” establishes the film's class concerns. Despite this troubling image, the film remains grounded in the traditional generic expectations of classical cinema depicting an idealized upper-class British street. Although situating the home on Royal Avenue between a hospital and Thomas Crapper imbues the film with “the overtones of disease, death and defecation of this setting [that] ominously imply that . . . something is rotten” (Parzysz 34), the overall tone of this introduction emphasizes normality through its familiar use of location establishing shots and cinematic orchestral music.

The characters in *The Servant* also conform to the viewer's expectations by remaining firmly within their prescribed gender roles. In the scene of their first meeting, Tony and Barrett act in a realistic manner, adhering to the social codes dictated by the situation by both performing their masculine roles in the naturalistic style of classical realism. Although Barrett catches Tony off guard and asleep, “foreshadowing the

impending reversal of social order” (Parzysz 33), Tony demonstrates his power over Barrett through Tony's ease during the interview, pacing and standing over Barrett. Tony also demonstrates the height of masculine power when he is depicted having sex with Susan on the floor of his unfurnished house—the only time he is able to have sex in the film without Barrett's knowledge and approval. In contrast to Tony's masculine power, Barrett appears meek, relegated to discussing the traditionally female-gendered tasks he can perform for Tony; he is explicitly connected with femininity during the interview when “the female figure of the 'housekeeper' is immediately used as a foil by Tony” (Parzysz 35). The house's realism demands that the characters fulfill their expected roles, regarding Tony's aristocratic power as dominant and therefore masculine in comparison to Barrett's domestic subservience.

Like *The Servant*, *Orlando* employs established British generic modes in its opening scenes. Although typically characterized as “art cinema” largely because of its intertextual connections to other films of the “art cinema” genre (Ciecko 21), *Orlando* also functions in many ways in the generic framework of heritage cinema. Beginning with its depiction of Britain in the 1600's, Potter employs the generic conventions of heritage costume drama to claim the film's relationship to a central part of British cinematic tradition, engaging with and critiquing the heritage genre of British national cinema. *Orlando* engages with the expectations of heritage cinema as “characterized by Edwardian and Georgian settings and adaptations staged in front of luxurious upper-crust settings. . . [and] by a fetishistic focus on aristocratic settings” (Trimm 181). *Orlando* begins with the opening credit “based on the book by Virginia Woolf,” identifying with the tradition of literary adaptations typifying heritage cinema.

The film soon cuts to large stately home, revelling in the rich costumes, foods, and a beautiful location. As the camera pans over an expanse of food, flowers, and ornate ornament in the banquet scene *Orlando* derives pleasure from the aesthetics of its aristocratic settings, “celebrat[ing] a gentrified figure in a manner which evokes the 'heritage' mode” (Ciecko 21). The image of the grandiose estate is central to this identification of the film with heritage drama as it serves as a clear emblem of British tradition despite being, in reality, situated in Russia (“Orlando Goes to Russia” n. p.). For, as Ciecko states, “[g]enres, like genders and nations, are constructs, regulatory devices, and as such are profoundly linked to the fixing of a 'national cinema’” (20). With this introduction the film asserts its connection to heritage cinema in order to claim the film's centrality in the gender and class discourses surrounding British identity. While genres such as art cinema or fantasy may be viewed as a peripheral mode of British culture that do not necessarily speak about British identity, in contrast, heritage cinema's centrality in British national cinema allows the viewer to identify the film as British and the characters as fair representations of British identity. Although it frequently troubles the generic conventions of costume drama—for example, by breaking the fourth wall and by casting gender-blending star personas—*Orlando* asserts that, despite their refusal to conform to “the traditionally British conservative view of gender image stability” (Shail 106), its characters are part of the landscape of British identity.

