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Constructed Spaces: Domination and Liberation in the Film *Orlando*

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Abstract— *This essay examines Sally Potter's 1992 film Orlando to explore how power dynamics like gender, hierarchy and ownership are constructed and represented through space presented in the film. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's The Production of Space, it argues that space in the film is not a neutral backdrop but functions as a powerful agent that shapes, constrains, and liberates an individual. By tracing Orlando's transformation from man to woman, this essay analyzes how gender fluidity redefines spatial relations and reveals the gendered and artificially constructed nature of both private and public spaces. Through close readings of scenes involving clothing, domestic interiors, and natural landscapes, the discussion highlights the ways in which space reflects and enforces patriarchal, national, and class hierarchies. The essay also investigates moments of resistance, particularly Orlando's rejection of ownership and return to nature, as acts of liberation from space. Ultimately, this essay argues that Orlando exposes the mechanisms through which space functions as both a social product and a site of emancipation, offering a critical reflection on how identity, power, and belonging are deeply involved with space.*

Keywords— ***Gender, Space, Nation, Nature, Sally Potter, Orlando (1992)***

I. INTRODUCTION

Sally Potter's 1992 film *Orlando*, loosely based on Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography*, explores the fluidity of gender and identity by following the protagonist's mysterious transformation from man to woman over centuries. At the heart of the film lies the notion that gender is not a fixed, binary characteristic but rather a social construct. As Craft-Fairchild (2001) observes in her analysis of the film, although Potter insists that her film is about an "essential self" that transcends gender, the film nonetheless reveals how "gender ideology unavoidably permeates the celluloid" (p. 23). The film thus spontaneously draws attention to the interplay between individual identity and broader societal forces.

In the film, gender fluidity is seldom explicitly discussed but is often implied through spatial dynamics. Space is often presented very differently before and after Orlando turns into a woman and thus can be said to be gendered. This raises an intriguing question: If gender is fluid and if space is gendered, is space also fluid? Can the transformation of gender cause a corresponding shift in the way space is perceived, experienced, and constructed? This essay thus aims to explore these questions by examining how space functions in *Orlando*, with a particular focus on the shifting spatial dynamics as Orlando transitions into a woman. More than its relation to gender, this analysis will also examine how other power dynamics function in constructing space and how space itself has become a powerful medium in expressing ideologies.

II. DRESSING AND THE PRODUCTION OF GENDERED SPACE

In *Orlando*, there are many deliberately constructed parallel scenes that mirror each other across Orlando's gender transformation, creating a direct comparison between Orlando's experiences as a man and as a woman. A particularly straightforward example occurs when Orlando, as a man, declares to Sasha, "You are mine ... because I adore you" (Potter, 1992, 24:35-23:41); this is later echoed by Archduke Harry with the exact same lines when proposing to Orlando as a woman (Potter, 1992, 1:05:45-1:05:52). The intentionally mirrored scenes underscore the shift in power relations: what once functioned as Orlando's declaration of desire is now turned back on her, transforming her from the expresser of affection into the object of another's desire.

While such direct parallels are powerful in delivery, the film more frequently articulates the impact of the change of gender through less overt contrasts. These subtler contrasts emerge particularly in the way space is experienced by Orlando before and after the transformation. As Orlando transitions, the spaces they inhabits (though often physically unchanged) and the ways those spaces structure movement, visibility, and autonomy are deeply shaped by the sudden change of gender. As Orlando shifts from man to woman, the spatial terms under which she exists also shift.

To further illustrate the shifts before and after the transformation, it is necessary to begin with the most immediate visual marker of Orlando's changed gender: clothing. With the protagonist's face remaining unchanged and the physiological characteristics of the body covered, dressing becomes the crucial marker of gender.

Henri Lefebvre, in his seminal work *The Production of Space*, proposes that space is not a passive background but a social construct (1991). Beyond physical space and the planned space of architects and planners, he identifies a third, crucial dimension: "representational space." This is the space of lived experience, "alive" with symbolism, imagination, and cultural codes: it is the space that "the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). It is precisely within this theoretical framework that Almila (2021), in discussing fashion studies, proposes the idea that dress is not only a situated practice but a spatial one, shaped by powerful ideologies and, in turn, creating its own spaces and realities. Clothing, in this light, already functions as a representational space, as it embodies certain symbolism that carries more than its practical use of covering the body (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33).

