


ANATOMY LESSONS: TRANS LIFE BETWEEN PORTRAITURE AND PERFORMANCE IN PAUL B. PRECIADO'S *ORLANDO, MY POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY* (2023)

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ABSTRACT

This article considers how trans lives are mediated across literary, painterly and filmic registers in Paul B. Preciado's *Orlando, My Political Biography* (2023). My analysis draws on Andrew Webber's development of reading practices applied to intertextual works that also exhibit inter pictorial and interfilmic dynamics in his reading of a scene in Christian Petzold's *Barbara* (2012) that features the studied contemplation of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). I adopt Webber's reading of the surgical and theatrical space of Rembrandt's painting as a point of departure for thinking about compositional scenarios that move between modes of portraiture and performance. More specifically, I approach the process of restaging — and reimagining — the literary text as one that can also render the construction and performance of trans and nonbinary identities in Preciado's personal and political documentary. In turn, I argue that the disposition of scientific investigation as an analogue for critical cultural work frames Preciado's invitation to read closely and queerly for the material and mediated presence of trans subjects across history and a range of media: from the printed page to contemporary art cinema.

Dieser Artikel untersucht wie Trans-Leben medienübergreifend in literarischen, malerischen und filmischen Ausdrucksformen in Paul B. Preciados *Orlando, My Political Biography* (2023) dargestellt werden. Dabei beruht meine Analyse auf Andrew Webbers Entwicklung von Lesarten, die auf intertextuelle Werke (die auch interbildliche und interfilmische Dynamiken aufweisen) angewendet werden, zum Beispiel einer Szene in Christian Petzolds *Barbara* (2012), in der Rembrandts Gemälde *Die Anatomie des Dr. Tulp* (1632) sorgfältig betrachtet und erwägt wird. Ich nehme diese Lesart des chirurgischen und theatralischen Raums bei Rembrandt als Ausgangspunkt für Überlegungen zu kompositorischen Szenarien, die sich zwischen den Formen der Porträtmalerei und der Performance positionieren. Genauer gesagt, betrachte ich den Prozess der Neuinszenierung — und Neudeutung — des literarischen Textes als einen, der auch die Konstruktion und Darstellung trans- und nichtbinärer Identitäten in Preciados persönlichem und politischem Dokumentarfilm widerspiegeln kann. In dem Sinne, behaupte ich, dass die Disposition einer medizinischen Untersuchung als Analogie für kritische Kulturarbeit Preciados Aufforderung untermauert, die materielle und vermittelte Präsenz von trans-Subjekten in einer Reihe von Medien — von der gedruckten Seite bis hin zum zeitgenössischen Filmkunst kino — behutsam und queer zu lesen.

INTRODUCTION

‘Would disrupting or upsetting the lexical surfaces, and the deeper structures disrupt other contracts (social, political) we have entered with those who have continually tried to dismiss us?’

Carole Maso, ‘Break Every Rule’¹

How are the material and mediated realities of trans life rendered across literary, painterly and filmic registers in contemporary art cinema? This article draws on Andrew Webber’s development of reading practices applied to works that are ‘intertextual, but also interfilmic and inter pictorial’ in his analysis of an ‘interlude’ in Christian Petzold’s *Barbara* (2012) ‘devoted to the analytic contemplation of Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp* (1632)’.² I adopt this reading of the surgical and theatrical space of Rembrandt’s composition as a point of departure for thinking about the intermedial rearticulation of artworks that move across portraiture and performance, between printed page, painted canvas and screened body. In particular, this article focuses on the disposition of scientific investigation — specifically, across medical and anatomical registers — asserted by Webber as an analogue for critical cultural work in Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson* and its literary and filmic afterlives. I transpose this intermedial framework to a scene of surgical attention performed by four Orlando figures in Paul B. Preciado’s documentary *Orlando, My Political Biography* (2023).³ Preciado’s film moves between modes of performative and essayistic documentary, musical interludes and personal testimonies to reimagine Virginia Woolf’s eponymous novel from the perspectives of trans and nonbinary subjects spanning the century since it was first written and published. This article considers the strategies deployed by Preciado and his fellow Orlandos to cut open and into the tissues of political biography, literary history and contemporary philosophy to disrupt the legibility of superficial representation and reassert the presence of gender-nonconforming subjects.

¹ Carole Maso, *Break Every Rule: Essays on Language, Longing and Moments of Desire* (Dzanc, 2014), p. 159.

² Andrew J. Webber, “‘Good Work’: Speed, Slowness and Taking Care in Christian Petzold’s *Barbara*”, in *Time in German Literature and Culture, 1900–2015: Between Acceleration and Slowness*, ed. by Anne Fuchs and J. J. Long (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 182, p. 174; Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632, oil on canvas, 169.5 x 216.5 cm, Maritshuis, Amsterdam.

³ The language of the film is French with the French title of *Orlando, ma biographie politique*. Quotations used throughout this article are taken from the film’s English subtitles and I refer to the film by its English name. *Orlando, My Political Biography*, dir. by Paul B. Preciado (France; Les Films du Poisson, 24images, 2023).

