

# A Semiotic Study in Film *Orlando* from the Feminist Vision

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**Abstract:** *With the development of mass media, many literary works have been remade into films, that are converted from literal symbols to cinematic symbols, thus creating value in the work once again. The creation of modern semiotics has broadened the theoretical, artistic, and technical study of cinema. This article uses the principles of semiotics to analyse the film *Orlando* and to illustrate the specific use of Roland Barthes's semiotics in the creation of the film in terms of costume design, character performance, and scene shaping. At the same time, based on feminist theory, this paper examines the breakthrough of absolute gender identity and the reconstruction of the complete "person" in *Orlando*.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Film studies, Orlando, Semiotics, Roland Barthes*

## 1. Introduction

In 1949, in her book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir pointed out that "women are not born, but are shaped<sup>[1]</sup>." This book not only contributed to the development of the second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s but also had a profound impact on contemporary feminist scholarship. In recent years, "women" has become a popular subject in various media, and more and more writers, directors, artists, and curators have begun to explore the power of "her" in this context. A rare film adaptation of a feminist author's feminist work by a feminist director, *Orlando* attracted widespread attention upon its release and has been the subject of ongoing research by scholars.

Originally a 1928 novel by Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* was made into a 1992 fantasy-drama film by Sally Potter. The film follows the legend of Orlando, an ageless aristocrat who was favoured by the Queen in the Middle Ages for over 400 years. The transformation from 16th-century male to 20th-century female, complete with a dual personality, led to the realisation of his/her life's values.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Feminism

In her 1792 book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Mary Wollstonecraft advocated for female education, thus leading to the rise of feminism. A French philosopher named Charles Fourier coined the term "féminisme" in 1837, which was known as "feminism".

There is some variation in the definition of "feminism" by different scholars. Ritzer and Ryan state that feminism is a series of socio-political movements and ideologies that promote equality between the sexes in politics, economics, personal relationships, and social interactions<sup>[2]</sup>. "Feminism is not just a movement of intellectuals, but also a political movement dedicated to justice for women and the eradication of all forms of sexism," writes Haslanger<sup>[3]</sup>. Feminism, according to Brunell and Burkett, works towards achieving gender equality on all levels, including social, economic, and political<sup>[4]</sup>. In this paper, we argue that feminism is a complex collection of social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies that are all concerned with women's equality.

In theory, feminist thinking extends feminism and covers a range of disciplines, focusing on power relations, the politics of gender, and sexuality as well as addressing issues of gender inequality. Women's rights are also promoted by feminist theory in the midst of criticizing these social and political relations. Discrimination, stereotyping, objectification (especially sexual objectification), the body, oppression, and patriarchy are among the topics explored in feminist theory<sup>[5]</sup>.

Women's social roles and lived experiences are the basis of feminist theory, which has its roots in the feminist movement. A recent study has identified four waves in the history of the modern western feminist movement<sup>[6]</sup>. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, women were offered the right to vote through the women's suffrage movement. As the second wave of liberation movements, the women's liberation movement started in the 1960s and fought for legal and social equality. Individuality and diversity became the hallmark of a third wave around 1992<sup>[7]</sup>. The Me Too movement emerged around 2012, using social media to combat sexual harassment, violence against women, and rape culture. Some researchers believe a fourth wave is also possible<sup>[8]</sup>.

The novel *Orlando: A Biography* is considered a feminist classic, in which Woolf continues her theoretical construction of “androgyny”. By adapting this text, director Sally Potter has also recreated Woolf's feminist theoretical constructs in the art of cinema, while at the same time using the unique audiovisual art of cinema to express her understanding of feminist theory. One critic has noted that “Orlando is an epic of metaphysical reflection and sexual politics”, a vision of human existence.

## 2.2. Semiotics

According to the Chinese Encyclopedia, the word “semiotics” is derived from the Greek word “sēmeion”, and the idea of semiotics originated with the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates' “symptomatology”. Later, Aristotle, Locke, and Leibniz all contributed to the study of semiotics. Semiotics was born as an independent discipline in the early 20th century, with the Swiss linguist Saussure and the American philosopher Peirce as its main founders. The study of semiotics investigates the nature, meaning, and relationship of signs with human activity, as well as the laws of development and change.

One of the most widespread definitions of semiotics is that of Umberto Eco, who states that “semiotics is concerned with everything that can be considered a sign”. This paper argues that semiotics is the study of signs and the act of using signs. The study of semiotics covers more than just everyday signs; it also includes all objects that “represent” or indicate something else. It is important to note that signs can be words, images, sounds, actions, and objects in the semiotic sense<sup>[9]</sup>.

The rise of semiotics during the 1960s was largely attributed to the work of Roland Barthes.