This is evident in *Orlando*, where, whether Orlando appears as a man or a woman, the act of being dressed by others always occurs immediately after their introduction. Before the act of clothing, the essence of men and women is reduced to their biological characteristics; it is through dressing that they fit into specific gender roles. Notably, Tilda Swinton is not the only one in the film who plays a cross-dressing role as the male Orlando; Queen Elizabeth I is played by the actor Quentin Crisp. Yet there

is nothing to doubt about their gender in the film: once the body is enveloped in the appropriate garments—be it a wig, gown, or corset—it is read according to the visual codes that clothing produces.

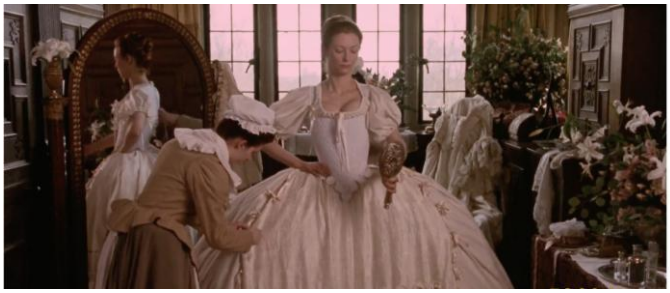

Fig.1: Orlando being dressed after becoming a woman

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 56:45).

In both dressing scenes right after the introduction, Orlando occupies the central position, but the balance of power shifts noticeably. After becoming a woman, Orlando's agency diminishes; she is transformed into an adorned and restrained object rather than the subject being served, just like the ornaments in the dressing room (see Figure 1). This transition from subject to object is further illuminated through the visual clue of mirrors. As Craft-Fairchild (2001) notes, echoing John Berger, the function of the mirror (the one she holds and the one behind her) is "to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight" (Berger, 1972, p. 51; as cited in Craft-Fairchild, 2001, p. 38).

More than its relatively abstract spatial function, the hoop skirt serves as a tangible visualization of Orlando's increasing limitations in physical space after turning to a woman. The skirt's size and constriction not only symbolize societal constraints but also physically restrict movement. As a larger physical presence occupies more space, the usable space around it narrows proportionally. This becomes strikingly apparent when Orlando, now wearing the dress, struggles to navigate a hallway. She is forced to sidestep as the corridor's width is effectively reduced by the expansive skirt (see Figure 2). As Craft-Fairchild (2001) also notes, the hoop petticoat takes its historical model to an "absurd extreme," and Orlando's "ungainliness in manipulating it gives the lie to notions of inherent female grace" (p. 43). The larger the skirt, the more her movement and, by extension, her agency (to move), is confined within the given space.

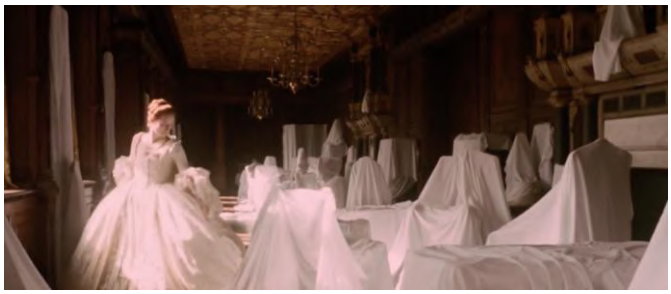

Fig.2: Orlando struggling through the hall

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 57:32).

An additional layer to this scene is the way Orlando, dressed in the white gown, also mirrors the function of the furniture covered in white cloth. Both the gown and the furniture become ornamental, confined within the same patriarchal space. In this context, Orlando, like the furniture, is reduced to a mere object, a symbol or attribution within the space. This highlights how women, in this patriarchal setting, are constrained not only by physical limitations, like the hoop skirt, but also by the spatial roles they are expected to occupy, roles that strip them of their autonomy.

While the physical constraints imposed on the female Orlando are stark as above, the film is also careful enough to show that the patriarchal order also disciplines men through spatial means. As a man, Orlando is subjected to a different, yet equally symbolic, spatial limitation: the wig. Functioning as a technology of social discipline, the wig imposes a rigid, respectable identity upon him, symbolizing the weight of his born aristocratic identity and its requisite authority. It operates as a sign of power and status yet a portable, oppressive space at the same time. This is exactly why Orlando seizes a moment of liberation by the campfire in the East (see Figure 3). The lack of surveillance on a foreign land allow him to

remove the wig, embracing a fleeting moment of reclaiming an authentic, essential self (as suggested by Potter) beyond the constrictive spatial norms of English society.