One of the final scenes in Preciado's film sees four of his Orlandos in an operating theatre, dressed in their characteristic Elizabethan or Jacobean ruffs, operating not on a human body but on a literary text: Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928).⁴ This detail of costume and the surgical scenario of the operating theatre evoke — if obliquely or inadvertently — Rembrandt's seventeenth-century group portrait of physicians inspecting the cadaver of an executed thief, Aris Kindt. At any rate, the scene in Preciado's *Orlando* unequivocally presents an anatomy lesson of its own: one that is instructive for the didactic logic of the film as a whole. Namely, that careful and attentive reading can allow trans and nonbinary subjects, such as the multiplicity of Orlandos that appear throughout, to reshape and rearticulate their own narratives both as they engage with the literary text or work of art and, crucially, as they navigate the social and political world around them. Following earlier discussions of gender-affirming surgery in relation to twentieth-century stories such as that of the US actress Christine Jorgensen, the climactic scene in the operating theatre deals not with surgery as a means of medical transition (a scene that might well be expected by the viewer), but rather with the staged excision of the literary text and subsequent transplantation of Preciado's and others' biographical fragments. Preciado thus presents us with a surgical and anatomical scenario that in fact operates by a literary and discursive conceit to reclaim the violence of assimilation into a binary world: what Eliot Dunn calls the attempt 'to reform traditional sites of trans trauma in a cinematic form of t4t [trans for trans] care'.⁵ As in the film more widely, the antagonistic legal and medical conditions under which trans and nonbinary people are forced to live are reimagined to fabulate a utopian near-future (set in the year 2028). The film then culminates in the performative abolition of gender assignment at birth while 'planetary, nonbinary citizenship' is proclaimed in the end credits. By cutting and pasting in this way, I contend, Preciado allows both himself and his 'invisible Orlandos of history' to reorganise the fictions that structure their daily life and life stories alike.

SURFACE READINGS

Orlando, My Political Biography ties the narrative model of Woolf's 1928 novel to Preciado's personal and painful history of gender transition alongside that of his fellow trans and nonbinary Orlandos. As such, the theorist-turned-filmmaker distributes the agency of the film's narrative development and documentary scope: it may be *his* political biography, but it is also one shared with a host of other voices. This scenario allows

⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Vintage, 2016).

⁵ Eliot Dunn, 'Orlando, Desire Lines: In Search of a t4t Documentary Practice', *Film Quarterly*, 78.1 (2024), pp. 9–19 (p. 11), doi:10.1525/fq.2024.78.1.9.

the autobiographical narrative to multiply beyond the singular story of the white Spaniard and encompass the lives of trans and nonbinary people of colour in particular (such as Koriangelis Browns and Janis Sahraoui). The film is composed of a number of scenes that feature its cast of Orlando's individually or as various ensembles (we might consider them group portraits). Invariably, they introduce themselves directly to camera by name and subsequently utter the line: 'In this film, I'll be Virginia Woolf's Orlando,' a post-dramatic device that suggests a series of audition scenes while arguably extending the repeated direct address of Tilda Swinton in Sally Potter's 1992 *Orlando* and establishing the film's credentials as a performative documentary.⁶

Towards the end of Preciado's film and just before the scene in the operating theatre, we hear from 'Emma Orlando', who describes herself as existing in a political limbo, 'without papers', and asks why it is so complicated for the authorities 'to give us new ones'. This question sets the scene for a conflation of bureaucratic and legal documentation, 'papers', both with the printed page as the material basis of the literary text and the 'discursive artefact' of the gender-nonconforming body in the subsequent scene of surgical operation. The personal examination or intrusion of the autopsy in Rembrandt's painting perhaps lends itself more to the self-revelation inherent to the generic and art historical modes of autobiography and self-portraiture than gender-affirming surgery. At the same time, the etymology of anatomy — 'cutting up' or into; 'dissection' — is suggestive not only of a medical or scientific investigation of the internal and external structures of the body, but also evokes the cutting that constitutes film work.⁷ In Preciado's *Orlando*, the surgical operation underlines this conjuncture between film editing and anatomical investigation only to complicate it by substituting the human body for the literary text.

Indeed, Preciado's turn to documentary filmmaking still bears an affinity with and close attention to print media. From poster to placard, literary text to archival fragment, *Orlando* wears its political and biographical message on its sleeve, its surface. In some respects, it is a simple, even superficial film. Perhaps these qualities are better thought of as being 'plakativ' in character: conveying a political message or story in a particularly striking way, such as, literally, on the surface of a poster or placard, like those which recur throughout the film (and its publicity material). The opening sequence begins with Preciado pasting posters onto a wall in semi-darkness. Before this, an intertitle in the opening credits precedes the title card itself to ask: 'what is really your sex?' The sound of wheatpaste being

⁶ *Orlando*, dir. by Sally Potter (United Kingdom; Adventure Pictures, Lenfilm, Mikado Film, Rio, Sigma Film Productions, 1992).

⁷ See the entry 'Anatomy', in *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d. <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/anatomy_n> [accessed 8 October 2025].