Roland Barthes was a 20th-century French writer, thinker, sociologist, and semiotician. He is perhaps best known for his 1957 collection of essays *Mythologies*, which contains reflections on popular culture. Roland Barthes' “mythologies” were heavily influenced by the modern linguistics of the semiotic pioneer Saussure, and Barthes was the first to apply the semiotic ideas that evolved from linguistics to visual images, such as food advertising, photography, and film. He sought to analyse how the meanings we associate with images are not the “natural” result of what we see; that is, they are not explicit and universal in our understanding of what we see<sup>[10]</sup>. Barthes builds on Saussure's suggestion about the connection between the “signifier” and “signified” of signs, shifting the “signifier” and “signified”. He proposed a dualisation of the structure of signs, which he applied to the popular critique of popular culture in the 1940s.

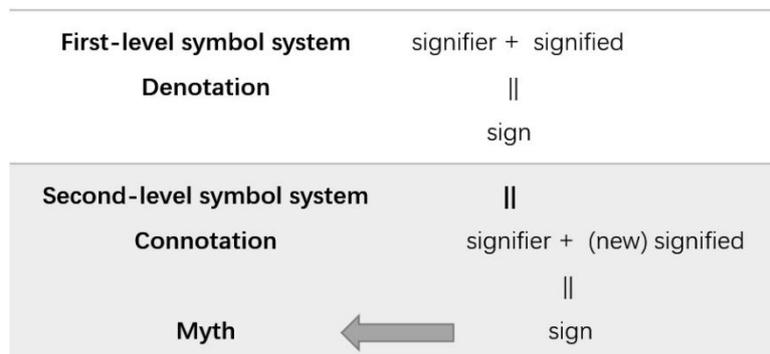


Figure 1: Roland Barthes's model of semiotics (Two Levels of Signification)

Saussure theorized that signs are made of signifiers (the form they take) and signified (the concepts or values they communicate). Roland Barthes incorporated Saussure's theory that signs also consist of a signifier and a signified, and developed his theory of the internal constitution of signs. In Barthes' view, Saussure's “signifier + signified = sign” is only the first level of symbolic representation, and the

symbolic meaning produced by the signifier and signified of the first level of the sign system is merged into the energy of the second level of the sign system, at which point a new signified is created. The signifier and signified meanings of the second level of the sign system form a new relationship - a new sign and signification and meaning - and this new sign is the "myth". The meaning of the first level of the sign system, which Barthes calls "denotative meaning", and the second level of the sign system is called "connotative meaning", and it is at the level of connotative meaning that ideology operates.

As a research method, the semiotic theory has evolved to integrate linguistics, aesthetics, philosophy, and literature, and in the course of its rapid development has become a strong guide to the study of cinema. The film is an artistic expression of literature, a reinterpretation of literary works. What is more special is that directors and actors can convey the connotations of literary works through non-verbal communication, which is incomparable to the written word.

As Peirce said, everything can be communicated at the symbolic level. By looking at a film from a semiotic point of view, it is possible to recognise the multiple perspectives and layers of meaning behind the film and the many possibilities for understanding its connotations. Understanding a film is therefore a matter of decoding the symbols in the film on the one hand and the connotations in the film on the other.

### 3. Roland Barthes's Semiotic Analysis

The essence of film language is a metaphor, which differs from the ordinary system of language and possesses its form of representation. The film has its system of signs, including symbols and symbols that act on each other, thus forming works of art with thoughts and feelings. This article takes the film *Orlando* as the object of study and uses Roland Barthes' theoretical model to analyse the meaning of the Signifier, the Signified, and the Connotation in the film from three aspects: costume design, character performance, and scene shaping, to explore the Myth in it.

#### 3.1. Costume Design

Film costumes are distinctly symbolic, and the ornate and intricate costumes are an important element of the visual expression of the film *Orlando*, with the director using costume symbols to portray characters of different genders.



*Figure 2: Orlando is reciting a poem*

Signifier: The male Orlando wears a padded shoulder, which adds volume to his upper body.

Signified: The broad-shouldered garment emphasises the masculinity of the man.

Connotation: The male is a symbol of strength and seeks to be aggressively masculine.



*Figure 3: Orlando is getting dressed*

Signifier: The female Orlando wears a corset and a wide brace skirt.

Signified: The corset and skirt brace emphasise the beauty of the female body (thin waist).

Connotation: The social constraint on the female body and mind.

Myth:

The theory of the social construction of gender is a representative doctrine of Beauvoir. In her feminist masterpiece *The Second Sex*, she points out that women are not born female, but are the product of social discipline and the coercive effect of customary norms.

Li Yinhe, a famous Chinese feminist scholar, summarises the views of feminist social constructionism as follows: gender is a social construction based on biological sex that arises from the combination of genes and environment. Individuals are born male or female, but they are not born with gender identity; they acquire it during their lives, and only become men and women once they are socially constructed.

Social constructionism argues biological gender, social gender, and the body are not natural categories, but social constructions. It is also known as so-called social constructionism, according to the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy published in 1999, which takes different forms. It holds that certain areas of knowledge are shaped by our social practices, social institutions, or the interaction and negotiation between relevant social groups, etc.