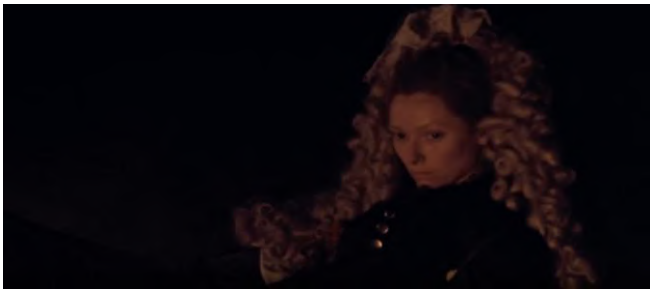

Fig.3: Orlando taking off his wig near the campfire

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 45:46).

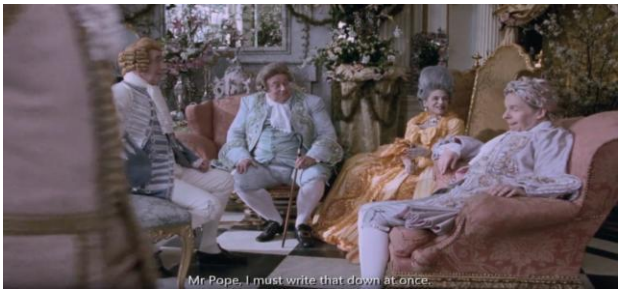

Fig.4: The literary gathering

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 58:48).

Another function of the wig in this film can be seen at the literary gathering, where the gathering of more people offers additional insight into spatial and societal hierarchies. In this scene, Mr. Pope occupies the most commanding position, both visually and socially. Though not physically situated at the center of the room, his position on the sofa, combined with the way others lean towards him as the focal point, marks him as the center of attention (see Figure 4). A very interesting detail is that Mr. Pope is the only person not wearing a wig, a distinction that symbolizes his elevated status. Unlike others who rely on the wig as an artificial attribution of power or authority, Mr. Pope's position allows him to transcend these restrictive societal symbols. This contrast emphasizes a hierarchy where higher status grants freedom from certain societal norms and allows for greater autonomy within the space. Mr. Pope's unadorned presence highlights how social privilege enables individuals to move through or inhabit the very same space with fewer constraints. This reinforces the idea that spatial freedom is in fact deeply intertwined with power and societal positioning, aligning again with Lefebvre's assertion that "(social) space is a (social) product" (1991, p. 26).

This spectrum of control finds its most concrete expression in the artifacts that physically mediate the body's relationship to space: the wig and the hoop skirt. Both function as impositions that shrink the individual's authentic self. However, a critical distinction must be drawn between them. The restrictions symbolized by the wig, while significant, are primarily social and can be contextually shed. In contrast, the constraints of the hoop skirt are inescapably physical and pervasive, systematically enforcing a more profound limitation of autonomy.. This spatial disempowerment of women in *Orlando* of course extends far beyond this physical confinement of heavy dressing, to a fundamental loss of personal autonomy, most starkly exemplified by the erosion of privacy. It is only after Orlando turns into a woman that her property becomes filled with others: she almost immediately loses the privacy that he (and the audience) once took for granted. The film highlights this through a deliberate contrast on the same garden path of her estate: where the man Orlando once walked in solitary reflection, the woman Orlando is forced into the company of others (Potter, 1992, 1:03:40). More than the overt contrasts, there are also numerous scenes in which the physical setting or material carrier of space (primarily the house) remains unchanged, yet the presence of servants, particularly maids, highlights how privacy is deprived (Potter, 57:10-57:20). The film then deliberately underlines this by having the squire explicitly advise Orlando not to attend the literary gathering without company, stating, "But you could not possibly venture there alone (Potter, 58:01-58:06)." Whereas the man

Orlando is free to travel all the way to the East without forced company, the woman Orlando is cautioned against attending a simple literary gathering near her own place. This enforced companionship and the systematic deprivation of privacy reflect broader societal constructs that limit women's agency and reinforce their dependency on others. As a matter of fact, from the moment of her transformation, Orlando is never granted a moment of true solitude—until she steps into the labyrinth.