Figure 1. The first of Preciado's fellow Orlandos (Oscar-Roza Miller) complete with ruff types a letter to Virginia Woolf in a forest clearing. Still from *Orlando, My Political Biography*, dir. by Paul B. Preciado (France; Les Films du Poisson, 24images, 2023).

prepared and applied is audible before the image of Preciado applying posters to a wall follows. An over-the-shoulder shot then reveals a casting call with the words 'Orlando, where are you?' pasted onto the wall. Preciado's voiceover, meanwhile, begins the film autobiography with a sense of redundancy by lamenting the fact that with *Orlando*, Woolf had already written *his* autobiography, albeit one that represented trans people as aristocrats in colonial England. He nonetheless declares himself one of Woolf's Orlandos — of which the contemporary world is 'full' — having emerged from her fiction. This tension between the longing for an autobiographical narrative of one's own and its ample multiplication across the shared experience of subjects spanning time and space will become a central concern of Preciado's film.

A subsequent cut to a wider shot of an Orlando (Oscar-Roza Miller) in daylight leaning against a tree trunk and writing on a laptop in a woodland clearing (see figure 1) presents the first of numerous Orlandos situated in green scenes evoking a state of or adjacent to nature. Preciado's voiceover, meanwhile, claims that he is writing a letter to Woolf, establishing an epistolary basis for the rest of the film. This scene also evokes the very end of Potter's film in the present of the early 1990s where Swinton's Orlando rests by an oak tree that is suggestive of the eponymous poem her character returns to through the course of Woolf's text. These resonances between various film adaptations and the original novel demonstrate a

logic of *mise-en-abyme* that inheres both within the literary text and is manifestly external to it, extrapolated in the form of various reimaginings on screen. Notably, the first of Preciado's Orlandos is wearing a ruff. While the film otherwise appears to be staged in a contemporary setting (and is in fact projected slightly into the future), the ruff implies an anachronistic citation of the novel's opening at the end of the Elizabethan age and its subsequent progression to early Jacobean England. It also provides a vestigial nod to Potter's more straightforward filmic adaptation, a costume drama of sorts, as well as the iconography of aristocratic and royal portraiture evident across Woolf's text, Potter's film, and beyond. Anita Raychawdhuri has characterised this broader constellation of aesthetic and textile associations as 'multilayered cross-temporal cultural resonances' that 'recall the queer campiness of early modernity'.⁸ As such, while Orlando's extended biography spans several centuries to lead up to the present, adaptations such as Preciado's and, for example, Wayne McGregor's contemporary ballet *Woolf Works* frequently reference the iconographic and camp values of early modern costume.

In addition to this scenic or painterly detail of Preciado's anachronistically beruffed Orlandos, the 'plakativ' or surface details of this avowedly political film might also be associated more closely with the written form of the manifesto, which Preciado has also used in his philosophical and (auto-)theoretical writing (such as in the *Countersexual Manifesto*).⁹ The etymology of 'manifesto', though uncertain, derives via 'manifest' partly from the Latin *manus* (meaning hand) and the less certain *festus*, with the suggestion of something being evident, clear to hand, or 'caught in the act', flagrant.¹⁰ There is, then, at the very least a gestural logic to the public statement of the manifesto, if not an explicit manual operation that grasps some plain evidence. In Preciado's *Orlando*, the film manifesto points to the evidential reality of trans and nonbinary experience including the author's own to propose a radical model of trans community and solidarity, what Dunn calls an experimentation with 't4t models of trans care in cinematic form'.¹¹ More specifically, Dunn argues that Preciado's Orlandos refuse to live a 'stealth'¹² trans existence, one that strives to pass as cisgender and assimilate into a binary gender regime that conceals its own construction. Instead, the film 'discards the

⁸ Anita Raychawdhuri, 'From Buckingham to Varble: Race and Queerness in Early Modern Performance and Appropriations', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Queer Reading*, ed. by Jeremy Chow and Declan Kavanagh (Edinburgh University Press, 2024), p. 189, doi:10.1515/9781399524810-015.

⁹ Paul B. Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, trans. by Kevin Gerry Dunn (Columbia University Press, 2018), doi:10.7312/prec17562.

¹⁰ See the entry 'Manifest', in *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d. <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/manifest_adj> [accessed 8 October 2025].

¹¹ Dunn, 'Orlando, *Desire Lines*', p. 10.

¹² The term stealth is used in trans circles in relation to the nondisclosure of one's trans status. See Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices* (Duke University Press, 2019).

binary gaze; it refuses to locate gendered truth in visual representations of the body and demonstrates that trans genders are not a product, but an embodied process'.¹³ The didactic logic of the film can also be associated with the scenario depicted in Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*: a scientific demonstration that appeals to viewers within and beyond the framed composition. However, while the criminological dimension of Rembrandt's painting relies on the public examination — and exhibition — of bodily evidence, the thief's hand caught *in flagrante delicto*, Preciado's *Orlando* shows how the legal and medical constraints on trans and nonbinary lives are demonstratively and imaginatively subverted.

