

The Cinema and Its Prey:

Modernism in Adaptations of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway*

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Abstract

This thesis aims to find out how modernist elements of Virginia Woolf's novels *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) have been adapted to film in Sally Potter's adaptation *Orlando* (1992) and Marleen Gorris's and Eileen Atkins's adaptation *Mrs Dalloway* (1997). Bigger questions this thesis helps answer is why modernist texts are rarely adapted to film and how they could be adapted in the future. The thesis explains which elements are typically modernist, how these elements are used in the two novels, and how these elements were adapted to film. It has found that while these films were commercially successful they still contain many modernist elements. Both films have found ways to adapt Woolf's stream of consciousness technique and show the inner lives of the characters, and modernist themes such as war and technology can be found in the adaptations too. Other modernist elements, such as the influence of the public clock on people's lives, were largely left out of the films, because they were too difficult to adapt or because they would make the film too confusing for a wider audience. An adaptation that would incorporate more modernist elements is possible, but it would be more experimental than these two films and would most likely not be commercially successful.

Key words:

Modernism, adaptation theory, novel, film, Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, *Mrs Dalloway*, Sally Potter, Marleen Gorris, Eileen Atkins.

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Introduction

“The cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and to the moment largely subsists upon the body of its unfortunate victim.”¹

It was 1926 when Virginia Woolf wrote this in her essay “The Cinema”, and the prey that is being consumed by the cinema is the novel. She goes on to explain that at the moment, which in 1926 meant silent films in black-and-white, film tried to imitate other art forms such as the novel, for example by adapting well-known books. In the process complex stories were reduced to simplified images: “A kiss is love. A broken cup is jealousy. A grin is happiness. Death is a hearse.”² She does express some hope for the future, because once cinema develops its own language it will be able to form images that texts cannot, but cinema still had a long way to go before it could stop being a parasite to the novel.

Nowadays there is the field of adaptation studies which is still relatively new but which does not see films as preying on novels, because the theory has advanced beyond that and because filming techniques have developed a lot since the 1920s. There was a time that fidelity criticism did make up a large portion of adaptation theory³, but scholars are increasingly critical of studies that only look at how faithful to the novel an adaptation is. Today the field concerns itself with how texts are adapted to film and other media, how these adaptations are promoted, and why certain novels are popular sources for adaptations, among other topics.⁴ Woolf’s own novels and its adaptations are often mentioned in these studies, but there have not been many studies that are focused on adaptations of Woolf’s novels alone, or on adaptations of modernist texts in general. This gap within the field of adaptation studies is the reason this thesis will focus on two of Woolf’s novels and their adaptations.

The works that will be discussed are *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and Sally Potter’s 1992 adaptation *Orlando*, and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and its adaptation *Mrs Dalloway* (1997), directed by Marleen Gorris and with a screenplay by Eileen Atkins. There are multiple reasons I have chosen to discuss these two works instead of other modernist novels that were adapted to film, although there exist only a few of these adaptations. Firstly, Woolf is known as a prominent modernist author, so there are many modernist elements to be found in her novels that could be adapted to film. Secondly, it is convenient that two of her novels have been adapted, because that makes it easier to compare the two films and see how they adapted

¹ Woolf, “The Cinema”, 2.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Leitch, “Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads”, 64.

⁴ Ibid., 68.

techniques that Woolf has used in both novels. Finally, these two films were relatively commercially successful, which suggests film adaptations of modernist texts are not only possible, but can bring in money too, even though modernism is not seen as commercially popular. Ideally all existing modernist adaptations would be compared, but unfortunately that is not possible within the scope of this thesis.

The question I will attempt to answer is as follows: How are the modernist elements of Virginia Woolf's novels *Orlando* (1928) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) adapted to film in Potter's *Orlando* (1992) and Gorris's *Mrs Dalloway* (1997)? An answer to this question could hopefully shed some light on why modernist texts, and Woolf's works in particular, are not being adapted to film more often. In comparison to other modernist texts Woolf's novels have been adapted relatively often, but still a novel such as Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has spawned many more adaptations than any modernist novel. An answer to the research question might also suggest how modernist texts can be adapted in the future. I expect the results to show that the two directors focused mostly on bringing the plot to film. This means they will have likely ignored some modernist elements because they are difficult to adapt and because the directors had to keep commercial goals in mind.

Previous research that will be used to answer the research question focuses on modernist adaptations and the adaptations of *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway* specifically. The field of adaptation studies is still relatively new and not many modernist novels have been adapted to film, so there have not been many studies about adaptations of modernist texts. The studies that do exist usually conclude that modernist texts are difficult to adapt because they do not fit with what today's public wants from a film and because they are technically difficult to adapt.

In order to find out how modernist elements have been adapted in Potter's *Orlando* and Gorris's *Mrs Dalloway* I will follow a few steps. The first step is to establish which elements are typically associated with modernism, for which I will use *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture* and Armstrong's *Modernism: A Cultural History*, among other works. The next step is to research how these elements are used in the novels. I will do this by doing close readings of the novels, with some help from texts such as Jones Abrahamson's essay on *Mrs Dalloway*⁵ and sections about *Orlando* in Clewell's book⁶. Next I will watch the films and compare scenes from the novels to their adaptations in order to see if and how these elements have been adapted to film. Texts that will help are essays on the adaptations by Reviron-

⁵ Jones Abrahamson, "Beyond Modernist Shock: Virginia Woolf's Absorbing Atmosphere".

⁶ Clewell, *Modernism and Nostalgia: Bodies, Locations, Aesthetics*.

Piégay⁷, Degli-Esposti⁸ and Ferriss⁹ for *Orlando*, and essays and book sections by Hankins¹⁰, Kendrick¹¹ and Sheehan¹² for *Mrs Dalloway*. Finally I will compare the findings about these two films to each other to see if modernist elements were adapted in the same way and what more could have been done to adapt these elements.

Chapter 1 of this thesis will consist of a theoretical framework. The first question that will be discussed is why modernist novels have the reputation of being difficult to adapt, for which I will use works by Halliwell¹³ and Trotter¹⁴. Next the chapter will discuss the elements of modernism, which will be divided into three categories: modernity, time and psychology. Chapter 2 will be a study of Woolf's *Orlando* and Potter's adaptation of the novel. This chapter will be divided into the same categories of modernism, with the addition of a category about the biography, and will discuss which elements exist in the text and how these were adapted. I will also discuss which elements were left out and what effect this has on the film. Chapter 3 is a study of Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and Gorris's adaptation and will feature modernity, time and psychology again, with here too a discussion of modernist elements and their adaptations. The conclusion, finally, will summarise the findings and compare the two films. I will also look back at the problems that arise from adapting a modernist text according to sources used in chapter 1 and will discuss how Potter and Gorris solved these problems. Lastly I will suggest what further research might be done to find out how modernist texts can be adapted in the future.

⁷ Reviron-Piégay, "Translating Generic Liberties: *Orlando* on Page and Screen".

⁸ Degli-Esposti, "Sally Potter's "Orlando" and the Neo-Baroque Scopic Regime".

⁹ Ferriss, "Unclothing Gender: The Postmodern Sensibility in Sally Potter's *Orlando*."

¹⁰ Hankins, "'Colour Burning on a Framework of Steel': Virginia Woolf, Marleen Gorris, Eileen Atkins, and Mrs. Dalloway(s)".

¹¹ Kendrick, "The Unfilmable".

¹² Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*.

¹³ Halliwell, "Modernism and Adaptation", in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*.

¹⁴ Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*; "Virginia Woolf and Cinema".

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

1.1 Modernism and Film

Modernist texts are notoriously difficult to adapt to film, which is why the history of modernist adaptations is very short. There have been many modernist novels and many modernist films, but there is not much overlap between the two. Modernist authors include big names such as Woolf, Eliot and Joyce, but the makers of modernist films are hardly any less famous with names such as Welles, Visconti and Resnais, who came up with all kinds of new filming techniques such as crosscutting, tracking, and abstraction.¹⁵ The problem, therefore, was not a lack of creative filmmakers. Even without direct collaboration, however, the two art forms are often argued to have influenced each other. Many scholars believe that modernist writers were generally inspired by the cinema, which is not surprising, as the popularisation of both modernism and the cinema occurred roughly around the same time. This fascination can be seen in Woolf's essay "The Cinema" that I briefly discussed in the introduction, and for example in the way T.S. Eliot uses cinematic techniques in his poem *The Waste Land*.¹⁶

One technique that scholars often name as evidence that modernists were inspired by the cinema is montage, which most modernist authors have used in some way.¹⁷ Montage originated as a film editing technique with many crediting Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein as its inventor¹⁸. The technique involves a quick succession of images that work together to tell a story without actually showing everything that happens on screen¹⁹. Because of modernist writers' preoccupation with the concept of time, which I will discuss later on in this chapter, it seems logical that they would use montage, as this gives the author the ability to speed up time. Trotter, however, has written articles and a book on modernism in films in which he argues the influence of cinema on modernist writers is often overestimated. He names Joyce's *Ulysses* as an example of a modernist text that uses the technique, even though it was written before films using montage had been shown in Western cinemas.²⁰ He argues that instead makers of films and modernist novels just happened to have some of the same interests, such as the concept of time.²¹

¹⁵ Halliwell, "Modernism and Adaptation", in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, 96.