III. CONSTRUCTED SPACES AND THE LIBERATION OF NATURE

Right before Orlando enters the labyrinth, the squires of the royalty come to announce to her the possible reclamation of her property . One of them states to Orlando, "One, you are legally dead and therefore cannot hold any property whatsoever; two, you are now female," to which another squire immediately adds, "Which amounts to much the same thing." (Potter, 1992, 1:04:32-1:04: 45). Upon hearing that Orlando has to reside her property because of the transformation, the Archduke, who had previously been Orlando's subordinate while Orlando was a man, immediately proposes to her. Orlando is surprised by the sudden proposal and asks him why, to which the Archduke answers, "Because I am England, and you are mine" (Potter, 1992, 1:05:42-1:05:46) . When Orlando refuses, the Archduke then remarks that she, after rejecting his "kind" offer "will die a spinster, dispossessed and alone" (Potter, 1992, 1:06:20-1:06:25). Very much disturbed by this offensive remark and probably the many accumulated prior ones encountered before, Orlando rushes into the labyrinth, dragging her Rococo dress through the narrow turns of the maze, moving very difficultly through the narrow space (see Figure 5). Then after a sharp turn, her dress suddenly transforms into a smaller, black one, strikingly reminiscent of the one worn by 19th century suffragettes (see Figure 6). Her movement, though still not entirely unencumbered, becomes freer.

Fig 5: Orlando struggling through the maze with the Rococo dress

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 1:07:00).

Fig 6: Orlando finding greater mobility in a smaller black dress

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 1:07:03).

This scene powerfully frames space as a metonymy for time. The labyrinth, a space of confinement and transformation, gives way to a new era as the film transitions to the 1850s, a period marked by the rising force of the suffragette movement. Orlando's own expanding agency is mirrored spatially: the cumbersome Rococo dress is replaced by a smaller, darker one, facilitating freer movement. This sartorial and spatial liberation culminates in her flight into a misty field, where she casts herself onto the grass and proclaims, "Nature, nature, I'm your bride, take me" (Potter, 1992, 1:07:40-1:07:45). Given the proximity in time to the earlier dialogue with the Archduke, this moment clearly echoes the Archduke's words: "I am England, and you are mine." This stark comparison raises a intriguing question: what does it mean for Orlando to reject England and instead wed herself to nature?

To fully grasp this symbolic refusal, it is instructive to recall an earlier scene (Potter, 38:45-38:50), where William III and Mary II send Orlando to the East, ostensibly to impart horticulture. This scene is pivotal, for horticulture serves as a conceptual bridge between the nature and nation, or nature and human construction. Horticulture epitomizes the desire to shape and dominate natural space, aligning it with the human-constructed spaces of nationhood. The contrast between the ordered, cultivated gardens (representing the nation) and the untamed wilderness (representing nature) exemplifies the tension between the human-imposed order of space and the organic spontaneity of natural space. This tension is indicated by Orlando's departure from the garden, her passage through the labyrinth, and her eventual immersion in the wild. As Lefebvre (1991) notes, "As sources and as resource, nature obsesses us, as do childhood and spontaneity, via the filter of memory" (p. 30). Nature, however, is constantly under threat: "Everything conspires to harm it" (Lefebvre , 1991, p. 31). While Lefebvre seems to have lost confidence in the future of natural space, adding that it is "now seen as merely the raw material" (1991, p. 31), Potter offers a contrasting view, suggesting that nature can still serve as a space of liberation and renewal. In this context, Orlando's moving from structured spaces of power (social occasions in England, gardens and the labyrinth) to the raw, unbounded wild symbolizes a rejection of human-made spatial constraints and a return to a more liberated existence. It is also noteworthy that the film poster, which features Orlando in the labyrinth, captures a moment where the narrow passage contrasts Orlando's constricted form in a giant dress, evoking a sense of spatial compression (see Figure 7). This is an image of spatial compression that, in hindsight, foreshadows her imminent rebirth, both spatially and socially.

Fig 7: Orlando standing in the maze

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 1:06:35)

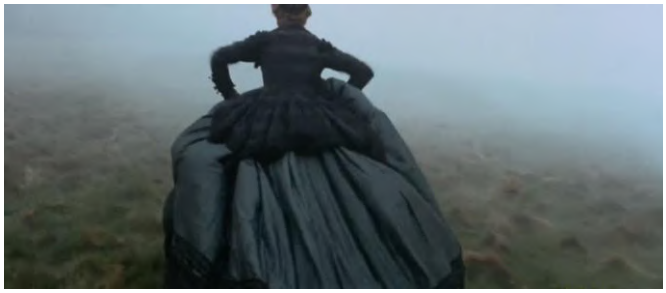

Fig 8: Orlando stepping into the mist

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 1:07:26)

The nation attempts to control and redefine nature through spaces like gardens, while Orlando and nature itself constantly resists. This interplay raises questions about the limits of human control and the potential of nature as a space for liberation. This is further highlighted by the scenes in the film where Orlando, immersed in true nature (whether under a tree or in the mist) is often depicted alone in the wild, free from societal constraint.