The Servant requires the film to leave the confines of British classical realism before enabling shifts in gendered performance. Once Tony's Georgian flat is decorated, a less realistic mise-en-scène eerily troubles the film's realism, signalling the transformations of genre and masculine power. When the viewer sees the fully-decorated

house for the first time, the camera shows us Tony and Susan entering the room through a convex mirror, which distorts the room, giving us a warped perspective. This distorting viewpoint signals the beginning of a rejection of the typical British realism that had eased the viewer into the film. The décor positions the home as a gendered space as “[Barrett] selects conspicuously masculine ornaments to decorate the house” (Parzysz 35-6). These “masculine ornaments” are largely militaristic, most notably the figurines of cannons that sit on the mantel and portraits of men in military uniform; similar to the role of combat in *Orlando*, the military and war acts as a symbol for the height of masculine power. This militaristic mise-en-scène also captures the metaphorical transition of the home into a hostile battlefield as the power struggle between Barrett and Tony emerges. Although the world depicted in the home remains recognizable, its connection to the familiar world is disrupted as the film makes a break from following expected generic conventions of British cinema. In this way, the house becomes the site of the uncanny³ where the “heimlich” (homely) becomes “unheimlich” (literally “unhomely,” the German term for the uncanny). This term draws attention to the way the home in *The Servant* becomes the space where socially repressed issues come to light. The rigid class system, so prevalent as to become naturalized, is exposed as Barrett's resentment and Tony's weakness surface in nightmarish fashion.

This new not-quite-familiar home allows the characters to break out of their prescribed gender roles, enabling Barrett to demonstrate his masculine power more forcefully while Tony relinquishes his. As Susan and Tony eat their dinner, the viewer

³ Here I draw on Freud's definition of the uncanny—that which is “in reality nothing new or alien, but something familiar and old—established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only by the process of repression” (Freud 241).

sees Barrett smoking and having a beer. As the orchestral music that opened the film takes on looser, jazzier tone, Barrett looks disdainfully at one of his gloves before dropping it on the table. This shot hints at the performed nature of Barrett's subservient position by showing the viewers a side of him that does not fit with our previous conceptions. At the same time, Tony begins to demonstrate that his masculine power is merely masquerade. In the *mise-en-scène* of his new house Tony attempts to place his masculinity above his servants by laughing, "You're too skinny to be a nanny, Barrett." Although this statement seems to position Tony in a more powerful position next to the feminized Barrett, the film directly undermines Tony's male power when Barrett interrupts Tony and Susan in their moment of passion. Although Tony responds angrily asserting his power over Barrett by snapping, "Don't do it again" and "Oh, get to bed," he then shifts instantly to dependence, asking Barrett for an aspirin and agreeing that he caught a chill in the rain. Tony's sudden shift from domineering to dependent demonstrates the performative nature of "historically conditioned, but inherently transient" (Shail 95) gendered identity. As the space of the home shifts away from the familiar realistic mode of representation and takes on an uncanny aspect, the secure gendered positions of the characters begin to slip as well. As the characters distance themselves from the generic imposition of British realism, they become less connected to the gendered roles British culture demands of them, complicating gender roles by exposing their social and class-conditioned roots.

In *Orlando* transformation of gender is only possible away from the confines of heritage genre and the imposing traditionalist symbol of the stately home. Orlando is enabled to transform from man into woman only once away from the constraints of

tradition and culturally-constructed British notions of gender identity. Brought on by “a crisis of masculinity” (Ciecko 20), Orlando's transformation stems directly from his/her inability to perform manly acts in combat. Orlando's transformation is captured “in a stylized, languorous mood, both naturalized and fantastic, with dust motes suggesting both shooting in natural light and a fairy godmother's magical power” (Mayer 42). Shot both through the modes of realism and fantasy, this scene of transformation rejects both the idealization and the restrictiveness of the heritage genre. By positioning the gender transformation in the exotic freedom of the abroad, the film plays on Orientalist assumptions associating Britain with culture and the East with wildness or savagery. This positions Britain as a place of gender impositions and restrictions, while in foreign lands a more flexible form of gender expression becomes possible. By placing gender fluidity away from the home and outside typically British genre, *Orlando* suggests that gender binaries are enforced culturally rather than being biologically determined and demonstrates the potential freedom of breaking up those cultural expectations.