¹⁶ Trotter, "T.S. Eliot and Cinema", 261.

¹⁷ Trotter, "Virginia Woolf and Cinema", 13.

¹⁸ Trotter, "T.S. Eliot and Cinema", 238.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 238.

²⁰ Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, x-xi

²¹ Trotter, "Virginia Woolf and Cinema", 14.

Still some connections can be made between modernism and cinema. Some authors, such as William Faulkner, had a side job as screenwriter. Faulkner had written multiple modernist novels when he started to work for Hollywood's MGM Studios.²² A writer's preoccupation with both film and modernist writing might be expected to lead to collaboration between the two forms, but there was not much room for that. Modernist films were made primarily by European filmmakers while the American studios wanted to make movies that would be accessible to the general public, which means modernist elements that complicated films were not appreciated. Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury* was eventually adapted to film, but the complex elements such as multiple perspectives were removed and what was left is generally not seen as modernist.²³ There was a reluctance by American and English filmmakers to make modernist films, and in turn to adapt modernist novels. They preferred the easy-to-adapt realist novel.²⁴

This is still true today, and not only film studios but audiences too seem to prefer realism to modernism. Timothy Corrigan explains that especially adaptations of realist novels from the nineteenth century are popular with contemporary audiences and are thus adapted frequently. According to Corrigan these films are so popular because the films are "a therapeutic turn from cultural complexity". The films serve as an escape from the complexities of modern life, and instead of following intricate plots and ideas the average viewer prefers to just sit back and enjoy the nostalgic images of "a time when life was simpler".²⁵ Corrigan's article was written in 1999, but since then many adaptations of nineteenth-century novels have been made, such as Cary Joji Fukunaga's adaptation of *Jane Eyre* (2011) and Thomas Vinterberg's adaptation of *Far From the Madding Crowd* (2015).

However, even if audiences were longing for adaptations of modernist novels, there are many technical difficulties directors have to face when adapting a modernist text. Martin Halliwell names three problems.²⁶ The first technical problem is that commercial goals put pressure on filmmakers to produce films that do not challenge viewers. This is not compatible with modernism, which often demands the attention of its reader or viewer. The second problem is that some literary devices modernists use are difficult to adapt to film. Stream of

²² Halliwell, "Modernism and Adaptation", in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, 91-92.

²³ *Ibid.*, 91-92.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁵ Corrigan, quoted in Hollinger and Winterhalter, "Orlando's Sister, Or Sally Potter Does Virginia Woolf in a Voice of Her Own", 238.

²⁶ Halliwell, "Modernism and Adaptation", in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, 90-91.

consciousness, unreliable narrators, fragmentation, and allusions to other texts would all require a lot of creativity to portray successfully on screen without thwarting the storyline. The final problem Halliwell names is a discrepancy between “the modernist disdain of bourgeois” and “the liberal ideology that is usually upheld in commercial film”.²⁷

I do not agree completely with this last point, because as will be explained later the modernists were not always diametrically opposed to commercialism and mass culture, but it is true that the commercial film and modernism do not seem like a logical combination. Halliwell’s first problem, furthermore, might have become smaller over time with the increased popularity of the arthouse film. Barry Jenkins’s 2016 film *Moonlight*, for example, which is described by the director himself as an arthouse film, did well in the box office and even won the Oscar for Best Picture, which most likely increased its audience even further.²⁸ Arthouse films do not seek a mass audience, so this leaves room for more challenging elements. That leaves the second problem as the biggest obstacle, and to solve this we would have to go back to Virginia Woolf’s advice that she expressed in “The Cinema”: film should not try to copy literature, but instead it has to develop its own language to tell stories.²⁹

The other two chapters of this thesis will explain how modernist elements of Woolf’s novels have been adapted to film, but in order to do this it will first be necessary to define which elements are typically linked to modernism. This is not an easy task, because modernism is a broad term with unclear boundaries, as it was never a real “movement” at the time it was most used and it was only later that certain authors and their works were labelled “modernist”. It is generally agreed upon that modernism gained most of its ideas and techniques during the early twentieth century, when all kinds of changes in society called for new ways to represent reality in art³⁰, but it has also been argued that a novel such as *Tristram Shandy*, which was written during the eighteenth century, contains modernist³¹ or even postmodern elements³². This makes it hard to tie modernism to a specific time period, and geographically it is not any easier. The movement originated in Europe and the US, but some have argued that modernism appeared in other parts of the world around the same time, for

²⁷ Ibid., 91.

²⁸ Rapold, “Interview with Barry Jenkins”, 44.

²⁹ Woolf, “The Cinema”, 4.

³⁰ Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History*, 1.

³¹ Lupton, “*Tristram Shandy*, David Hume and Epistemological Fiction”, 98.

³² Klein, “The Art of Being Tristram,” in *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*, 129.

example in Asia.³³ However, there are still many elements and themes that a lot of modernist works have in common.

1.2 Elements of Modernism: Modernity

One of the most important interests of modernism is change. Modernists occupied themselves with thinking about modernity and the changes it brought such as technological advancements and the rise of consumerism. Tim Armstrong, in his book on modernism, explains that modernists were fascinated by how new technologies changed their society, both in positive and negative ways. Technology meant progress and efficiency, but modernists also saw it as “overload or as dwarfing the human”, and they felt that it led to alienation and estrangement from the world and from each other.³⁴ Charlie Chaplin’s film, *Modern Times* (1936), did a good job of showing people’s fears of having their jobs taken over by machines or becoming part of a machine and having nothing to say for themselves. Celia Marshik, however, points out that modernists also felt a “sense of alignment between the human body and the machine”.³⁵ This alignment was not necessarily negative, and many modernists were fascinated by technology even if they saw the danger of it.

Mass culture was another fascination of modernist authors. Claudia Olk explains that modernism was challenged by the emergence of mass culture.³⁶ Modernist texts contained all sorts of experiments and could be challenging to its readers, so mass culture, with its clear-cut storylines and characters, might be seen as a threat to modernism, as it was reaching a very large audience. Armstrong has argued that the problem with mass culture could be summarised by “a vast and increasing inattention”.³⁷ Modernist texts challenge this inattention created by mass culture with storylines that do not have a clear beginning, middle and end, and by showing a character’s inner thoughts in the form of a stream of consciousness instead of simply describing action. Armstrong also argues, however, that modernist authors embraced mass culture as being a part of the time they lived in and that they realised that doing so would lead to a better understanding of their society. Armstrong uses Norbert Elias’s definition of “kitsch” to explain that it is only logical that modernists embraced parts of mass culture. Before the twentieth century there was an “obsessive formalism” in art, and all mass culture was rejected, which meant that everything the general public liked was rejected.

³³ Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 1-2.

³⁴ Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History*, 129.

³⁵ Marshik, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture*, 10.

³⁶ Olk, *Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Vision*, 5.

³⁷ Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History*, 95.

Modernists, in turn, rejected this “obsessive formalism”, so it follows that they turned towards mass culture again. Elias has explained that kitsch represents “a state of the soul engendered by industrial society”,³⁸ so the only way for modernists to accurately represent modern life is to show the influence of mass culture in their texts. Armstrong also mentions that modernist authors often participated in mass culture themselves. Virginia Woolf, for example, gave talks to the BBC.³⁹ This shows that even if the modernists were wary of mass culture, they needed to participate in it in order to sell their books.

1.3 Elements of Modernism: Time

Another theme that interests modernists is time. Paul Sheehan, in his book on modernism, has argued that the invention of clocks “transformed time from a cosmic phenomenon to a personal one”.⁴⁰ Of course clocks existed long before the rise of modernism, but with new inventions such as the automatic wristwatch people became more aware of time and they could now plan their days meticulously, deciding exactly what had to happen at what time. Another change is that people now had more free time, because technology took over tasks that had to be performed manually before. Armstrong argues, however, that people now also had too little time to do everything they wanted to do, because society had changed into a consumer culture and the incoming flow of information had become much larger.⁴¹

These changes concerning time, and the paradox of there being both more and less time, might be what interested the modernists so much, and might have led them to the idea that time is not always linear. Martin Halliwell explains that modernists noticed a discrepancy between “clock time” and “experiential time”.⁴² Time can speed up or slow down inside somebody’s head without anyone else noticing. Similarly, time can become non-linear when somebody is thinking about the past. Armstrong explains that “human time is always a rolling accumulation of traces of previous time”.⁴³ The present cannot exist without the past and traces of the past can always be found in the present, which leads to a fragmentation of time. Modernist authors expressed this by showing fragmented time in their texts, for example by using flashbacks. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), for example, contains many flashbacks, without which it would be impossible to understand Jay Gatsby. The flashbacks

³⁸ Ibid., 48.

³⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁴⁰ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*, 122.

⁴¹ Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History*, 13.

⁴² Halliwell, “Modernism and Adaptation”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, 98.

⁴³ Ibid., 98.

also help the reader understand why certain characters make certain decisions, so this shows the influence the past has on the present. This might not seem distinctly modernist, but it does create a non-linear timeline.

1.4 Elements of Modernism: Psychology

The fragmentation in modernist texts is not only a result of fragmented time, however, but also of a fragmented inner self. Armstrong explains that modernism went against the idealism that was apparent in philosophy, because philosophical tradition saw art as a way to show people how everybody feels and how everybody should act.⁴⁴ Modernism, on the other hand, did not think there was such a universal way of feeling and thinking and wanted to emphasise the inner thoughts and point of view of the individual. Armstrong links this shift to developments during the nineteenth century in the fields of psychology and psychophysics, which popularised these fields with the general public.⁴⁵

David Rando suggests that the inner self of a character was especially important to Virginia Woolf.⁴⁶ Woolf wrote that the interest of “the moderns” lies mainly with “the dark places of psychology”⁴⁷, and according to Liesl Olson statements such as these have been taken by scholars as a starting point when trying to define modernism.⁴⁸ Furthermore, in her critiques of other texts Woolf often mentioned the lack of believable characters and of Edwardian novels she said “in none of them are we given a man or woman whom we know”.⁴⁹ Woolf, like many other modernist authors, wanted to put the human consciousness onto the page through her characters. Because of the many thoughts and emotions a person goes through during a day this led to fragmentation and the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique, since a person’s thoughts never run in one straight line.

This preoccupation with showing the inner self also means a lot of modernist fiction is written from a first-person perspective, as that is the easiest way to let the reader see inside a character’s mind. Rando argues, however, that despite these different techniques the modernists used, their goal of showing a characters’ inner thoughts was not always achieved.⁵⁰ Techniques such as stream-of-consciousness can make a text difficult to read and

⁴⁴ Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History*, 91.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

⁴⁶ Rando, *Modernist Fiction and News*, 73.

⁴⁷ Woolf, quoted in Olson, “Virginia Woolf’s “Cotton Wool of Daily Life””, 43.

⁴⁸ Olson, “Virginia Woolf’s “Cotton Wool of Daily Life””, 43.

⁴⁹ Woolf, quoted in Rando, *Modernist Fiction and News*, 73.

⁵⁰ Rando, *Modernist Fiction and News*, 28.

if its only goal is to show a character's thoughts there will not be much in terms of plot that drives the reader to finish reading the book. It is furthermore impossible to put every single thought a person has on paper, because while a thought is being written many more thoughts have passed through the writer's mind already, and there is not enough time to write all of them down. This preoccupation with what happens inside the mind will probably prove to be difficult to adapt to film in the rest of this thesis.

Chapter 2: *Orlando*

The first novel that will be discussed is Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). The story follows Orlando, an English nobleman living from the sixteenth century to 1928. He lives at Knole House, the family estate, and spends his days writing poetry, and then one day after he has slept for a long time he wakes up as a woman. This change in sex does not seem to bother Orlando and she goes on living as a woman, eventually publishing the poem she has been working on all these years, marrying a man called Shelmerdine and giving birth to a son. The novel discusses issues such as the female experience and the impossibility of writing an accurate biography.

The adaptation that will be discussed is Sally Potter's 1992 film *Orlando*. Before directing this film she did not have any commercial successes⁵¹, which might be why producers were hesitant to sponsor this film and she eventually coproduced it under her own company, Adventure Pictures.⁵² *Orlando* became her first mainstream success.⁵³ The commercial failures of Potter's previous films, however, might have led her to be more conscious of commercial goals, making her more careful with adapting modernist elements from the novel.

This chapter will use the same categories of modernist elements as the first chapter, with the addition of a section about the biographical form. This section was added because the merging of conventional forms in order to better represent reality is distinctly modernist⁵⁴, but is something that is mostly visible in Woolf's *Orlando* and not so much in *Mrs Dalloway*. The section will discuss how the novel defies biographical conventions, the absence of this element in the adaptation, and how Potter's film comments on filmmaking. The next section will examine modernist elements connected to psychology, for example how Orlando's interior life and techniques such as the stream of consciousness were adapted to film with a breaking of the fourth wall. The third section is about modernity and discusses the effects technology and the city have on Orlando's identity, how this was translated to film, and how certain changes in society are visible in the film. The final section discusses time: the visibility of time in the film, Orlando's movement towards the future, and the role of the clock.

⁵¹ Hollinger and Winterhalter, "Orlando's Sister, Or Sally Potter Does Virginia Woolf in a Voice of her Own", 238.

⁵² Ciecko, "Transgender, Transgenre, and the Transnational: Sally Potter's 'Orlando'", 19.

⁵³ Hollinger and Winterhalter, "Orlando's Sister, Or Sally Potter Does Virginia Woolf in a Voice of her Own", 238.

⁵⁴ Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, xi-xii.

2.1 The Biography

The full title of the novel *Orlando* is *Orlando: A Biography*, but any reader who does not know this would think the story is completely fictional. The novel seems too fantastical to be real, with its protagonist who lives for more than three hundred years and who changes sex in the middle of the story. It does contain biographical elements, however, about Woolf's friend and lover Vita Sackville-West⁵⁵, so it could be classified as an unconventional biography. *Orlando* is a manifestation of both Vita and her family history, and many of the characters in the novel are recognisable as people in Vita's life. *Orlando*'s lover Sasha, for example, is based on Violet Trefusis, a lover of Vita, and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, whom *Orlando* eventually marries, is based on Harold Nicolson, Vita's husband.⁵⁶ Another character who appears as a lover is Rosina Pepita, who is based on Vita's grandmother Joséfa "Pepita" Duran.⁵⁷ This shows the novel is not just a biography of Vita, but of her family as well, since her grandmother was of course the lover of her grandfather and not of Vita herself.

The novel furthermore describes Knole House, the enormous country house that Vita grew up in and which was in the possession of her family. Vita could not inherit the house, as is described in *Orlando*, because she was a woman and women could not inherit property back in 1928 when her father died.⁵⁸ A final important element in the novel that can be linked to Vita's life is *Orlando*'s poem "The Oak Tree", which strongly resembles and even directly quotes Vita's poem "The Land".⁵⁹ If all that was not enough to convince a reader that *Orlando* really could be seen as a biography, the pictures that are used to show what *Orlando* looks like at several stages in his/her life come from the real-life collection of Knole House and some of them even picture Vita.⁶⁰ These ways of merging fiction and the biography are distinctly modernist, as it was the modernists' goal to challenge existing forms in order to better represent reality.⁶¹

It is curious that Woolf would write a biography, because she had written critically about the biographical form before writing *Orlando*, for example in her 1939 essay "A Sketch of the Past" which was published posthumously. In the essay she criticises the biography and names the problems a biographer might run into. One such problem is that biographies describe

⁵⁵ Pawlowski, "Introduction," in *Orlando*, VI.

⁵⁶ Glendinning, quoted in Pawlowski, *Ibid.*, VII.

⁵⁷ Woolf, *Orlando*, 164.

⁵⁸ Pawlowski, "Introduction," in *Orlando*, VIII.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, VIII.

⁶¹ Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism*, XII.

events, but according to Woolf it is much more important to know what a person thinks and how they feel, which is not something a biographer can completely know.⁶² Even if the subject tells the biographer how they felt at a certain moment they will first have to convey their feelings to the biographer and then the biographer will have to convey this to the reader.

These thoughts of Woolf's are noticeable in *Orlando*, because while the biographer provides everything necessary for a conventional biography, such as descriptions of Orlando's physical appearance and important events in his/her life, there are also many passages which only describe what Orlando is thinking. This does lead the reader to question how the biographer, or Woolf, could possibly know these thoughts of Orlando, or Vita, but according to Woolf it is not important whether such descriptions are based on fact or not. She has said that in order to come to a truth "facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity".⁶³ Thus it is not enough to write down facts in order to convey someone's personality in a biography, but some fiction should be added as well if this leads to a better understanding of the person's character. However, even if the biographer does this the form of the biography remains imperfect, which is emphasised by the biographer in *Orlando*, who constantly criticises their own capabilities in describing Orlando.

