

Changing Faces:

To what extents do screen representations of Elizabeth I reflect modern political and cultural agendas?

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Tilda Swinton as Orlando and Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth I in *Orlando*¹

¹ *Orlando*, dir. by Sally Potter (Sony Pictures Classic, 1992)

Paul Weinstein has argued that film and television should be acknowledged as one of “the great history educators of our time”, and states that a “greater impression on the public consciousness” was made by *Saving Private Ryan* than the “myriad [of] scholarly studies of the Normandy invasion”². For many people, Elizabeth I’s image is the one that they see portrayed on screen. She is a figure that has been portrayed on screen almost as far back as the origins of cinema itself, with Sarah Bernhardt likely to have been the first to play her in the 1912 silent movie *Les amours de la reine Élisabeth*³. Some productions, for example Flora Robson's portrayal in 1937's *Fire Over England*, see Elizabeth “running the show”⁴, albeit in a fictionalised account of the Spanish Armada⁵. On the other extreme, Miranda Richardson’s portrayal in the BBC comedy *Blackadder II* (1986) presents Elizabeth as a “bubble headed autocrat”⁶ played purely for comedy purposes. Two alternative portrayals of Elizabeth will be discussed, namely the strong-headed feminist image of Elizabeth portrayed by Glenda Jackson in the BBC’s production of *Elizabeth R*, and the way Elizabeth’s quest for eternal youth is carried on after her death in the 1992 movie *Orlando*. While both attracted a minority audience at the time of their release, they were at the forefront of cultural changes, and their impact would be felt on screen and beyond for many years to come.

BBC2 was the home of *Elizabeth R*’s first broadcast in 1971. The channel had a reputation as being the home for “serious television” with an adult and educational slant⁷, while the other

² Weinstein, Paul B., “Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project,” *History Teacher*, 35 (2001), pp. 27-48 [p. 27]

³ Latham, Bethany, *Elizabeth I in Film and Television: A Study of the Major Portrayals* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc., 2011), p. 16

⁴ O’Connor, Dale, “Fire Over England – Plot Summary”, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0028872/plotsummary?ref =tt_ov_pl> [accessed April 3rd, 2014]

⁵ Carlson, Eric Josef, “Teaching Elizabeth Tudor with Movies: Film, Historical Thinking, and the Classroom”, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 38 (2007), pp. 419-28 [p. 425]

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 426

⁷ Science Museum, *BBC2: Origins; Influence; Audiences: A 50th Anniversary Conference* <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/about_us/new_research_folder/~/link.aspx? id=1E645D1C8BBA421483795370412A2FA8& z=z>, [accessed April 3rd, 2014]

two channels were criticized for “churning out an alarming quantity of dispensable trivia”⁸. Viewing figures for the channel were much lower than those for BBC1 or ITV, and in 1969, Robin Scott was appointed controller of BBC2, with the aim of finding a balance between highbrow and popular, along with attempting to gain an audience share of 15 per cent⁹. On the night of the first broadcast of episode one of *Elizabeth R*, February 17th, 1971, a cursory glance at the television listings emphasises the difference between BBC2 and the other two television channels. BBC1 featured American imports such as the cartoon series *Tom and Jerry* and science fiction drama *Star Trek*, the police drama *Softly Softly*, and *Sportsnight*, featuring highlights of popular sports such as boxing and FA Cup football. Meanwhile, ITV viewers were treated to episodes of the soap operas *Crossroads* and *Coronation Street*, a celebrity biography in *This is Your Life*, and the American police drama *Hawaii Five-O*. In contrast, as well as *Elizabeth R*, BBC2’s line-up included programmes from the *Open University*, the current affairs programme *Man Alive*, that week dealing with issues concerning drugs, a half hour long *Newsroom* and *Pot Black*, a made-for-television snooker tournament which was itself a minority sport in the early seventies¹⁰. It can be fair to say, therefore, that BBC2 offered a “natural home” for *Elizabeth R*, and afforded the chance to depict a historic figure while echoing a growing social trend, namely second-wave feminism.