The imbrication of scientific investigation and state control are no less crucial for Webber's reading of Christian Petzold's incorporation of the *Anatomy Lesson* into his 2011 film *Barbara*. In his analysis of 'good work' in Petzold's film, Webber identifies a highly 'intertextual, [...] interfilmic and inter pictorial [art]work with frames of reference drawn from a wide network of literature, film, and visual culture'.¹⁴ However, the particular and sustained attention given by Petzold to Rembrandt's painting enacts for Webber its own 'anatomy lesson for the practices of viewing and handling' in the film with implications for the cultural logics of biopolitical control and museological display.¹⁵ In *Barbara*, the context is the German Democratic Republic where the titular protagonist is seconded to work with a paediatric surgeon in a rural East German hospital. The tone and setting of Petzold's film may be a far cry from Preciado's hardly unserious, but nonetheless camp, performative and self-reflexive documentary. And yet, the logics of state control in the service of repair or cure provide a point of commonality between the two. Moreover, in a later iteration of the 'Good Work' essay reproduced for a monograph on Petzold's oeuvre co-authored with Stephan Hilpert, Webber discerns a model of triangulation between 'the film, the painting, and the narrative text': *Barbara*, *The Anatomy Lesson* and W. G. Sebald's *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995).¹⁶ What Webber and Hilpert identify as the similarly triangular relationship of the work of the film to both scientific and cultural critical work might also be applied to the constellation of literary and visual cultural references in Preciado's *Orlando*.¹⁷

In the latter, this triangulation of the filmic, the painterly or pictorial and the textual is compressed, since the film is already a loose reimagining of Woolf's literary narrative — yet it has also been expanded by the incorporation of various *Orlandos'* life stories, including Preciado's own.

¹³ Dunn, 'Orlando, *Desire Lines*', pp. 11–12.

¹⁴ Webber, "Good Work", p. 182.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 181–82.

¹⁶ W. G. Sebald, *Die Ringe des Saturn: eine englische Wallfahrt* (S. Fischer, 2020); Stephan Hilpert and Andrew J. Webber, *Screening Work: The Films of Christian Petzold* (Legenda, 2024), p. 171, doi:10.2307/jj.22212191.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

This work of autobiographical adaptation can thus also be thought of in terms of its tendency towards intermedial citation along the lines recently advanced by Annie Ring and Lucy Bollington in their model of ‘citational media’. Their framework encompasses ‘the entanglements of past and present, nostalgia and techno-progress, that are evident in so much of contemporary visual culture’.¹⁸ Indeed, Ring and Bollington adopt Judith Butler’s investment in a ‘citational politics’ to claim more comprehensively that we are all ‘citational subjects’, defined by our ‘ongoing referential relationship to the discursive, technical, and material contexts in which we are immanently enmeshed’.¹⁹ Moreover, Ring and Bollington assert that this situation of referential entanglement is reinforced by the fact that ‘all aspects of subjectivity are the result of a reproduction of narrative norms, which *define the viability of life*’.²⁰ It is within this frame that I situate Preciado’s *Orlando*, a film that exhibits a self-conscious citational character that is concerned with nothing less than the formation of subjectivity and the flourishing of trans and nonbinary lives under harsh medical and legal conditions.

OPERATING ON FLESH AND FICTION

Shortly before the closing sequence in which Virginie Despentes declares the abolition of gender assignment at birth to a courtroom of expectant Orlandos, we see a longshot of Koriangelis Browns and a ‘Power to the People’ placard resting by her side. The support of the placard given to its slogan — or platitude — reinforces a further sense in which the paper surface is co-opted for a political message. In the subsequent medium long shot, Koriangelis is visible pulling on scrubs ostensibly in preparation for surgery. ‘It’s a big operation,’ we hear from one of the Orlandos in the scene. Another Orlando on the left-hand side of the frame is seen washing up, shot from behind in blue scrubs with his ruff visible around the back of his neck (see figure 2). On the right, Koriangelis and a further Orlando are visible chatting, enclosed by an open doorframe that separates them visually from the other two-thirds of the shot. This frame-within-a-frame is suggestive of the baroque visual style of the early modern period: what Saige Walton identifies as ‘its taste for *mise-en-abyme* or multiple and doubled enframings; the replication of its own media within the space of the representation’.²¹ The baroque sensibility of this framing anticipates the subsequent *mise-en-abyme* of the literary text’s insertion into Preciado’s

¹⁸ Annie Ring and Lucy Bollington, *Citational Media: Counter-Archives and Technology in Contemporary Visual Culture* (Legenda, 2025), p. 1, doi:10.59860/vc.b6b691a.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Emphasis added.

²¹ Saige Walton, *Cinema’s Baroque Flesh: Film, Phenomenology and the Art of Entanglement* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), p. 32, doi:10.1017/9789048528493.



Figure 2. As the Orlandos prepare for a 'big surgery', the frame of the open doorway provides a 'double enframing' that anticipates the later *mise-en-abyme* of the literary text within its filmic recomposition. Still from *Orlando, My Political Biography*, dir. by Paul B. Preciado (France; Les Films du Poisson, 24images, 2023).

filmic autobiography (and vice versa) while also providing a further implicit connection to Rembrandt's painting style on the one hand and the early stages of Woolf's novel on the other.

Meanwhile, Preciado's voiceover asks: 'what is an identity document, if not a piece of paper written and printed, a small booklet containing a political fiction?' The association of identity papers with something like a pamphlet or manifesto of 'political fiction' and the broader implication of literary fiction is striking. The performative intervention of a public declaration in the form of a manifesto, evoking what is evident or clear to hand, might thus be associated with the production of the identity document on demand. Combining textual and photographic modes of registration, Preciado's voiceover posits the identity document as akin to a literary genre: a 'shared fiction' that 'we can question, modify, change [...] that we can lay on an operating table'. The Orlando surgeon then walks across the frame, washed hands aloft, before a cut reveals the operating table itself. The voiceover notes that trans bodies have historically been considered as requiring medical surgery 'to restore the continuity between anatomy and gender'. This formulation underscores the significance of the operating theatre and the multivalent connection of both 'continuity' between an assumed gender and one assigned at birth and 'continuity' in film editing as a form of cutting that works to conceal itself. The voiceover

that accompanies the scene of the operating table being prepared prior to surgery thus reinforces the analogy of film work to the medical operation in the service of a broader regime of overreaching biopolitical control or repair. This multivalent work of editing ensures continuity, yes, but also recognition by, legibility to, and assimilation into the workings of a particular signifiatory or governmental regime: what the voiceover dubs the 'Binary Empire'. The viewer is thus invited to question the relationship between anatomy and gender while presumably still anticipating a scene of gender-affirming surgery. If this is an anatomy lesson, then, what kind of conclusions are to be drawn?