In *The Servant*, both the house and the actors' performances change drastically once Barrett leaves for the first time. Despite its inclusion of increasingly dark and uncanny elements, until this point *The Servant* has maintained a realism that locates it in a particular generic tradition of British film. Parzysz points to this interplay between genres saying “the seduction scene between Vera and Tony . . . offered a revised version by Pinter and Losey of what a ‘kitchen-sink drama’ could be, in a stylized rather than realistic mode” (37). It is through these series of sexual transgressions that the film descends into an expressionistic horror bearing increasingly little resemblance to the British classical realist film we saw at its opening. Entering into the oppositional generic

territory of expressionism, the film combines two genres, which, while both central to British national cinema, are tendencies placed in contrast to one another rather than present in the same film⁴.

Upon Barrett's return, the house "becomes a den as characters prey on or fall prey to one another" (Parzysz 38), continuing to draw into question the 'natural' gender and class roles which previously defined the characters' relationships. Generic convention and gender performance are foregrounded as Barrett and Tony assume a variety of increasingly extreme personas in their game of cat-and-mouse. In their first scene together Barrett and Tony "undeniably act like an old couple, with Barrett as a shrewish housewife constantly nagging Tony as the useless, unemployed husband" (36). This performance highlights not only the performed natures the Tony and Barrett's masculine and feminine personas, but also draws attention to the artifice of the "social problem" films they are aping. The "social problem" film genre that "emerged [in Britain] in the post-war period" (Shail 102) is clearly referenced in the dialogue between Tony and Barrett; however the mise-en-scène of the film remains dark, shadowy and expressionistic, undermining this interaction. By invoking this genre in dialogue and parodying its themes, Losey and Pinter draw attention to the artificial, even clichéd nature of the genre, pointing out the aspect of performance that permeates even "realist"

4 Jim Leach points to this in *British Film* saying, "Film Historians often distinguish between a realist tradition, descending from the brief *actualités* of the Lumière brothers, and another tradition, often loosely described as 'expressionist,' traced back to the magical fantasies of Georges Méliès." (Leach 66). Although Leach acknowledges that this opposition is problematic and that these two stylistic approaches "refer to tendencies rather than mutually exclusive stylistic options" (66). This contrast is, nevertheless, important to bear in mind as it reflects the history of the struggle within British cinema between "filmmakers [becoming] associated with very different visions of what the national cinema should be" (32). Between John Grierson's desire for a socially-conscious realism and Alexander Korda whose expressionistic approach made "Korda's film's, and their representation of the national character . . . the very antithesis of those produced by Grierson" (37).

cinema through their caricatured performance of gender roles.

Generic shift also continues in *Orlando* once the titular character returns to her home in Britain as a woman the film returns to the mainstream filmic conventions of a period drama, placing Orlando in the elegant and regimented surroundings of her home. Like the unstable home in *The Servant*, Orlando's home is transformed to reflect her gender change. In a single long take, Orlando, now in the costume of a woman of the mid-eighteenth century, carefully navigates a long hall of furniture preserved under white sheets. Her comically wide dress both draws attention to the artifice of this gender performance and symbolically restricts her from navigating through this arena of British tradition. Scholars have highlighted the fact that Orlando is, regardless of gender, visibly played by a woman (Mayer 42, Ciecko 20), arguing this visual information shifts her scene of gender transformation from a man into a woman to a scene of gender affirmation in which a woman in a man's clothes becomes a woman in her own clothes. However, this scene disrupts that reading by depicting the female costume on this female character as equally unnatural and performative. Orlando's figure caricatures typical depictions of femininity by creating an extreme form of the idealized "hourglass" shape, drawing attention to the absurdity of the regimented and exaggerated expectations placed on women.