Feminism had found itself in a more prevalent position within the public consciousness around the period of *Elizabeth R*’s broadcast. In 1970, the first National Women’s Liberation Conference took place at Ruskin College, Oxford, paving the way for “the beginning of a new wave of feminist scholarship”¹¹. While the conference may not have caught the imagination of the general public, that year’s *Miss World* pageant, watched by 23.76 million

⁸ Billington, Michael, “Restoring One’s Faith”, *The Times*, May 19th, 1969, p. 11

⁹ Purser, Phillip, “Robin Scott”, *Guardian*, February 9th, 2000, p. 22

¹⁰ “Television”, *Guardian*, 17 February, 1971, p.2

¹¹ Claus, Peter and Marriott, John, *History: An Introduction to Theory, Method and Practice* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2012), p. 201

viewers on BBC1¹², certainly would have. The contest was noted for its disruption by feminists arriving at the venue having hidden “leaflets, water pistols, stink bombs and bags of flour” as they took their seats, and then “hurl[ing] their missiles onto the stage”. The aim of the protestors was to “strike a blow against passivity, not only the enforced passivity of the girls on the stage, but the passivity we all felt in ourselves”¹³. The same year had seen the passing of the Equal Pay Act, a law that had made it illegal to establish separate pay levels for men and women doing the same job, brought about partly after a strike by 187 female employees of the Ford Motors factory in Dagenham, Essex, who were protesting at being placed on a lower pay grade for doing the same job as their male colleagues¹⁴. Feminism was beginning to hit the mainstream, and with the aforementioned police dramas boasting strong male leads, the time was rife for a strong, female figure to play the lead in a television drama.

Currently Labour MP for Hampstead and Kilburn¹⁵, Glenda Jackson was described at the time of broadcast as “a born actress, capable of gorgeous eloquence and racy toughness of speech”¹⁶, and was, over twenty years before being elected to Parliament, a politically active figure¹⁷. It is therefore likely that Jackson would only have taken on a role that suited her strong personality, and one that echoed the second-wave feminist arguments of the time, namely equality and strength for women. Jackson is clearly the strongest figure on the screen, playing the Queen as a promiscuous, flirtatious character, but also as a strong-willed woman, sticking strongly to her Protestant beliefs. In the second episode, titled *The*

¹² Tapper, James, “The biggest TV audience ever... it is now”, *Mail on Sunday*, May 1st, 2005 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-346942/The-biggest-TV-audience--now.html#ixzz2yZeOoGRt>> [accessed April 11th, 2014]

¹³ Chaudhuri, Shohini, *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 32

¹⁴ Lalli, Virginia, *Women in Law* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2014), p. 74

¹⁵ UK Parliament, “Glenda Jackson” <<http://www.parliament.uk/biographies/commons/glenda-jackson/175>> [accessed April 6th, 2014]

¹⁶ Raynor, Henry, “Elizabeth R – BBC2”, *The Times*, February 18th, 1971

¹⁷ MacDonald, Marianne, “The Afterlife of Glenda Jackson”, *Independent on Sunday*, February 16th, 1997, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/the-afterlife-of-glenda-jackson-1278880.html>> [accessed April 6th, 2014]

Marriage Game, she refuses to marry a Roman Catholic, spurning the requests of ambassadors from Spain and France to marry members of their Royal families, and not only for religious reasons. At a time when there were very few female figures in “front bench” politics, Elizabeth is portrayed as being a strongly political woman, with many of the male characters depicted as weak sycophants. With feminism on the radar of the television audience, this dominant character would have had a strong impact, certainly “striking a blow against passivity”, and may have served to alter the public perception of someone regarded as the “Virgin Queen”.

