

# Genres, Genders, and Interaction

## The Theory Film Question and Paul B. Preciado's „Orlando, My Political Biography“

Von: Florian Fuchs

“I can surely watch *any* film as a theory,” a colleague told me the other day over lunch, all but wiping away my idea that there could be a third film genre – the theory film – yet undescribed between the well-established documentary film and essay film. I had been trying to wrap my head around the fact that the old distinction between essay film and documentary film still dominated the discussion about non-fiction film. For almost a century, numerous film and media scholars engaged in seemingly endless debates on the same binary opposition, resulting in ever more nuanced but overall unsatisfying results, up to the current boom in so-called video essays.<sup>1</sup> My plan, I told my colleague, was to come up with a set of films wrongly labeled “documentary” or “essay” that in turn could benefit from this new and more accurate description emphasizing their specific capabilities. Whether that genre would be called theory film or not, I argued, there are films that are not only narrative, experimental, essayistic, or documentary but first and foremost indicative, thetical, and theoretical. I mean films whose main intention is not showing how things were, how they might be, or how they ought to be, but films that argue how things are, developing a theory from their images. In this category, one might include some films by Trinh Minh-ha, Harun Farocki, or Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. Such films do not present their film images verbatim as fact or fiction but as pieces of knowledge about the world that the film itself then montages and structures toward a theory. If they exist, I continued as we finished our miso soups, theory films provide us with a specific view, a take, a perspective on how to see, understand, and organize the images they show vis-à-vis the world in which we see them.



Fig. 1: Film still, „Orlando, My Political Biography“, dir. Paul B. Preciado, 2023 (courtesy of Salzgeber)

When we left lunch still discussing, I caught myself defending the fact that film genres exist, and felt thrown back into the discussion I had hoped to leave behind. Instead of grinding genres against each other, I wanted to discuss how non-fiction films can convey a theoretical attitude differently and perhaps even better than texts. What I did not plan to do was having to defend genres just as film scholars sometimes do. But why is this genre question so insistent? Is it true, perhaps, that genres are not what we should discuss when it comes to theorizing through film? Are genres a holdover from literary culture and thus rather misleading to understand what films do? What do we lose when thinking of all films as objects begging to be compartmentalized?

Walking back to my office I realized that I took a wrong turn explaining what I was after when I said I was trying to describe an overlooked genre. It would have been better to approach these questions in reverse and ask why works are categorized in genres in the first place. We all have experienced what I call the genre fallacy, that knowing a work's genre before actually experiencing the text or film in question means starting with a blurred vision and a biased preconception. When considering why genre definitions even exist, this fallacy is a paradox. Genre definitions mostly originate from clustering similar works to compare and understand how they work; defining them is an attempt to describe why a bunch of specific films do similar things to the viewer and how. Instead of the typical understanding of genre, it might be better thought of as the set of proven and recurring interactive, practical, or pragmatic functions that works of a certain kind often perform in the lifeworld. That is how I should have phrased my interest to my colleague, I thought, because this original relationality between film and viewer, between text and reader is mostly lost when a film is called “a documentary” or a book is called “a novel.” More and

more, genres have become labels that help to sort and organize works, for critics or scholars, or even to brand products as demanded by film distributors and book publishers. Having turned from descriptive to prescriptive, genre definitions are now generally applied externally, often skipping the actual work and skipping to understand how it does what it does. What that does to the current vast landscape of auto-socio-biographies can help illustrate this, as books such as Annie Ernaux's *The Years* or Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *A Space Bounded by Shadows* are categorized as "novels" in some countries, while elsewhere they are sold under the rubric "creative non-fiction."

What gets lost in this primacy of genre over work is that the differences between the various kinds and forms of films and texts exist because they each implement a specific type of hermeneutic interaction between work and person. "Essays" is the label given to experiments, attempts, tests, or explorations; "novels" are first and foremost fictional renditions of wholly other but possible worlds; "documentaries" are generally attempts at recording, capturing, and representing factual situations, events, and their results; etc. If we want to reduce "genres" once again to mere descriptive notions we have to overwrite them with a new imaginary that disobeys their petrified prescriptive nature. Otherwise, the normative genre logic we have learned to live by – if only because it says "documentary" on the poster – dangerously prevents a true engagement with the work's *raison d'être*.