Of all the modernist elements the novel *Orlando* contains the way Woolf challenges the form of the biography might be the hardest to adapt to film, which is probably why Potter largely ignored that part of the novel and did not include the words "*A Biography*" in the title of her film. It also seems, when pictures of Vita Sackville-West and Tilda Swinton as Orlando are compared, that no effort was made to have Tilda resemble Vita. This choice is understandable, as Vita is relatively unknown and references to her would probably not have added to commercial success. A cinematic adaptation of a biography will furthermore always be fictional since real-life people are portrayed by actors, which means it is not purely a biography anyway and it would be nearly impossible to use biographical conventions and comment on them the way Woolf does in her novel. One of Woolf's main points about the biography, lastly, is that thoughts should be described instead of actions, and it is difficult to do that in a film. Orlando's thoughts on poetry might be interesting to read about in Woolf's pretty sentences, but if that was all the film consisted of everybody would fall asleep. The general consensus seems to be that a film needs action in order to stay interesting.

⁶² Woolf, quoted in McIntire, *Modernism, Memory, and Desire: T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf*, 123.

⁶³ Woolf, quoted in *ibid.*, 129.

Potter has, however, replaced Woolf's comments on the biography with some comments on filmmaking and challenges the form of film in the same way that Woolf challenges the biography. The clearest reference to filmmaking comes at the very end of the film when Orlando is sitting under the oak tree that has been so important in her life, and her young daughter is running about. The daughter is holding a camera and is filming Orlando and their surroundings, which the viewer can see in the form of shaky footage. Suzanne Ferriss notes that the unprofessional images the child creates "expose the artistry and constructedness of Potter's professional cinematic product"⁶⁴. I believe, however, that this is also a critical but hopeful comment on the still small number of women that work as film directors. Orlando did not have much agency as a woman in the ages she lived through, but in the end they are moving towards the future and now her daughter has the ability to pick up a video camera and become a filmmaker.

Another scene in which Potter challenges cinematic conventions is the opening scene of the film. In most films if a scene contains the main character the camera will follow the character so that the viewer is able to clearly see what the character is doing. In this scene, however, Orlando can be seen reading and walking, and as he moves to the left the camera moves to the right, while as he walks to the right the camera moves to the left. It is almost as if the camera is reluctant to follow Orlando. This scene shows that even though Orlando might be the title character, this film will not be a conventional film that shows the life of its main character, because the camera will not just be following Orlando and instead "will be there for the character to find".⁶⁵

2.2 Psychology

Orlando does indeed find the camera, as there are several points in the film at which (s)he looks at the camera and talks to the viewer, thereby replacing the biographer of the novel. There is already less of a need for a biographer in the film because the viewer sees events as they happen, so they do not have to be described to the viewer, but because Orlando tells the audience how (s)he feels at certain moments the biographer becomes completely obsolete as there is no need to "translate" these feelings to the viewer either. Ferriss explains that the way Orlando addresses the camera works to "subvert conventional spectator relations".⁶⁶ Normally the viewer is a passive spectator to what happens on screen and the characters are not aware

⁶⁴ Ferriss, "Unclothing Gender: The Postmodern Sensibility in Sally Potter's *Orlando*", 114.

⁶⁵ Ciecko, "Transgender, Transgenre, and the Transnational: Sally Potter's '*Orlando*', 84.

⁶⁶ Ferriss, "Unclothing Gender: The Postmodern Sensibility in Sally Potter's *Orlando*", 111.

of the camera, but here the viewer is acknowledged, which creates a bond between the character of Orlando and the viewer. Especially at moments when Orlando gives a look to the camera without saying anything, for example when a publisher asks her “how long did this draft take?”⁶⁷ and the viewer knows it has taken her more than three hundred years, it is like Orlando and the viewer share an inside joke.

This breaking of the fourth wall makes what happens on screen seem more real and less real at the same time. Orlando is aware of the viewer, so Orlando and the viewer exist within the same universe, but because Orlando knows there is a camera it might also be questioned if (s)he is manipulating what the viewer sees. This is especially clear in the scene in which Orlando lies in bed after having met Queen Elizabeth. He turns to the camera and says “very interesting person”⁶⁸. It seemed to me almost as if Orlando were vlogging, even though the concept of vlogging did not exist yet when the film was made. This is a moment in which nothing else is happening, so there is no reason for a camera to be there, but Orlando himself chooses to turn towards the camera and address the viewer, which shows a certain agency that the main character usually does not have in a film and that Orlando does not have in the novel. It also means that the film could be considered to be told from a first-person perspective. This perspective was often used by modernist writers, as I mentioned in the first chapter, since it is an effective way of showing the reader what a character is thinking. Orlando’s thoughts are filtered through the biographer in the novel, so in this aspect the film is actually more modernist than the novel. Cristina Degli-Esposti explains that Orlando’s comments to the viewer can even be seen as an adaptation of Woolf’s stream of consciousness technique.⁶⁹ This modernist technique is not as apparent in her novel *Orlando* as it is in some of her other novels, but it is still there, for example in the last chapter when Orlando starts to think in nouns without articles or verbs.⁷⁰

Degli-Esposti does, however, feel that the way Orlando addresses the camera is not entirely successful, because the viewer never gets a clear image of who Orlando really is.⁷¹ Most of the comments Orlando makes to the camera are very short, so while they do give some insight into certain situations, there are many other situations in which the viewer does not know how Orlando feels. Another reason it might feel as if we do not get to know Orlando very well in the film could be that it is difficult to portray on screen the many aspects there are

⁶⁷ Potter, *Orlando*.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Degli-Esposti, “Sally Potter’s ‘Orlando’ and the Neo-Baroque Scopic Regime”, 78.

⁷⁰ Reviron-Piégay, “Translating Generic Liberties: Orlando on Page and Screen”, 322.

⁷¹ Degli-Esposti, “Sally Potter’s ‘Orlando’ and the Neo-Baroque Scopic Regime”, 82.

to Orlando's personality. One passage in the novel reads "his mind was such a welter of opposites – of the night and the blazing candles, of the shabby poet and the great Queen, (...)"⁷² Much later the biographer explains how their biography might be considered successful, but is not complete, "since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand",⁷³ and that does not even take into consideration how someone's personality might change over time. Reviron-Piégay explains that both in biography and film an important goal of the modernists was to give a "proper rendition of the inner life of emotion and thought",⁷⁴ which led to the conclusion that there is no one self, and instead everybody's personality is fragmented. So if there really are so many aspects to somebody's personality it seems that mentioning this as Woolf did might be the best a writer can do, and attempting to show all these aspects in a film is altogether impossible given the short amount of time that is usually available in a film.

2.3 Modernity

Another modernist theme which can be found in both the novel and the film is that of modernity, although it is mostly near the end of the story as it moves into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that this is discussed. Before these centuries arrive there is no mention of any new technologies and most of the story takes place in Knole House, which invokes a feeling of nostalgia and, notes Tammy Clewell, "serves as a metonym of English tradition and identity".⁷⁵ Throughout the story Orlando always returns to the family house and when (s)he spends a few year in Constantinople as ambassador it is visions of Knole House and its surroundings that eventually draw her back to England.⁷⁶ The house represents the whole of England to Orlando at that moment.

It is later when the nineteenth century arrives that new technologies and modern ideas become important in Orlando's life, and this transition is not a gradual one. The beginning of the century is marked in the novel by the appearance of a black cloud. "With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was over; the Nineteenth century had begun."⁷⁷ The biographer goes on to describe the effects of this black cloud as if they are simply caused by the weather. The fact that "the life

⁷² Woolf, *Orlando*, 10.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷⁴ Reviron-Piégay, "Translating Generic Liberties: Orlando on Page and Screen", 320.

⁷⁵ Clewell, *Modernism and Nostalgia: Bodies, Locations, Aesthetics*, 93.

⁷⁶ Woolf, *Orlando*, 73-74.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 111.

of the average woman was a succession of childbirths”⁷⁸ is connected to flourishing ivy and evergreen, caused by dampness, for example. Most of the other changes that are described as being caused by the black cloud are changes in the way people think and behave. The concept of the home changes and there are certain topics that cannot be mentioned in public anymore. Seeing as the steam locomotive was invented around the turn of the century and Britain had become more industrialised in the previous couple of years it can be assumed that the black cloud is not a natural one, but an industrial one, and that Woolf blamed these changes on modernity and industrialisation.