While Jackson dominates the screen time on *Elizabeth R*, Quentin Crisp’s portrayal of Elizabeth lasts for only the first ten minutes of the Sally Potter directed 1992 film *Orlando*, but has an influence that lasts for the entire movie. The film is based upon the book *Orlando: A Biography*, written by the feminist author Virginia Woolf, and published in 1928, the year of universal suffrage for all women aged 21 or over in the United Kingdom¹⁸. The film opens with a falsetto singing “Eliza is the Fairest Queen”, a composition by Edward Johnson that was originally sung at the Elvetham entertainment in 1591 and “apparently so delighted Elizabeth that she commanded to hear it sung and to be danced three times over”¹⁹. The falsetto is played by Jimmy Somerville, a singer who found initial fame with the band Bronski Beat. Their first single, “Smalltown Boy”, told of “a gay youth forced to leave a provincial town”²⁰, and their 1984 album *The Age of Consent* not only listed the different ages of heterosexual and homosexual consent in different countries to emphasise discrimination²¹, but contained tracks that offered “the most powerful angry gay lyrics since

¹⁸ Whitworth, Michael H., *Virginia Woolf (Authors in Context)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Kindle Edition

¹⁹ Kelnberger, Christian, “‘Time Stands Still with Gazing on her Face...’: Queen Elizabeth I and her Musicians”, in *Queen Elizabeth I: Past and Present*, ed. by Jansohn, Christa (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), p. 118

²⁰ Frutkin, Alan, “In Profile: Jimmy Somerville”, *Advocate*, July 25th, 1995, p. 68

²¹ Somerville, Jimmy, “It struck a chord because it could be anyone's story”, *Guardian*, November 12th, 2006 <<http://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/nov/12/popandrock27>> [accessed April 6th, 2014]

the early days of Tom Robinson”²². As an openly gay man, Somerville was subject to much hostility during the time period prior to the filming of *Orlando*, being forced out of his flat in Camberwell after it was invaded and attacked by anti-gay youths, as well as being refused a mortgage due to his homosexuality²³. Elizabeth herself is played by Quentin Crisp, who achieved notable fame following the publication of his book *The Naked Civil Servant* and its consequent adaptation for television. Crisp was another figure attacked for his homosexuality, and was said to be “reviled” by people on the streets of London, where he would be spat at by women and have stones thrown at him by children²⁴. Finally, the role of Orlando is played by Tilda Swinton, an actor whose “ghostly-pale androgynous face”²⁵, was well suited to the gender swapping role of Orlando. She was the muse of Derek Jarman, director of *Jubilee*, a movie in which Elizabeth views a “post-punk post-Thatcherian wasteland where civilization has come to a halt”²⁶. Swinton is also known as a left-wing campaigner for LGBT rights, recently seen holding a rainbow flag in Moscow’s Red Square²⁷. These pro-gay figures mirror the growth in gay activism that became more prevalent in the 1990s, which saw the establishment of groups such as Queer Nation New York, formed to counter violence against homosexuals and to battle against the “continued existence of anti-gay discrimination in the culture at large”²⁸, and OutRage, established in London and “committed to radical, non-violent direct action and civil disobedience” against homophobia²⁹.

²² Denselow, Robin, “Steel Country Blues”, *Guardian*, October 18th, 1984, p. 12

²³ Rouse, Rose, “Solidarity Forever”, *Guardian*, October 11th, 1985, p. 19

²⁴ Bailey, Paul, “Camping it Up”, *Guardian*, June 8th, 1975, p. 26

²⁵ Mottram, James, “Tilda Swinton. I Was Expected to Marry a Duke!”, *Independent*, April 3rd, 2010

<<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/tilda-swinton-i-was-expected-to-marry-a-duke-1932431.html>> [accessed April 6th, 2014]

²⁶ Newman, Kim, “Jubilee”, *Empire Magazine*,

<<http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/review.asp?FID=132522>> [accessed April 6th, 2014]

²⁷ Hynes, Eric, “Tilda Swinton Lives By Night”, *Rolling Stone*, April 1st, 2014

<<http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/tilda-swinton-lives-by-night-20140401>> [accessed April 6th, 2014]