Despite those suggested resistance, horticulture and its products still serve as concrete examples of nation's desire to assert control over nature; they reflect the extent to which England, historically, sought to fracture and impose its own order on nature. This logic aligns with the ecofeminist critique of dualism, which identifies hierarchical oppositions (such as culture versus nature, civilization versus barbarism, man versus woman) as the ideological root of systemic oppression. Within this framework, horticulture emerges as a material expression of the nature-culture dichotomy, one that deliberately privileges culture while framing nature as a domain to be

dominated and conquered. This same dualistic worldview manifests spatially in other scenes, particularly one that dramatizes the tension between civilization and so-called "barbarism." Here, Orlando and other English nobles dance formally upon a carpet laid across the ice, while Sasha, the Russian girl that Orlando fascinates, skates freely with her father beyond its edges (see Figure 9). The carpet functions as a literal and symbolic boundary, reinforcing the English claim to cultural superiority. As one of Orlando's companions condescendingly notes, the Russians are viewed as lacking both material wealth and "civilization." Yet, while the carpet demarcates a space of distinction, it also confines its users, physically limiting their movement to its prescribed area. In contrast, Sasha's unrestricted skating outside its margins represents a mode of being unbounded by national or social impositions, a fluidity that subtly subverts the very hierarchy the English seek to enforce.

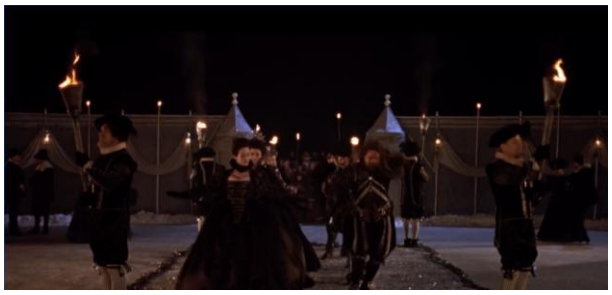

Fig 9: English noblemen dancing on the carpet

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 17:44)

This juxtaposition reveals a central thesis of the film: spatial possession is inherently linked to the curtailment of liberty. This idea extends beyond the carpet, underpinning the film's critique of ownership in all its forms.

IV. PROPERTY AND OWNERSHIP

The film's spatial critique then eventually extends to question a more fundamental relationship, one that between ownership and belonging: does owning the property make the space created by it "mine"?

At the very beginning of the film, Orlando's father claims he would offer everything he owns to please Queen Elizabeth I, to which the Queen replies, "What you call yours is mine already (Potter, 1992, 7:22-7:27)." This exchange encapsulates the power dynamics surrounding ownership. Orlando's father may legally own the property where the dinner is hosted, but under the Queen's reign (which represents the overarching power of the nation), his ownership is always subject to the whims of higher authority. In this context, the space created by the property is not truly private but only temporarily so, existing at the mercy of higher powers. Later, when the Queen grants Orlando the property, she adds, "For you and for your heirs Orlando, the house... do not fade, do not wither, do not grow old" (Potter, 10:28-10:51). While Orlando literally fulfills the stipulation of not aging through all these years, the grant carries implicit social and gendered conditions: the beneficiary must remain the male Orlando and produce a male heir to ensure continuity. Orlando's transformation into a woman fundamentally violates these terms. As the royal squires later affirm, being female is tantamount to being "legally dead," and without a male heir, her claim to the property is voided. This reveals the fragility of ownership, demonstrating how it is contingent upon conforming to rigid patriarchal and social norms, thereby reinforcing Orlando's entrapment within a system that ultimately disowns her.

Moreover, after witnessing Orlando's lack of privacy in the house as a woman, one can easily see that possessing the house does not equal true ownership of the space inside. Even before the formal notice brought by the squires, Orlando already is a mere temporal holder of the house, with its true ownership passing either to a husband or a son, who could also easily lose the ownership to higher command.