Gender is an acquired social construct, and patriarchal societies demand different things of men and women. Society sees men as strong, free, and often dominant in their interactions with women. Society, on the other hand, defines women as graceful and noble. They tend to be submissive rather than proactive in their interactions with men, and they behave in a more restrained manner.

### ***3.2. Character Performance***

Character symbolisation in film means that the director draws on the image of a character to express a certain mood or idea beyond the text so that most of the main characters in a film have multiple symbolic meanings. The series of things that a character does can be summarised as patterns that constitute the character's particular symbolism.



*Figure 4: Orlando and Sasha in the rickshaw*

Signifier: The male Orlando with eyes closed and tears streaming down his face.

Signified: The male Orlando showing sadness in front of his lover.

Connotation: The male Orlando is sentimental like a woman.



*Figure 5: Orlando and Shelmerdine on the horse*

Signifier: The female Orlando riding a horse with a man, her position in front of the man.

Signified: The female Orlando is a good rider.

Connotation: The female Orlando is as brave and independent as a man.

Myth:

"Queer" is a derogatory term for homosexuality in mainstream western culture, meaning "weird", and was later borrowed by sexual radicals to describe their theories with an ironic connotation. People who do not conform to mainstream culture and gender norms are referred to as "queer", which is a social group that includes all people whose causal relationship between their sex, gender, and sexual orientation is nonconforming.

A new sexuality theory that emerged in the 1990s in the west is queer theory, which is a feminism-based alternative to patriarchal theory of binary genders. Initially originating as a theory of homosexuality, it soon extended to including all sexual minorities as well, and went on to question and subvert the dichotomy between gender and sexuality. The queer theory assumes that people have multiple possibilities in terms of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Orlando is the archetype of queer theory, and Orlando is both masculine and feminine. In a patriarchal society, there is a single, entrenched idea of gender, but in Orlando's case, there is no innate stable male or female identity; Orlando's androgyny breaks the binary structure of masculinity and femininity.

His/her experience completely breaks down prejudices about fixed gender, thus providing more possibilities for human behaviour to develop freely and allowing people to reach their full potential.

### 3.3. Scene Shaping

The semiotician Metz once said, "The film symbol exists in any scene<sup>[11]</sup>." It can be seen that the scene, as a unique symbol, constructs the content and form of the film, carries the deeper connotation that the director wants to express and at the same time drives the flow of thoughts of the audience.



*Figure 6: Orlando is running from the maze*

Signifier: The jungle is dense, a puff of smoke blows, and the female Orlando runs out of the narrow maze.

Signified: Changing from elaborate costumes to plain clothes, the female Orlando is running into the arms of nature.

Connotation: The female Orlando begins to awaken to her identity.



*Figure 7: Orlando is driving on the road*

Signifier: The female Orlando is riding her daughter on a motorbike in a modern road with tall buildings.

Signified: The female Orlando dressed neutrally, capable of driving a tandem motorbike.

Connotation: The intersexed Orlando breaks the gender dichotomy and completes the exploration of her "self".

Myth:

"Women's literary radicals" published a periodical in 1919 disclosing that moral, social, economic, and political standards should not be gendered and that we should refocus on people, not men and women.

Their position is known as “post-feminism”.

Post-feminists believe that masculine and feminine identities are adornments of the essential self and that people are free to choose. The essential self is a human essence that transcends gender, and by looking beyond gender to the essential self, harmony can be achieved, women can be free, and gender is equal in a post-feminist world.

400 years later, Orlando slowly finds herself reborn and completes the reconstruction of her self-identity. Orlando has become a mature woman, not in relation to gender, but in relation to human growth. She no longer has to cling to anyone. However, her femininity at this moment is only a superficial narrative strategy; at this point, Orlando has transcended being an ordinary person and represents a “person” in the true and complete sense of the word, which is precisely the view espoused by post-feminism.

#### 4. Conclusion

Cinema is a special language with ideographic symbols, and the various symbols in cinema with metaphorical nature leave one with endless thoughts. By using semiotic theory to interpret the various symbols in films, we can further understand the connotations of these symbols and gain a deeper understanding of the multiple thematic ideas of films, which is conducive to an all-round and multi-level understanding of the meaning of films, thus triggering individuals to reflect deeply on their own existing state and social problems. It can also give films new connotations and enhance their value.

Feminist thought has long influenced all aspects of society, and the rise of female consciousness has contributed to the development of female culture, and feminist cinema is a product of this development. Feminist cinema is a product of the development of women's culture. Feminist cinema has its background and necessity and contributes to the call for gender equality and the expression of women's self-awareness through the expression of film art. This article explores the symbolic metaphors of Orlando from a feminist perspective and explores the feminist ideas contained in the film, which will be of some value to the subsequent discussion of film symbols from a feminist perspective.

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