The scene in the operating theatre initially presents a kind of *tableau vivant* in which the suggestion or citation of a baroque group portrait is succeeded by something closer to a scene from a medical drama. In the context of Rudolf Arnheim's film theory, this tension between painterly and scenic or filmic modes can be understood in terms of a surface and depth model that has structured film spectatorship since its early development. In *Film as Art*, Arnheim conceives of film's tabular or planar disposition that nonetheless works to frame a particular scene as the construction of a 'partial illusion': 'always at one and the same time a flat picture postcard and the scene of a living action'.²² More explicitly, he argues: 'the effect of film is neither absolutely two-dimensional nor absolutely three-dimensional, but *something between*. Film pictures are *at once plane and solid*.'²³ In other words, the composition of the moving image is never binary, but rather hybrid and indeterminate. In Preciado's *Orlando*, then, and in the operating theatre scene in particular, the surface details of the printed text, the painted or photographic portrait, and the political manifesto are held in tension with more scenic arrangements of dramatic tableaux and their articulation by film editing as an analogue for anatomical instruction and medical investigation more broadly. The intended result is to establish partial, fleshed-out images of trans and nonbinary subjectivity that refuse the flattening of a medicalised gaze on the one hand and the straightforward assimilation into cisgender norms of 'stealth' appearance on the other.

The surgeon then consults a dossier ostensibly comprised of printed portraits of Vita Sackville-West and Woolf herself. Meanwhile, his assistants, also complete with ruff, scrubs, cap and face mask, prepare the surgical equipment in the background (see figure 3). The trappings of contemporary medicine are thus interrupted by the citational, inter pictorial nod both to Orlando's sixteenth-century 'origins' and, more obliquely, to the beruffed men who populate Rembrandt's canvas. In these shots, the tabletop and the documents on it are illuminated by the overhead surgical lamp as *mise-en-scène* and medical equipment

²² Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (University of California Press, 1957), p. 12.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 26. Emphasis added.



Figure 3. The surgeon Orlando prepares the medical documentation on the surface of the operating table. The photographic printouts serve to develop the intermedial and citational framework that embeds literary, historical and autobiographical details within the same scene of surgical operation. Still from *Orlando, My Political Biography*, dir. by Paul B. Preciado (France; Les Films du Poisson, 24images, 2023).

apparently overlap. An over-the-shoulder shot then allows the viewer to discern the dossier title: 'suivi medical', which suggests medical care, follow-up or monitoring processes that compose the record, underlining the observational logics of biopower and the affinities between medical recording and film documentation. We then see the dossier cover as the surgeon closes it to reveal Preciado's name before writing 'Orlando, March 9th, 1500' in the top right-hand corner. With the statement 'I too have been on this operating table', Preciado's voiceover inserts his explicit authorial presence into the sequence, not unlike the autographic sign and self-portrait of Rembrandt in the *Anatomy Lesson* identified by Webber as 'a performative claim to having made the scene'.²⁴ Preciado then ponders Woolf's inspiration for the novel as the concern that her lover Sackville-West would lose her property rights if she did not reproduce. In the voiceover, he continues to claim that 'the idea of a trans character in 1928 was not simply a literary utopia', since there were people in Europe and the United States who did not identify with their gender assignment at birth and sought medical operations to change this.

²⁴ Ibid.

A bed is then wheeled through the doorway into the operating theatre and we see, instead of a human body, a small hardback edition of Woolf's novel as Preciado asks: 'Who is operated on when our bodies lie on the operating tables of the Binary Empire?' He then adds: 'Our bodies are discursive artefacts, assemblages of flesh and fiction. To operate is not only to intervene in anatomy but also to cut into political fiction.' The framing of the body as a 'discursive artefact' alongside the 'fiction' of official documentation to be cut into and manipulated recalls what Jack Halberstam articulates as the 'technotopic vision' of the trans body: 'situated in an immediate and visceral relation to the technologies — guns, scalpels, cars, paintbrushes — that have marked, hurt, changed, imprinted, and brutally reconstructed it'.²⁵ And yet, the film pointedly removes the trans body from the surgical scenario, refusing the spectatorial anticipation of the medical intervention as the *sine qua non* of gender transition and trans life more broadly. Moreover, this association of 'flesh and fiction' in the operation on the textual body invites a phenomenological reading of what Walton calls 'cinema's baroque flesh': a 'mode of seeing marked by self-reflexive gesturing towards the viewer, towards the medium and towards what [Vivian] Sobchack calls the "film's body"'.²⁶ This model of 'baroque flesh' is apposite for approaching the anatomical practice of cutting up and into both the printed page and the film body at a critical moment in the film. As such, while Preciado's *Orlando* may not be characterised by the visual excess more readily associated with the baroque, in its imbrication of the film body, the body of the text and that of the surgical patient *in absentia*, it self-consciously indexes modes of embodied perception across a range of media.