This is made even more obvious in the film, where the nineteenth century is introduced by smoke and the sounds of a train. “What’s that?” Orlando asks, and Shelmerdine, whom she has just met and who will become her husband, replies “The future!”⁷⁹ The effects of this future, however, are not shown, in favour of scenes showing her relationship with Shelmerdine. One of the commercial posters and DVD covers for the film shows Orlando and Shelmerdine embracing in bed, so the reason a relatively large portion of the film is spent on their relationship is probably to increase commercial success, since romantic plots are probably more interesting to the wider public than the concept of the future in twentieth-century England. There is some implicit commentary on modernity and change, however, because in the film Potter has changed Shelmerdine’s nationality to American. His arrival indicates all sorts of changes and he tries to convince Orlando to come to America, the land of commercialism and technological advancement, but Orlando is reluctant and wants to hold onto her past in Knole House for a little longer.

After the nineteenth century comes the twentieth century, beginning with the Edwardian era, and as Clewell notes this era is a period of transition in *Orlando*. The Victorian era has gone and modernity emerges, even more so than in the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ Many important events happen for Orlando in this short period: she gives birth to her son (or daughter in the film) and the manuscript she has worked on for hundreds of years is finally published. These events seem to indicate that this new age is one of possibility, but the novel’s biographer also describes some negative changes. The electric light bulb becomes common in the home, for example: “at a touch, a whole room was lit; hundreds of rooms were lit”⁸¹, and while this can be handy, it also erases privacy. Other inventions that are mentioned are the car, the airplane

⁷⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁷⁹ Potter, *Orlando*.

⁸⁰ Clewell, *Modernism and Nostalgia: Bodies, Locations, Aesthetics*, 99.

⁸¹ Woolf, *Orlando*, 147.

and the lift, which all speed up life. It is in a car where an important scene takes place in the novel. Orlando is driving through the city and because of her speed and the many things that are going on in the city “nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish”.⁸² It is this experience of seeing everything partially that causes a fragmentation of her identity and this leads the biographer to wonder “in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment”.⁸³ The fragmentation of identity fascinated the modernists, and Woolf clearly shows here how modernity contributes to this fragmentation. The film retains the scene with the car, which is changed to a motorbike, but in the film this scene is only a visual one and there is no way to tell how the drive through London affects Orlando’s mind. The scene on its own is not able to have the same effect on the viewer, because the modern viewer is used to this fast life that is new to Orlando.

2.4 Time

Time seems to pass very gradually in Woolf’s novel and it is only near the end of the story that the influence of time is really visible, but in the film these changes are more noticeable because of the dates and titles that are shown on screen. The film is divided into seven of these combinations, such as “1600: Death” and “1750: Society”.⁸⁴ Only the last title does not include a date and is simply called “Birth”, which suggests this part takes place in the present. Another way in which the passing of time is shown is through costumes and mise-en-scène. Degli-Esposti notes that each time period comes with a set of colours in the film and that these correspond “to the literary changes of style in Woolf’s novel”.⁸⁵ Red and gold represent the Elizabethan period, for example, and dusty blue is used for the nineteenth century. This can only be done through a visual medium, so in that sense it adds something to the novel, but it also has the effect of reminding the viewer of the passing of time. In the novel it is because time passes gradually that Orlando and the reader are able to forget the fact that Orlando is supposed to age, but because time visibly passes in the film the viewer’s attention is drawn to this fact and might expect an explanation for this, which is not given.

Another point the novel makes is that time is relative, and the biographer notes that an hour may sometimes feel like a minute and vice versa. “This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves

⁸² Ibid., 152.

⁸³ Ibid., 152.

⁸⁴ Potter, *Orlando*.

⁸⁵ Degli-Esposti, “Sally Potter’s ‘Orlando’ and the Neo-Baroque Scopic Regime”, 79.

fuller investigation”⁸⁶ is something the biographer says, but it might as well have been a quote from a modernist paper as this discrepancy is exactly what the modernists found fascinating about time. Memory adds to this discrepancy and makes time more fragmented in the novel, because Orlando often thinks about the past and near the end of the novel it becomes less and less clear which scenes are taking place in the present and which in the past. This might have been adapted to film with the use of flashbacks, but that choice was not made and time therefore is linear in the film, which has the commercial advantage of making the story easier to follow. This choice might have been necessary because the unconventional plot of the film already makes it more difficult to follow than a Hollywood blockbuster, for example.

In the end it is striking of a clock that forces Orlando back to the present: “eleven times she was violently assaulted”⁸⁷ by the clock striking eleven. It interrupts Orlando’s thoughts of the past, which annoys her at first but also has the positive effect of making her notice her surroundings and making her appreciate what she sees in nature. After a while she finds a balance between thinking of the past and being in the present. Orlando is not obsessed with the past as much in the film as in the novel, with the exception of her attachment to Knole House. Emphasis is laid on the future instead. Shelmerdine says to Orlando: “You can stay and stagnate in the past or leave and live for the future, the choice is yours”.⁸⁸ He says this when he wants Orlando to come to America with him, and as I mentioned before she chooses to stay in England. This suggests she is not ready for the future yet, but at the end of the film she does seem to be ready. She is now free because she is able to let go of her long past and is able to live in the present, going towards the future. It looks like Orlando is thinking this over as she sits under the tree, and the viewer is able to do the same as Jimmy Sommerville playing an angel voices Orlando’s feelings about her newfound freedom in a song:

“In this moment of unity
 Feeling an ecstasy
 To be here, to be now
 At last I am free,
 Yes at last, at last
 To be free of the past
 And the future that beckons me.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Woolf, *Orlando*, 47.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁸⁸ Potter, *Orlando*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 3: *Mrs Dalloway*

The other novel this thesis will examine is Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). The story follows Clarissa Dalloway through London as she prepares for a party she will be hosting. Throughout the day she thinks back to her youth that was spent at Bourton while she wonders if she chose the right man to be her husband. At the same time Septimus Warren Smith is followed, who is a war veteran of World War I and suffers from PTSD. Eventually Clarissa is able to hold her party and Septimus commits suicide.

Woolf has called *Mrs Dalloway* "the finished product"⁹⁰ of her modernist experimentations in one of her diary entries, which has led many to deem it "unfilmable".⁹¹ Paul Sheehan explains that the novel might have a traditional storyline, namely a love-triangle resulting in doubt about Clarissa's choice of husband, but that this storyline is not the point of the novel.⁹² Clarissa and Peter, the man she did not end up marrying, are brought together at the end to possibly resolve any doubts about the man she chose, but at this point the story ends and there is no resolution, which suggests the story was never intended as a love story. Instead it is the extensive descriptions of the inner life of Clarissa and the other characters that make the novel interesting. "I adumbrate here a study of insanity & suicide: the world seen by the sane & the insane side by side," Woolf wrote in her diary.⁹³ The novel could therefore be adapted as a love story that is just about the events that happen to Clarissa, but then a large portion of the novel, and perhaps the portion that Woolf found most important, would have to be left out. Marleen Gorris knew of the novel's reputation,⁹⁴ but still succeeded in adapting the novel in her 1997 film *Mrs Dalloway*, with Eileen Atkins as screenwriter. The film has received mixed reviews by critics and scholars, ranging from reviewers praising Vanessa Redgrave's performance as Clarissa Dalloway⁹⁵ to one scholar, Walter Kendrick, claiming all Gorris and Atkins have done is "denigrate film".⁹⁶

Some of the reasons the film is viewed negatively are tied to elements of modernism that exist in the novel but were not adapted to film (successfully), so those reasons and the modernist elements that *were* adapted will be discussed in the rest of this chapter. I will first discuss modernity, of which *Mrs Dalloway* contains elements connected to the city, the war,

⁹⁰ Pawlowski, "Introduction," in *Mrs Dalloway*, VI.

⁹¹ Kendrick, "The Unfilmable", 50.

⁹² Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*, 139.

⁹³ Woolf, quoted in Pawlowski, "Introduction," in *Mrs Dalloway*, VII.

⁹⁴ Kendrick, "The Unfilmable", 50.

⁹⁵ Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama*, 63.

⁹⁶ Kendrick, "The Unfilmable", 59.

and the treatment of PTSD by the medical profession. The next topic is psychology, for which I will look into Septimus's madness, Clarissa's connection to Septimus and her interior life, and the way the narration jumps from character to character. Finally I will discuss time, in particular the way the film jumps between present and past, the role of the clock, and how feelings of nostalgia are present in both novel and film.

3.1 Modernity

The most obvious sign of modernity in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is the city of London. The characters' views of London seem to be mostly positive, for example in the first description of the city, which is Clarissa's: "In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June."⁹⁷ These thoughts portray the city as busy and loud, but other than a few remarks about there being homeless people it seems that the characters are used to the busy life in London and do not view it negatively. The city is still very present, though, for example in the detailed descriptions of all the roads Clarissa passes on her walk.