Therefore, owning the container of space does not equal true belonging or privacy within that space. That, to some extent, explains why it is only after relinquishing her

claim to the property, that Orlando, for the first time as a woman, exhibits a sense of belonging. In a powerful reversal, she stands alone yet assured before the vast expanse of her forfeited estate (see Figure 10). No longer defined by legal possession, she exists as an autonomous subject, liberated from the patriarchal boundaries that once confined her. This moment visually inverts the traditional logic of ownership: dispossessed, she nonetheless appears for the first time not as a transient occupant, but as the unequivocal subject of her own space.

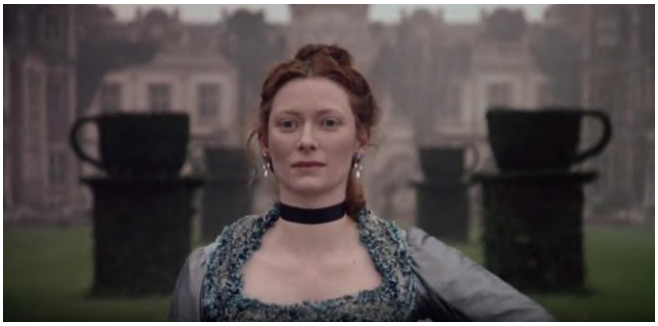

Fig.10: Orlando standing in front of her forfeited property

Note: From *Orlando* (Potter, 1992, 1:19:30)

This theme of liberation through dispossession is also echoed in the philosophy of Shelmerdine, the American with whom Orlando, as a woman, falls in love. Significantly, he has a very similar face with Sasha, the Russian girl who Orlando falls in love with as a man. Both Sasha and Shelmerdine, as Russian and American outsiders respectively, occupy a marginal status in the English worldview, yet this very position grants them a unique mobility. Shelmerdine describes the joy of travel as being "like a free spirit unfettered by position or possession" (Potter, 1992, 1:10:45-1:10:50), articulating his life philosophy unburdened by the very attachments that define English society. Paradoxically, their lack of property becomes the source of their agency, liberating them from the constraints of socially sanctioned spaces.

The narrative thus offers a definitive answer to its central question: owning a property does not make the space it contains truly "mine." Instead, through the characters Orlando loves, both embodiments of a freedom untethered to property or status, the film argues that it is the relinquishment of ownership that opens the way to a more expansive existence. Orlando's enduring quest, unchanged by gender, is for this very liberty. Orlando's emancipation from the restrictions of constructed space is further emphasized by her decision to give birth to a daughter, not a male heir, declaring her will to live as a free human being rather than as a prescribed role within a rigid hierarchy. Ultimately, it is only by renouncing material possession and the human-made spaces that enclose it that she achieves true liberation, transcending societal confines to find a final, unbound belonging in the embrace of an essential self.

V. CONCLUSION

In *Orlando*, space is not merely a backdrop or a static setting but an active signifier in the formation and repression of identity, especially in relation to gender and nationhood. The film masterfully illustrates how spaces, whether physical, social, or metaphorical, serve as tools for both constraining and liberating the characters. As Lefebvre (1991) suggests, "(social) space is a (social) product", and these constructed spaces operate as "means of production and of control" (p. 26). The spaces Orlando occupies throughout the film, from the rigid confines of her aristocratic estate to the expansive, untamed wilds of nature, are not neutral; they are laden with social, political, and gendered meanings that both define and restrict her agency.

The analysis has traced a clear trajectory in Orlando's spatial existence. Beginning with the gendered production of the body through dressing that constrict and define, the film shows how Orlando's agency diminishes as she navigates the world as a woman. The labyrinth serves as a pivotal, transformative space, a tight corridor of patriarchal confinement that ultimately leads to an expansion of both time and possibility. This movement out of the labyrinth and into the wild encapsulates the film's

central spatial argument: the rigid, ordered spaces of nationhood, epitomized by the aristocratic estate and the cultivated garden, give way to the unbound, organic space of nature as the true site of personal and political freedom.

Ultimately, Orlando posits that true belonging is not achieved through ownership, but through release. The legal possession of property is exposed as a fragile and conditional privilege, one that reinforces patriarchal and national hierarchies rather than securing autonomy. Orlando's liberation is only realized when she renounces these material claims, transcending the socially constructed spaces of gender, nation, and property. In the end, the film proposes a radical redefinition of belonging, not as a right granted by deed or title, but as a state of being found in the boundless, natural space of the self, free from all imposed confines.

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