How liberating to the mind a non-premeditated approach to a work of art can be has been successfully tested out by museums in recent years. Many have started doing away with the descriptive signs next to an artwork. Instead of labels, museum spaces offer QR codes or overview charts in the corner of the room to foster more immediate interaction between work and viewer. On the one hand, this allows the work to take up the space it needs to become fully present in the viewer's processes of making sense. On the other hand, the aesthetic experiences that emerge as a result point to the very specific modes of interaction that works are capable of facilitating if as little genre normativity as possible is applied to them.

Museums, with their multitude of works, can easily modulate markers of genrefication from work to work. But when I try to apply this to my lunch discussion about theory films, things are not so easy. How can a 90-minute film achieve the same? How can a film establish a similar set of different interactive modes while steering clear of normative preconceptions such as "documentary" or "memoir"? Can a film switch genres or contexts during its course like a museum walk without becoming a random mishmash? Or would the changes in "genre" make us feel queasy as we watched? Would it feel hard to get through all of the various processes of making sense in a single sitting? Would we be lost between fact and fiction, sitting empty headed at the end? Or dazzled between astonishment about the sequences and distrust in what they convey?

No, we would not, indeed, much on the contrary. That is, if we take Paul B. Preciado's recent *Orlando, My Political Biography* as our model case. This 98-minute film contains an array of modes of hermeneutic interaction that practically exceed even the most diverse set of theater, performance, stage, or film genres. To list them all is impossible but we certainly do find moments of documentation, of archival footage, of feature film, biographical and also autobiographical passages. There is slapstick, drag, performance art, self-help video, spoken word essays, fragments of theoretical lectures; there are readings, ceremonies, reenactments; and there is, of course, the literature adaptation of Virginia Woolf's 1928 – novel? history? autofiction? – *Orlando: A Biography*. And all of the above intersect and hybridize as well. I list only these, but I would wager that any beholder will come up with an entirely different range of "genres," modes, sequences, and sections, thus proving my point that this film does not abide by any one genre or set of them or any one prototypical viewer. More importantly, it does not do this out of postmodern abundance, play, or hyper reflection, but because it returns the idea of "genre" to its hermeneutic and interactive origin. Genres get undone here for us spectators so that new meaning can be grown from each sequence and its interferences.



Fig. 2: Film still, „Orlando, My Political Biography“, dir. Paul B. Preciado, 2023 (courtesy of Salzgeber)

The stretches of Preciado's biography, to start with the titular reference to this form of self-writing, consist of photographs of him at different ages, but also of diary-like entries, and sometimes deeply affective reflections, all of which bring us close to his life story as a trans man. Other parts of the film adapt Woolf's novel *Orlando* about a time traveling transperson into fragmentary enactments. Preciado isn't the only one to stage *Orlando*; 25 other trans and non-binary people of diverse ages and backgrounds do as well, effectively placing the reality of being trans and non-binary into a temporal context, both on the level of biography

and age, as well as on the level of history and the historical situatedness of knowledge. Woolf's plot is not only adapted into settings and *tableaux vivants* but also read out loud, while at the same time Preciado appears in the role of the narrator, sharing his own reading experience, commenting on the book's genesis as well as on Woolf's life to ultimately speculate about how much of a transperson Woolf might have been had she lived during different times. Besides playing or impersonating the Orlando character, many of the other protagonists frequently go out of character and share fragments of their lives, biographical anecdotes of their continuous becoming. Mixing genres, they implicitly draw on their being Orlando by telling how a change in gender identity is established precisely by the experience of the self in time that Woolf's book is projecting. The book comes undone, after all, generating more genres than it might ever have contained.