London is less present in the film, which might be due to the relatively low budget that was available.⁹⁸ There are some scenes which show the streets of London, but it is always a very small part that is visible and there are no shots that show a wider view of the city. However, 1920s London would not seem very busy to a modern audience, as the modern viewer is used to there being even more vehicles and sounds, so the effect of it being a large and modern city would likely be lost anyway. There is a scene with an airplane writing an advertisement in the sky in both novel and film which I will discuss later, but even this way of advertising that draws all the characters' attention in the story and makes them forget their surroundings would not have the same impact on an audience used to billboards and television commercials.

Another aspect of modernity is modern warfare, in this case World War I, which is not mentioned often in the novel but is always there in the background. Early on in the novel the effects of the war are described: "This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly

⁹⁷ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 4.

⁹⁸ Kendrick, "The Unfilmable", 59-60.

upright and stoical bearing.”⁹⁹ The war has led to a change in society and Clarissa mentions she feels that it is “dangerous to live even one day”.¹⁰⁰ Anna Jones Abrahamson explains that this feeling of danger was common in the years after WWI: “Clarissa is not haunted by one traumatic memory from the past; instead, she senses danger within the exuberant vitality of an ordinary June morning.”¹⁰¹ This feeling people had after the war is one of the main reasons the modernists felt the need for new forms to express life inner feelings, so it is only logical that the war plays such a large role in the novel.

The influence of the war is visible in the film as well, for example at the beginning of the story when Clarissa steps outside her home and a one-legged man on crutches can be seen walking down the street, and later when a one-armed man on crutches is seen sitting on a bench.¹⁰² At other moments the film is less subtle than the novel, however, and the war is even mentioned explicitly by Clarissa’s old friend Hugh Whitbread: “The war may be over, but there’s still the echo of it.”¹⁰³ This means the presence of the war is very obvious in the film, but as the modern viewer is not living in the years after WWI themselves this might be necessary in order to understand why the characters feel and behave a certain way.

The effects of the war can be noticed most clearly in Septimus Warren Smith. He is a war veteran who is suffering from PTSD and has hallucinations about the war. The film begins with the event that was most traumatic to Septimus, namely the death of his friend Evans during the war. This event is never fully described in the novel, although it is mentioned, but in the film we see Septimus’s facial expressions as he watches Evans come towards him and die in an explosion. This, too, enlarges the presence of the war in the film, because it is the first thing the viewer sees. Leslie Hankins has criticised this decision¹⁰⁴, because Woolf wrote famously in *A Room of One’s Own* that “A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop—everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists.”¹⁰⁵ She meant by this that typically masculine scenes, such as one on a battlefield, are seen as more important than feminine ones. Films, however, are not the same as novels, and the addition of this scene does lead the viewer to a better understanding of Septimus, which is necessary because they cannot read extensively about his thoughts as in the novel.

⁹⁹ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰¹ Jones Abrahamson, “Beyond Modernist Shock: Virginia Woolf’s Absorbing Atmosphere”, 44.

¹⁰² Gorris, *Mrs Dalloway*.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Hankins, “Colour Burning on a Framework of Steel”, 369.

¹⁰⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 86.

3.2 Psychology

That Septimus is suffering from PTSD as a result of his time as a soldier in the war will be obvious to most readers and viewers, since his symptoms are very visible and clearly linked to the war. “The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at,”¹⁰⁶ are some of the first lines through which the reader gets to know him, and a few pages later he has a vision of Evans, his friend who died in the war,¹⁰⁷ connecting his madness to his time spent as a soldier. The descriptions of Septimus’s thoughts, for which Woolf mostly uses the modernist stream of consciousness technique, are how the reader gets insight into his madness. It is always difficult to adapt a character’s thoughts to film, but many of Septimus’s thoughts and hallucinations are very visual, which might make it easier. In one scene he hallucinates the following, for example: “Music began clanging against the rocks up here. It is a motor horn down in the street, he muttered; but up here it cannoned from rock to rock, divided, met in shocks of sound which rose in smooth columns (that music should be visible was a discovery).”¹⁰⁸ The scene described here might be even better conveyed through film than through text since a film would be able to use real visions and sounds instead of just describe them, but the 1997 film does not take the opportunity in this case.

There is another scene, however, which shows Septimus’s madness in a visual way. In this scene the camera cuts quickly from Septimus and his wife Rezia sitting on a park bench to images of pigeons, a crying baby, another war veteran, and walking feet, accompanied by a soundtrack that gets louder and more disorienting and incorporates the sounds of the crying baby and someone walking down the path.¹⁰⁹ This scene combined with the many close-ups of Septimus’s anxious face successfully convey how overwhelming and disorienting the world is to him. Other visual scenes are those where Septimus has visions of Evans walking towards him and dying in an explosion. Still, some critics feel that Gorriss could have done more. “Gorriss’s film makes less use of the visual than does the novel,”¹¹⁰ is one of Leslie Hankins’s critiques in her essay on the adaptation, and she names several cinematic techniques, such as montage, lens distortion, and slow and fast motion, that could have been used to adapt Woolf’s visual descriptions to film.¹¹¹ The film even goes so far as to have

¹⁰⁶ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 12.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁰⁹ Gorriss, *Mrs Dalloway*.

¹¹⁰ Hankins, “Colour Burning on a Framework of Steel”, 371.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 371-372.

Rezia summarise Septimus's symptoms and describe his episodes of madness to Doctor Bradshaw, which means the viewer gets the task of coming up with images to go with Rezia's words instead of actually seeing them.

All these scenes about Septimus might lead a reader or viewer to wonder why so much time is spent on a character that seems to have nothing to do with the title character, but Woolf has explained that the two characters are actually connected and that Septimus serves as Clarissa's double.¹¹² Septimus is able to feel and think things that Clarissa cannot, because of her place in society. This experiment of having two characters portray different sides of one person feels very modernist, as the modernists were interested in findings ways to better represent people's inner lives. The connection between Clarissa and Septimus is perhaps even more clear in the film than in the novel, because the film contains a scene in which they see each other through a shop window. It is filmed from Clarissa's side of the window, which makes it seem as though she is looking at a mirror and sees Septimus as her reflection.

They never meet in the novel, but their connection is still hinted at. Sheehan notes, for example, that in the novel both Clarissa and Septimus are said to have a bird-like appearance¹¹³: Clarissa's face is "beaked like a bird's"¹¹⁴ and Septimus is "beak-nosed"¹¹⁵. Their thoughts seem to match up at certain moments, too. Both in the novel and film Clarissa fears that her party is going to be a failure and thinks to herself: "Why seek pinnacles and stand drenched in fire?" The novel continues with: "Might it consume her anyhow! Burn her to cinders!"¹¹⁶ and in the film this feeling is made more imminent with a change to: "I feel burned to a cinder".¹¹⁷ Clarissa's thoughts echo Septimus's hallucinations of fire, for example in the moment I mentioned before where Septimus is afraid the world will burst into flames. This fear exists in the film too, where Rezia explains to Doctor Bradshaw that Septimus often feels like he is engulfed in flames.¹¹⁸

Finally the clearest connection between Clarissa and Septimus occurs at the end of the novel and film, when Septimus commits suicide by jumping out of a window and Clarissa hears about this at her party. She is anxious that the news will ruin her party and Septimus's madness seems to jump over to her for a moment in the film, which is expressed through a

¹¹² Pawlowski, "Introduction," in *Mrs Dalloway*, XI.

¹¹³ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*, 132.

¹¹⁴ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 8.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹¹⁷ Gorris, *Mrs Dalloway*.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

quick succession of close-ups of eyes and mouths, and the sound of people talking over each other loudly.¹¹⁹ Clarissa then goes to an empty room to contemplate the man's death. Martin Halliwell explains that Woolf had planned to make Clarissa, who makes some passing remarks about death throughout the novel, commit suicide, but decided that the death of Septimus would enable her to live.¹²⁰ "She had escaped," she realises in the novel.¹²¹ How Septimus's death has saved her is made more explicit in the film as she holds a monologue about life and death through voiceover while she looks out of her window and down at a spiked fence; the same sort of fence that Septimus jumped to his death on. After this monologue she realises that Septimus's death has made her feel more like him and less afraid of life.¹²²

Clarissa's thoughts are described extensively in the novel and a character's interior life is always difficult to adapt to film, so it is this use of voiceover that lets viewers of the film experience Clarissa's thoughts. This is not a new technique, but especially the monologue that Clarissa gives as she is looking out the window is an effective way to let the viewer have a look inside her mind. Another way in which the viewer gets to know Clarissa and the other characters is through their facial expressions. These expressions and the acting in general are what has brought the film praise from positive critics and scholars.¹²³ Damion Searls, for example, calls it "a superb adaptation" in his essay on the film and goes on to explain that Woolf's literary style may be largely absent from the film, but the characters have been brought to life very effectively by the actors. He claims that "acting talent (...) can convey as much interiority as interior monologue can".¹²⁴

That statement might go a bit far, however, because some of the internal monologues are so long in the novel that a facial expression could not possibly convey all those feelings and thoughts, but the good acting certainly adds to the viewer's understanding of the characters. Clarissa often claims to love life in the novel, for example, but this is mixed with many negative thoughts which might make the reader doubt that claim. In the film, however, Clarissa is often seen smiling to herself, and this confirms that she does indeed love life at moments even if she might think negatively at other moments. Other visual cues to what the

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Halliwell, "Modernism and Adaptation", in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, 103.