The next shot, in which Orlando crosses the grounds of her manor, re-enforces the use of setting as a reflection of gender. Behind Orlando we see a gardener pruning the topiary into strictly regimented pyramids. The shrub he is pruning remains, at present, wild and untamed, providing a striking contrast to the strictly regimented foliage on either side of it. This symbolic background draws the viewer's attention to the

manipulation of the natural to fit social and cultural demands, its artifice mirroring the artifice of the performed gender roles. Orlando's return to Britain is filmed as a return to the generic conventions of typical period drama, emphasizing the aesthetic of aristocratic culture and refusing markers of the fantastic or magical. Through her return to heritage, Potter places gender in the context of British culture and tradition, employing its generic conventions to comment on their artificiality and on their potentially harmful nature.

In *The Servant's* final generic and performative twist, the film moves into the realm of expressionistic horror completing a descent into the nightmare world that was repressed in the film's realist opening. As Barrett hunts Tony in a game of hide-and-seek that “enhances Barrett’s ferociousness throughout his suspenseful, animal-like advance” (Parzysz 38), the camera captures Barrett and Tony's expressions in close-up, with the rest of the screen consumed by darkness. Dark shadows permeate the house at expressionistic angles and a niche painted black carries on this theme, paying homage to German Expressionism. Tony’s face, barred by shadow, conveys abject terror as Barrett’s hands grasp the shower curtain to reveal Tony’s hiding place. The close-up on Barrett’s hands and Tony’s terrified face is fully embedded in the horror genre, reminiscent of the famous scene in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, which had been released only three years earlier. From this point on, the house remains entirely expressionistic with its dark mise-en-scène. Tony and Barrett echo this cinematic darkness in their increasingly manic performances that suit the extreme darkness of the film’s atmosphere, but bear no relation to the “realistic” Britons they once portrayed.

While in *The Servant* the home gains power and centrality through the film, in *Orlando* the impressive and imposing structure of the British Estate gradually loses

power until, at the end, Orlando is entirely free of it. Just as the film opened with male Orlando running towards the great estate demonstrating its centrality, the narrative achieves symmetry by ending with female Orlando and her daughter walking away from the estate back to the freedom of the meadow. In the final scene, *Orlando* escapes the restrictions of British mainstream cinema, undermining its hegemony by intercutting between the shots typical of *Orlando* and the more mobile, sensory, documentary-style shots taken by her young daughter with a digital camera. This generic shift is radical as it places the camera—and therefore the power of controlling the narrative—in the hands of a little girl, disrupting the institutional hegemony that privileges older, rich men as author. This scene, like the scene of gender transformation, simultaneously maintains elements of heightened realism—the documentary of the digital camera—and the camp fantasy of the angel. An angel, played by Jimmy Somerville, is captured by the digital camera “in the sort of outrageously fake gold lamé outfit associated with B movie science fiction” (Mayer 40). This shot foregrounds modes of genre and gender that are typically marginalized by British society and its cinema. In this final scene, escape from the impressive structure of the estate represents a refusal to abide by the restrictions and hegemony of British tradition, signalling a desire to expand the parameters of British identity. In the film's final moments Orlando looks up at the angel as he sings to her, bringing the mainstream British form of cinema into conversation with the B movie fantasy; this connection gestures at the film's ultimate project—to form a British identity that includes the full spectrum of British society while upholding and celebrating its diversity.

Through both of these British films we have seen the archetypal British house rise

and decline in importance as its inhabitants build and transform them over time. No single aesthetic could suit these ever-shifting characters as Barrett “encompass[es] servant, lover, wife, gay man, childhood friend, and, finally, master” (Shail 105), while Orlando transforms from male to female encompassing lover, failed poet, brother, mother and author along the way. The flexibility of the central figures makes these characters, and the genres that situate them, impossible to pin down. It is the transient and transformative aspect of these films that ultimately speaks to British identity, because no singular or established definition could ever embrace the contradictions and pluralities of a national identity. By emphasizing their shifting nature, these films rebel against traditional perspective of a British identity that stagnates in the contrived dichotomies of masculine/feminine or demands loyalty to a single cinematic aesthetic. By simultaneously transforming gender and genre, *The Servant* and *Orlando* ask the nation to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of British identity.

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