CUTTING PLACES

In this vein, Preciado's film and the surgery scene in particular pay close attention to superficial detail while also staging the disruption or disarticulation of textual, painted or film surfaces — and the evidence they purportedly constitute — by hand and tool. The subsequent shot shows the four Orlando figures from the front, one sitting, the others standing, gathered to peer down at the book on the table. This tableau appears to anticipate a scene of reading, a further quality it shares with Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*, which conducts a number of gazes both within and without the painted scene: variously towards the viewer, the deceased criminal's hand, and the open book of anatomy in the painting's foreground. Webber accordingly characterises the distribution of subjects' attention in Rembrandt's group portrait: 'as much an enactment of reading, perhaps

²⁵ J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York University Press, 2005), p. 116, doi:10.18574/nyu/9780814790892.001.0001.

²⁶ Walton, *Cinema's Baroque Flesh*, p. 30.

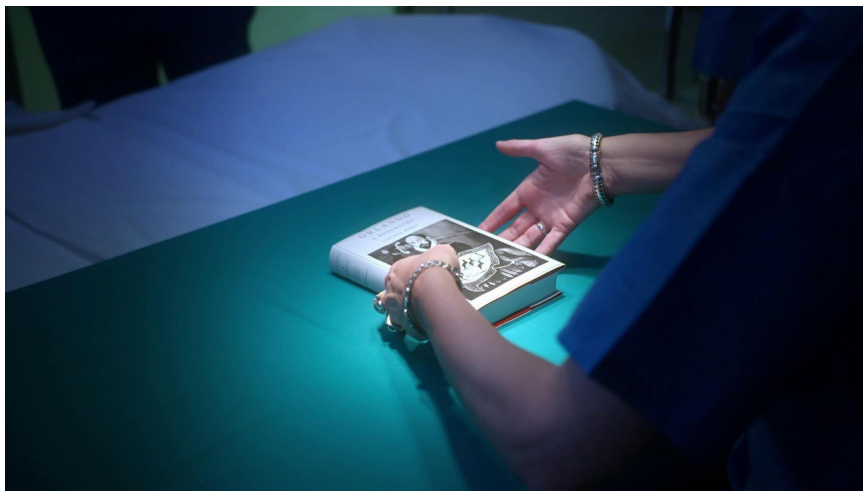


Figure 4. The trans body that might otherwise have been subject to the anatomical gaze and surgical intervention is replaced by a copy of Woolf's *Orlando* 'spotlit' by the operating theatre's overhead lamp. Still from *Orlando, My Political Biography*, dir. by Paul B. Preciado (France; Les Films du Poisson, 24images, 2023).

more precisely of reading pictures in the anatomical atlas, as one of the anatomist's practice on the body'.²⁷ The same might be said of Preciado's insertion of the original novel in place of a human body for surgical examination and intervention. In this case, however, in direct contrast to Rembrandt's composition, the text occupies a central position on the operating table and is not in shadow but 'spotlit' by the overhead surgical light (see figure 4). For Webber, meanwhile, the reading of Rembrandt's painting across literary and filmic 'texts' — and in particular Sebald's assertion of the criminal's hand under examination being the 'wrong' hand and therefore a 'krasse Fehlkonstruktion' — opens up 'broader reflection upon the epistemological, and thereby also the ontological, status of acts of reading and misreading'.²⁸ Moreover, in his attention to the anatomist's gaze that looks out of Rembrandt's frame and towards the beholder, Webber suggests it is the spectatorial gaze that 'comes under anatomical scrutiny' while the 'principle of looking awry or askance' is posited as necessary for thinking about the viewer's own powers of attention and detection.²⁹

²⁷ Webber, "Good Work", p. 184.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

While Webber is not referring to the logics of queer reading in this context, elsewhere the work of ‘looking askance’ has been posited as a means of reading for the presence of queer companions across literature and history. To this effect, GerShun Avilez writes:

Queer artists do not only write themselves into existence; they develop disordering ways of thinking and ways of reading that create space for their own and others’ existences. They encourage us to look askance at our present and locate the queerness waiting to be seen and felt.³⁰

In Preciado’s *Orlando*, while directing the reader’s attention back out from the scenic tableau that prepares the surgical procedure, the scene in the operating theatre also insists on the incorporation of the literary text at a critical moment of the film. In a gesture of disruption like those posited by Avilez, Preciado provocatively and performatively inserts his own biography and that of his fellow Orlandos — expectant queer companions — into the literary and personal history of Woolf’s *Orlando*. It is perhaps in this sense that reading closely and queerly may open up a space or room of one’s own, one proper to the self and its revelation not as autopsy but more akin to the ‘Eigenzeitraum’ Webber locates in Petzold’s filmmaking practice. Webber and Hilpert further develop this term in the later version of the ‘Good Work’ essay to appropriate Helga Nowotny’s conception of ‘Eigenzeit’ as ‘proper or own time-space in a particular rhythm of time and motion, close-up and distantiating, whereby the holding of time [...] enables a particular attention to the space of the film work’.³¹ Marco Abel has similarly characterised Berlin School filmmaking not only in terms of its ‘slowness’, but also its ‘spatiotemporal precision’ and ‘clinically precise framing’.³² Again, while *Orlando* may not exhibit quite the characteristic slowness of the Berlin School, its staging of the surgical operation does represent a moment of sustained attention and works to frame the precise details of the medical record and literary text alike in a scene of studied concentration. Webber duly identifies the ‘paradigmatic status’ of the laboratory in Nowotny’s conception of ‘Eigenzeit’ such that ‘science creates its own temporality of immediate accessibility and continuous presence within its own proper or technical space’.³³ In Preciado’s *Orlando*, the clinical precision of the surgical procedure joins with the specific capacity of film — and its labours — to advance forms of experimentation through the staged dissection of print media.