¹²¹ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 134.

¹²² Gorris, *Mrs Dalloway*.

¹²³ Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama*, 63.

¹²⁴ Searls, "The Timing of Mrs. Dalloway", 361-362.

characters are thinking include Peter's looks at Clarissa during her party, which clarify that she is still on his mind, and Septimus's many anxious facial expressions.

I have only discussed some of the major characters in *Mrs Dalloway* so far, but the minor characters also play a large role in showing Clarissa's character, especially in the novel. This is explained early on in the novel as Clarissa feels that she is "part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself."¹²⁵ Clarissa anxiously feels that she can never be completely in control over her life, because part of herself exists in other people and how they think of her, and they will take that part of her with them wherever they go. This feeling is turned into a writing technique for the duration of the novel. The narration jumps from Clarissa to characters around her and then from them to characters that Clarissa does not even meet through an event they both witness or a sound they hear. Anna Jones Abrahamson explains that the voice of the narrator is difficult to spot because "the narrator absorbs and is absorbed by the voices of the novel's extensive cast of characters", which allows Woolf to represent "atmosphere itself" instead of just a few characters.¹²⁶ This feels like a very modernist experiment that again has the goal to give better insight into Clarissa's mind. It could lead to some confusion for the reader, however, because it is not always clear that a transition between characters has taken place, which might be why it was largely left out of the film.

There are only two scenes in which this technique is visible in the film. One is very short: Elizabeth, Clarissa's daughter, sits on top of a bus and looks at a house; the camera then zooms in on a window of the house and moves inside the window to reveal Septimus, after which a scene involving him follows. The other scene is one in which an airplane writes an advertisement in the sky for toffee. This is one of the first scenes in the novel that gives voice to a large range of characters because they all hear the airplane, they all look up, and they all try to decipher what it is spelling. The reader only finds out what it has spelled after some time has passed, because the narration jumps between a few characters that all decipher a few of the letters, creating a fragmented narrative. This was adapted to film in a similar way. The viewer first hears the sound of the airplane, after which the camera cuts to Clarissa. When she looks up a shot of the airplane and some of the letters it has spelled follows. The scene then cuts to Rezia, who is connected to Clarissa because they both hear the airplane. It is a nanny

¹²⁵ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 7.

¹²⁶ Jones Abrahamson, "Beyond Modernist Shock: Virginia Woolf's Absorbing Atmosphere", 47.

sitting in the same park as Rezia who lets the viewer know that the full word it spells is “Kreemo” by saying it aloud, and only later does the viewer discover the full message, when Clarissa passes a couple that mentions it also spelled “Toffee”.¹²⁷

3.3 Time

Although the narrative in Gorris’s film does not jump between minor characters as it does in the novel, it does jump between characters and their younger versions in the past, creating a timeline that is non-linear. This starts in the very first scene. One of the first lines in the novel is “What a lark! What a plunge!”¹²⁸ which reminds Clarissa of the fresh air in Bourton, where she lived when she was younger. The film starts with her saying the same line, and the line “what a plunge” is immediately repeated by a younger Clarissa who we see at Bourton.¹²⁹ A connection between the older and younger versions of Clarissa is thus created in the same way connections between different characters are created in the novel. At the same time this is a sign to the viewer that these are the same characters, which is clarified further a few scenes later when someone calls the young girl “Clarissa”. This jumping between time lines happens again, for example, when Clarissa is holding the dress she is going to wear at her party, which makes her reminisce about her time at Bourton, so the scene cuts to one in which her younger self is wearing a dress at a party too. These examples show that the technique which Woolf uses to jump between characters’ minds by connecting them with a shared experience or object they both see happens in the film too, but to jump between present and past instead. Walter Kendrick, in his essay on “unfilmable” novels, criticises the film for not clarifying that these characters we see at Bourton are the same ones we see as their older versions in London and calls the jumps into the past “abrupt”,¹³⁰ but I disagree. Not only do the characters have the same names, but in nearly all instances a reason is given for these jumps to the past, namely that something reminds a character, usually Clarissa or Peter, of their time at Bourton.

These jumps to the past happen many times in the novel and film, so the main characters seem to be spending a lot of time in their pasts, but the present is also important to them. Sheehan explains that for Woolf, “life consists of flowing streams of sensation, yet it is also centred in the singular, heterogeneous moment”.¹³¹ This is perhaps most visible in the way

¹²⁷ Gorris, *Mrs Dalloway*.

¹²⁸ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 3.

¹²⁹ Gorris, *Mrs Dalloway*.

¹³⁰ Kendrick, “The Unfilmable”, 59.

¹³¹ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*, 128.

past and present live in harmony in both the novel and film. Clarissa often reminisces about the past, but there are also times in which she is able to live in the present moment and enjoy it, for example when she thinks: “But everyone remembered; what she loved was this, here, now, in front of her; the fat lady in the cab”.¹³² Her memories are shared by the other people who were at Bourton, and because it was so long ago she remembers mostly things that the others remember too, but here in the present she is the only one who sees “the fat lady in the cab” and she enjoys that. In the film Clarissa’s enjoyment of present moments are most visible whenever she is walking down the street and smiling to herself about what she sees.

One way in which the characters are always brought back to the present in both novel and film, even when they might have been thinking of the past a moment ago, is by the striking of the clock. The public clocks in London seem to direct people’s lives: “Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, (...)”. The clock divides people’s days into little fragments of time and constantly reminds them of the present. Sheehan notes that the clock is not almighty and that it “cannot compete with the flux of human interiority; experience has prior claims to temporal engagement”¹³³, which is mostly true, as the characters are able to think of the past even as the clock is telling them they should be in the present. This shows the discrepancy between clock time and experiential time that modernists were so fascinated by, because the characters are able to bring the past into the present by thinking about it and thus expanding time in a way.

There is one scene in which the clock does invade the past, however. “‘Tell me,’ he said, seizing her by the shoulders. ‘Are you happy, Clarissa? Does Richard –’”¹³⁴ At this moment in the novel Peter seems to want to hear that Clarissa has made the wrong decision in choosing Richard as a husband over him, but he is interrupted by two reminders of the present: Elizabeth, Clarissa’s daughter, comes into the room and the Big Ben strikes “with extraordinary vigour”.¹³⁵ Peter is reminded that Clarissa is not the girl he knew at Bourton, because she even has a daughter now, and that there is no chance of him and Clarissa being together in the present. The message is less strong in the film, because Peter is not interrupted by Elizabeth but by a maid and the Big Ben can only be heard faintly in the background, so the clock has less power over the characters’ lives in the film.

¹³² Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 7.

¹³³ Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative, and Humanism*, 146.

¹³⁴ Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 35.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

Even if the present can be so invasive to the characters' thoughts, however, the 1997 film is never fully in the present for a modern audience, because it takes place in 1923. Woolf wrote about the time in which she was living herself, but the film was made many years later, so a sense of nostalgia is added that was not part of the novel. In his essay on Gorriss' adaptation Damion Searls calls the film a period piece¹³⁶ and in Christine Geraghty's book it is classified as a heritage film.¹³⁷ Geraghty explains that especially in the scenes at Bourton the characters' costumes and the shots of the English country evoke a feeling of nostalgia, and that these scenes "are presented as episodes in a lost but perfect time".¹³⁸ The feeling of nostalgia is thus more present in the film than it is in the novel, but it is not entirely new, because the characters do feel nostalgia for those summers at Bourton in the novel. The film, however, is able to convey this even more effectively because the costumes and sets will let the viewer feel that same sense of nostalgia that the characters feel. In the end Clarissa Dalloway is able to let go of her past for the most part, but the viewer will leave the cinema or their computer screen with a feeling of nostalgia, as the film ends with a still of Clarissa, Peter and Sally at Bourton.

¹³⁶ Searls, "The Timing of Mrs. Dalloway", 362.