²⁸ Queer Nation New York, “Our History”, <<http://queernationny.org/history>> [accessed April 6th, 2014]

²⁹ OutRage!, “About OutRage!”, <<http://outrage.org.uk/about/>> [accessed April 6th, 2014]

The last words spoken by Elizabeth to Orlando are “do not fade, do not wither, do not grow old”³⁰. While this can be taken literally, as Orlando does neither during the length of the film, these words can also be attributed to Elizabeth herself. With the “sensitive and simplistic” Darnley portrait being the face pattern used for most portraits of Elizabeth during the 1580s and 1590s³¹, she did not appear to grow old to most of her subjects, with paintings such as Egg’s *Queen Elizabeth Discovers she is no Longer Young* not commissioned until Victoria’s accession to the throne over two centuries later³². Crisp portrays Elizabeth in *Orlando* in 1600 appearing rather like Egg’s portrait, and it could be argued that Elizabeth’s wish for eternal youth should be continued in the body of Orlando. Swinton’s long red hair and youthful complexion certainly bear more than a passing resemblance to the Virgin Queen. Returning to the cultural agenda of the early 1990s, this quest for eternal youth could also be said to mirror the growing fascination with celebrity, with magazines such as *Hello*, *OK!* and *Heat*, concentrating on visual imagery of famous people and their private lives, launched in the decade surrounding *Orlando*’s release³³. The “alarming quality of dispensable trivia” referred to in 1971 could now be applied to these publications, but the interest in celebrities, and more importantly their image, could well have been a reason for adapting Woolf’s novel as a critique of 1990s culture. Even following the change in gender, Orlando continues to look immaculate and youthful at all times.

Although Jackson and Crisp portray Elizabeth rather differently, both play the part in a commanding fashion. Jackson takes centre stage in *Elizabeth R*, and while Crisp underplays

³⁰ *Orlando*, dir. by Sally Potter (Sony Pictures Classics, 1992)

³¹ Cerasano, S P and Wynne-Davies, Marion, “‘From Myself, My Other Self I Turned’: An Introduction”, in *Gloriana’s Face: Women, Public and Private, in the English Renaissance*, ed. by Cerasano, S P and Wynne-Davies, Marion (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), p. 4

³² Egg, Augustus Leopold, *Queen Elizabeth Discovers she is No Longer Young*, priv. col. (1848)

<<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/augustus-leopold-egg-169>> [accessed April 10th, 2014]

³³ Betts, Hannah, “Is this really goodbye, Hello! Magazine?”, *Daily Telegraph*, 5th September 2012

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/mediatechnologyandtelecoms/media/9522892/Is-this-really-goodbye-Hello-magazine.html>> [accessed April 10th, 2014]

the part, his character has a presence that is felt throughout the film. While the notion of second-wave feminism would have appeared as something of a novelty to television audiences in the early 1970s, it is fair to say that Jackson's portrayal of Elizabeth paved the way for strong, female parts in television drama, and by the time of *Orlando*'s release, the likes of Helen Mirren in *Prime Suspect*, along with Sharon Gless and Tyne Daly in *Cagney and Lacey*, showed that women could take the lead in police dramas, which during Elizabeth R's initial broadcast had been a largely male bastion. *Orlando* itself, with its gender swapping lead character and gay-friendly cast, could also be said to have paved the way for the increased presence of figures far removed from the comfortable nuclear families of the past, with peak-time family dramas such as *Doctor Who*, *EastEnders* and *Waterloo Road* featuring LGBT actors and characters that feature as part of the storyline. While both *Elizabeth R* and *Orlando* were in keeping with the times of their production, it is fair to assume that they were both also instrumental in moving the agenda of television and movie drama forward and crossing new boundaries. Over four hundred years after the death of Elizabeth, her on-screen legacy endures in different ways, and is likely to entertain new generations of audiences for many years to come.

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