³⁰ GerShun Avilez, ‘Afterword: Looking Askance: Reading History, Reading Queerness’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Queer Reading*, ed. by Chow and Kavanagh (2024), p. 365 (emphasis added), doi:10.1515/9781399524810-026.

³¹ Hilpert and Webber, *Screening Work*, p. 172.

³² Marco Abel, *The Counter-Cinema of the Berlin School* (Camden House, 2015), p. 15, doi:10.1515/9781571138736.

³³ Webber, “‘Good Work’”, p. 185.

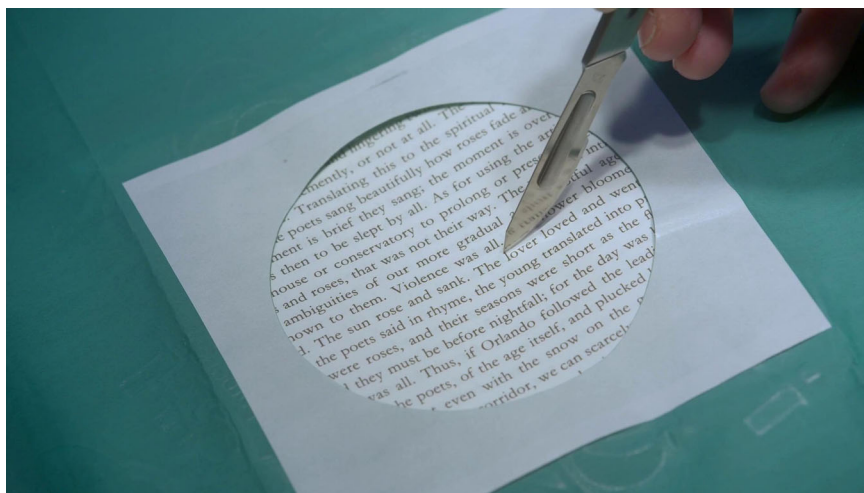


Figure 5. The words ‘Violence was all.’ are surgically removed using a scalpel. This procedure at once draws attention to the literary text and the capacity of film production and editing in particular to radically reconstruct the printed page. Still from *Orlando, My Political Biography*, dir. by Paul B. Preciado (France; Les Films du Poisson, 24images, 2023).

There follows a cut to a close-up of the surgeon’s face that slowly pans down to show his bare, ungloved hands insert an instrument into the spine of the book and place what appears to be a catheter and drip, before a bib is placed over the pages of the open book. An extreme close-up then shows the scalpel trace an incision around the words: ‘Violence was all.’ (see figure 5). The sound of the cut into and against the page is audibly accentuated, punctuated only by the bleep of the life support machine. These sounds present a reminder of the fact that we are dealing with critical matters of life and death while also providing a sense of absurdity or bathos, or — at the very least — a camp shifting between seriousness and irony. The film’s contemporary setting might suggest a pervasive structural, biopolitical or epistemic violence against which the philosopher-filmmaker seeks to intervene. However, in the context of the novel, the picture is a little more complicated. The quotation excised appears in *Orlando*’s first chapter in a passage that contrasts the certainties of the Elizabethan age with Woolf/Orlando’s contemporary moment in the 1920s: ‘Everything was different [...] The withered intricacies and ambiguities of our more gradual and doubtful age were unknown to them. Violence was all.’³⁴ The irony of foregrounding this sentence from this passage is to imply that such

³⁴ Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 15.

violence of rigidity and binarism — characterised by the voiceover as the ‘Binary Empire’ — has in fact persisted well into the 2020s, a holdover not only of the previous century but also of the more distant imperial past.

In the same extreme close-up, we see the three words extracted and placed to one side by the surgeon’s tweezers. The work of close-up makes a placard of these words: the excision performs a kind of ‘found poetry’ on the one hand or what might be interpreted as a form of redaction or censorship on the other. A portrait of Orlando ‘as a boy’ printed in the edition of the novel is then also cut out by the scalpel. Preciado mentions Woolf’s incorporation of Sackville-West’s portraits throughout the novel but claims that these images occluded the ‘real Orlandos of history’. Subsequent cuts to close-ups of the Orlandos performing the surgical procedure suggest intense concentration if not anticipation: as in Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson*, the other Orlandos who make up this scene are participants but also spectators. In this respect, the surgery scene operates according to the logic of the wider film: the (auto)biographical agency of Preciado’s *Orlando* is distributed between a host of protagonists. The intermedial triangulation of literary text, portrait and film reaches its culmination in this act of cutting. The portrait removed, the page of the novel reveals an empty space, a window or frame, through which the text of the page beneath it can be seen, or indeed read. The notes to the edition’s Introduction, a paratext or threshold, are revealed: a further frame-within-a-frame that rehearses the tension between the filmic frame-as-window onto a wider world of trans and nonbinary lives and the more superficial plane of printed page, operating table or cinema screen. In other words, between living action and picture postcard.