¹³⁷ Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama*, 59.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

Conclusion

Now that both *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway* have been analysed it is time to come up with some answers to the research question I posed in the introduction: “How are the modernist elements of Virginia Woolf’s novels *Orlando* (1928) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) adapted to film in Potter’s *Orlando* (1992) and Gorris’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1997)?” The answer to this question might shine a light on why so few modernist texts have been adapted to film. In order to do this I will look back at how the modernist elements of the novels were adapted in the two films, if the two used similar or different techniques, and what more could have been done to adapt these elements to film. I will do this based on the three categories of modernist elements that were used in the introduction: modernity, psychology and time. Following that I will look again at the problems that arise from adapting a modernist text according to Halliwell and see how Potter and Gorris solved these problems. Finally I will suggest what further research could be done in the future.

The first elements of modernism I will discuss are those that fall under the category of modernity. As is explained in the first chapter, modernists are interested in the changes in society that modernity has brought, such as technological inventions and the rise of consumerism and mass culture. A place where all of this comes together is the city and big cities play an important role in both *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway*. The novel *Orlando* contains a scene in which the experience of driving a car and seeing the many elements of the city only partially leads to fragmentation of her identity, which is another fascination of the modernists. The film retains the scene with the car (which is changed to a motorbike) but leaves out the effect it has on Orlando’s mind. There is a similar scene in *Mrs Dalloway*, namely one in which an airplane writes the name of a brand of toffee in the sky and everybody is only able to read part of the message, which also leads to a fragmentation of sorts. The scene in the film is similar to the one in the novel and the sense of fragmentation is maintained by quickly cutting between parts of the message and the faces of the people looking at it, which leads to the viewer only seeing part of the message too. If Potter had wanted to show the way driving through the city fragments Orlando’s mind a similar technique could have been used to quickly show parts of everything she passes on her car ride.

Another subject attached to modernity is World War I, which is not discussed in *Orlando* but is an important theme in *Mrs Dalloway*. There is Septimus, a war veteran who suffers from PTSD, but other than his story the war mostly exists in the background of the novel, as the characters try to forget about it, but in the film it has a more obvious presence. The film

starts with a scene during the war and at various moments disabled war veterans can be seen in the background. There is even a scene in which Clarissa's friend Hugh explicitly mentions the influence the war has had on society: "The war may be over, but there's still the echo of it."¹³⁹ There is a similar scene in *Orlando*, where a change in society is mentioned too. The novel claims a black cloud has caused these changes, which is a metaphor for industrialisation. The film shows this same black cloud but clarifies what it means: "What's that?" Orlando asks, and Shelmerdine answers: "The future!"¹⁴⁰ These examples show that while the novels took their time to slowly show and describe changes in society the films had to make these changes more explicit in order to convey them to the viewer.

The next category of modernist elements is time. A concept modernism is interested in is that of clock time versus experiential time. The time on the clock does not always reflect how someone experiences time, because moments can seem to last shorter or longer than they really are and when someone thinks of the past or future the time they experience becomes non-linear. Both *Orlando* and *Clarissa Dalloway* often think of the past, but in the end it is the striking of a clock that brings both characters back to the present. This disruption of the clock is initially seen as negative but eventually allows both characters to leave their pasts behind in a positive way. The influence the clock has on these characters' journeys to the present is not as visible in the films, however. The striking of a clock can be heard multiple times in the film *Mrs Dalloway*, but its effects are less obvious. Having the sound of the striking of a clock interrupt scenes which show the characters' memories might have served to show these effects.

The final category of modernist elements I will discuss is psychology. Modernists are interested in conveying the thoughts and feelings of characters and how this can be done in a way most true to life. In both *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway* there is a lot of emphasis on the inner life of the characters and both adaptations use a voiceover to convey this. Orlando speaks directly to the camera and in Gorriss's *Mrs Dalloway* there is a scene near the end where Clarissa holds an internal monologue contemplating Septimus's death. This is conveyed to the viewer through voiceover, which makes it seem as if she is speaking to the viewer as well, although she is not realising this herself. Other scenes in which the film *Mrs Dalloway* shows the inner lives of the characters are those in which the camera cuts quickly between different things the character sees and hears, for example in a scene that shows how

¹³⁹ Gorriss, *Mrs Dalloway*.

¹⁴⁰ Potter, *Orlando*.

overwhelming Septimus's surroundings are to him. Still, the readers of *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway* will get to know much more about the characters' inner lives than viewers of the films, because there is simply not enough time in a 90-minute film for long internal monologues.

That the inner lives of the main characters are complicated is emphasised in both novels by showing the fragmentation of their inner selves. It is explained that Orlando's mind is "a welter of opposites"¹⁴¹ and Clarissa Dalloway feels that her self is scattered because parts of her live in other people. This is further developed in the way the narration gives voice to many minor characters in *Mrs Dalloway*. This fragmentation is not noticeable in the films, because as I mentioned before it is difficult to show characters' inner lives and it would be hard to adapt the way the narration in *Mrs Dalloway* jumps between characters, because in the short time of two hours or less that most films stick to it would be too confusing for the viewer to keep switching between minor characters. It could be done, but such a film would probably be too experimental to be successful commercially.

We can now reflect back on the three problems directors have to face when adapting a modernist text, which were discussed in the first chapter and were first posed by Martin Halliwell in his essay on modernism and adaptation. The first problem is that commercial goals put pressure on filmmakers to produce films that are not too challenging, while modernist texts are known to be challenging.¹⁴² Both Potter's and Gorriss's films were moderately successful commercially even though they adapted many modernist elements from the novels, so these two films show modernist texts can be adapted into commercially successful films. Not all modernist elements were adapted, however, and some changes were made to make the stories more commercial. Potter's *Orlando*, for example, used a poster that shows the romantic plot which formed only a small part of the novel, and the romantic plot gets more time in the adaptation of *Mrs Dalloway* than in the novel as well. Gorriss's *Mrs Dalloway* also contains relatively many scenes that take place in the past, which gives the film a nostalgic feeling and turns it into more of a period drama than a modernist film.

The second problem is that many techniques modernists use are difficult to adapt to film.¹⁴³ An example of this is modernists' frequent use of the first person perspective to convey a character's inner thoughts, which *Orlando* adapts by having Orlando speak to the

¹⁴¹ Woolf, *Orlando*, 10.

¹⁴² Halliwell, "Modernism and Adaptation", in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, 91.

¹⁴³ Halliwell, "Modernism and Adaptation", in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*, 91.

camera. This technique is also used to adapt Woolf's use of stream of consciousness and in *Mrs Dalloway* the scenes in which the camera quickly cuts between different objects resemble a stream of consciousness as well. Fragmentation is another technique that is difficult to adapt, but here the same scenes in *Mrs Dalloway* do the job well. Fragmentation of time, furthermore, happens in *Mrs Dalloway* through its many flashbacks to the past.

The final problem is the discrepancy between "the modernist disdain of bourgeois" and "the liberal ideology that is usually upheld in commercial film".¹⁴⁴ I explained in the first chapter that I feel that Halliwell's argument ignores the fact that modernists were not always negative about mass culture and accepted it as a part of society. The two adaptations do the same, as both films combine commercially accepted plots with modernist themes and techniques.

In conclusion, there are many factors that make adapting a modernist text to film difficult, but both Potter and Gorris have succeeded in capturing at least some of the modernist elements of Woolf's novels in their films *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway*. Both films ignored some modernist elements and only used those that would not hinder the plot too much, and though *Orlando* can be seen as a challenging film, it was still commercially successful. Not all modernist elements of the novels were used in the films, but certain camera techniques and CGI, for example, could be used to do this, although this would probably make a film more experimental and less commercially successful.

Hopefully research on the topic of modernist adaptations does not end here, because so much more can be done. Only two adaptations were compared in this thesis, and there are some other more obscure adaptations of *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway* that might still be discussed. There is Michael Cunningham's novel *The Hours* (1998) and Stephen Daldry's 2002 adaptation of it as well. A discussion of these works would be interesting since the events in *The Hours* all surround Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, which makes even the novel a sort of adaptation of Woolf's novel. Other modernist novels and their adaptations might be compared as well to see how modernist elements were adapted in those cases. Not that many modernist texts have been adapted to film, however, so it might be interesting to look at modernist films that are not adaptations as well and see how the modernist elements that were used there could be used in adaptations of modernist texts. Finally, as a student of English literature I do not have enough knowledge about film to suggest how an adaptation could be made that includes all elements of modernism that exist in Woolf's novels. Perhaps we have

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 91.

to wait a little longer for filming techniques to develop further and then one day someone will be able to solve all the problems that arise from adapting a modernist text. Until then, Potter's *Orlando* and Gorriss's *Mrs Dalloway* more than suffice.

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