Another important interactive mode viewers will encounter is the recurring form of speech one might call theoretical reflection. Preciado, who has published numerous theoretical essays and books, interweaves a discourse that resurfaces by abstracting again and again from the anecdotes, biographical fragments, and *Orlando*-adaptations. Almost every time such primary filmic material is shown, the film switches from merely commenting to a secondary mode of indicating, often in a voice-over: "To be trans means to discover the reasons behind sexual gender-differences. It means to understand that society is a collectively constructed mass and that masculinity and femininity are political fictions that we have learned to accept as natural through the force of repetition and power." (1:08:31-1:08:50) In these instants, the film's momentary mode – whether it is documentary, literary, performative, autobiographical, historical or other – is interpreted, often in a Brechtian or postdramatic manner, and becomes a building block for the theoretical discourse slowly assembling on the film's meta-level. Theory, however, is no academic field or discipline here, even if the film shows protagonists reading books by gender theorists like Monique Wittig or Leslie Feinberg. Theoretical speech emerges so closely to and almost organically from the other genres of the film that theory is simply verbalized thought setting in when we are faced with enough primary filmic material. This makes the film reminiscent of the origin of "Theory" in the ancient Greek activity called "*theōria*" meaning contemplation, speculation, observation, or insight. Trans life here begets and requires theory, and theory helps to make sense of the life a trans person is living, both for trans or non-binary viewers and for the others like myself. The film puts forth its very own theory of being trans because it wants to transport this genuine mode of thinking beyond itself so that it will remain in the world of the viewer, irrespective of the film genres they may or may not know.



Fig. 3: Film still, „Orlando, My Political Biography“, dir. Paul B. Preciado, 2023 (courtesy of Salzgeber)

From this perspective, the film might be considered to be post-genre, a remarkable parcours of many genre-fragments and modes of representation. Or, perhaps more fittingly, the film is consequently trans-genre because the normative genres petrified by the film industry and film scholarship cannot speak to the lives, the realities, the identities of transpeople. The film's unique quality, however, lies not in doing what scholars have done before, namely justifiably criticizing how gender normativity has developed cruel, even dangerous structures for trans and non-binary people. By working through and leaving behind genre, *Orlando: My Political Biography* can re-establish the interactive hermeneutics of its scenes, modes, and situations in order to create a truly trans-genre filmic practice that does not rely on pre-fixed plots, forms of speech, or fact-fiction-dichotomies. Preciado allows the viewer to re-engage with each part, sequence, fictive and factual protagonist, story, and footage of the film, and all these moments and modes of engagement have the ability to create a singular and emphatically anti-generic form of hermeneutic interaction. The film is made of this human form of engagement, and hence is not simply based on presenting trans-people as examples or on documenting their biographies, nor on merely illustrating pre-existing discourses from academic gender-studies. Preciado's care toward his 25 co-creators and to the varied other collaborators who made the film possible<sup>2</sup> make it the work of a collective, whose relations radiate outward from each kaleidoscopic genre scene. The result is a radical modulation and subversion of the existing filmic grammars, a collective biography of transpersonhood ultimately bringing life itself on screen, feelable, tangible, and experienceable beyond genres to any human, whatever their gender may be.

Preciado achieves this reinterpretation of what life on screen might feel like by drawing on an ongoing formal revolution. His film taps into a contemporary kind of multi-media storytelling that might also be called civic in the fullest sense as it seeks to do away with the often-petrified genres and their taxonomies in order to convey what life looks like in the now.<sup>3</sup> The artist and scholar Hito Steyerl has called this form of storytelling a sort of documentation of a “real-life” that “now more than ever ... is much stranger than any fiction could imagine.” Current forms of life require current forms of reporting, Steyerl continues, “otherwise [these forms of reporting] are not going to be ‘documentary’ enough, they are not going to live up to what’s happening.”<sup>4</sup> Preciado seems to be in tune with this poetic imperative when he points out how Woolf’s being limited to the 1920s British novel conventions prohibited her from fully writing a transperson’s life story. In Preciado, however, form of storytelling and form of life once more seem to be set into an intentional dialectic, where one helps generate the other. In this regard, *Orlando, My Political Biography* might also be called a theory film in the aforementioned sense. It is trans-generic because it wants to point us to that very trans-genre existence in life and in form, involving us in the physical and mental interactions required to overcome the normativities of both gender and genre.

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