Another portrait is then replaced with an archival photograph, presumably from the dossier seen moments before. These images include photographs of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson most prominently (and explicitly annotated with sticky notes), whose inclusion reprises the previous citation of archival footage of the activists earlier in the film. A further medium shot shows the surgeon stitching, suturing a ‘new’ historical fragment into the page of the novel. Successive cuts then reveal colour photographs of Preciado as a child inserted into the novel’s pages: ‘a nonbinary five-year-old Orlando’ at the Spanish carnival accompanied by the fictions of normative femininity and masculinity — two gigantic, masked figures. This metaleptic incorporation of the filmmaker into the diegetic intertext is followed by a zoom into the face of the child Orlando/Preciado before a cut to a scene of children playing outside. We then see more young Orlandos, one of whom gives a speech in a parliament chamber. This arena is figured as another space of performance and remediation as the other children are shown watching the speech unfold in an editing suite.

This subsequent focus on the editing of the moving image following the cutting and pasting of the surgical scenario can hardly be a

coincidence. Undoubtedly, the surgery scene evokes Walter Benjamin's comparison of the painter and camera operator with the magician and surgeon respectively in his 'Kunstwerk' essay. In direct contrast to the painter/magician, the surgeon 'vermindert die Distanz zu dem Behandelten sehr — indem er in dessen Inneres dringt — und er vermehrt sie nur wenig — durch die Behutsamkeit, mit der seine Hand sich unter den Organen bewegt'.³⁵ The penetration of the camera operator into 'das Gewebe des Gegebenen' also produces a radically different image to that of the painter's totalising picture: 'Das [Bild] des Kameramanns ist ein vielfältig zerstückeltes, dessen Teile sich nach einem neuen Gesetze zusammenfinden.'³⁶ With the dissection of the literary text, Preciado thus performatively remediates for emphasis the constitutive fragmentation of film and its editing. Moreover, for Benjamin, the interpenetration of reality by mediating technology is the condition that guarantees the 'apparatfreien Aspekt der Wirklichkeit'.³⁷ This dialectical logic is also evident in the theory of remediation expounded by David Bolter and Richard Grusin at the turn of the twenty-first century. They identify 'the twin preoccupations of contemporary media: the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves'.³⁸ That is to say that the perception of transparent immediacy, what Benjamin might call the 'equipment-free' aspect of its representation, is in fact the result of excessive or hypermediation. The medial construction — indeed penetration — of reality lived and perceived has important ramifications for the film's trans politics. As Dunn claims, Preciado's film 'wants the audience to see its becoming, just as *Orlando's* Orlandos refuse to cover over their own trans histories to embrace the ability to live stealth'.³⁹ The attention of the surgery scene to the opacity of the printed page and reproduced portraits similarly serves to underscore the artifice of mediation, or intermedial reproduction more specifically, that is, of a piece with the realities experienced by Preciado and his fellow Orlandos: the shared but nonetheless operable political fictions of binary gender.

CONCLUSION: POLITICAL FICTION, PARTIAL ILLUSION

The anatomy lesson to be drawn from this sequence in Preciado's film appears to be that here it is not the surgical reorganisation of the body that matters, but the technical, citational and discursive reworking of 'reality'

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit: Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie* (Suhrkamp, 2018), p. 32.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT Press, 2003), p. 21.

³⁹ Dunn, 'Orlando, *Desire Lines*', p. 13.

by trans and nonbinary subjects, a reality that in a Benjaminian sense is itself penetrated by technological mediation. The surgical operation as the classical analogue for the intervention into reality by film technology self-reflexively points to itself as an exemplar for other (inter)medial strategies to circumvent and performatively subvert the legal and medical strictures imposed on trans bodies. The reproduction and remediation of artworks, narratives and histories engendered by Woolf's *Orlando*, its intermedial adaptations and reincarnations, prove instructive in this regard. Preciado's autobiographical reworking of Woolf's novel thus wears a political message on its sleeve while simultaneously inviting its viewer to look deeper or askance at its complex intermedial and citational composition. In this sense, the film declares its manifesto for the legal and medical rights of Orlandos everywhere while also developing methods of what Avilez calls 'reading history and reading for different sites of knowledge' that 'reveal the tangle of ideologies and oppressions through which the non-normative must navigate to survive'.⁴⁰ The triangulation between literature, portraiture and film, alongside that of film editing, anatomical investigation and the critical work of interpretation and analysis operate to establish the time and space for close and queer reading as survival strategy. They articulate both the hypermediated reality, that which is manifest on the surface or clear to hand, while also demanding that we look askance at superficial fictions or beyond them entirely. These techniques might encompass penetrating the baroque fleshiness of textual, filmic and organic bodies, or cutting and recombining material to produce a technotopic vision that renders the lives of Preciado's many Orlandos most faithfully: as living action, political fiction and partial illusion all at once.

⁴⁰ Avilez, 'Afterword', p. 370.