

**Breaking the Binary: How the Queer Gaze is enacted in Celine Sciamma's  
*Tomboy* (2011)**

**& Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993)**

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## **Abstract**

Both *Tomboy* (2011) and *Orlando* (1993) explore themes of gender identity and non-conformity in different ways. Sciamma's *Tomboy* does not question masculinity and femininity with its main character Laure. It instead feels, observes, and celebrates gender fluidity through the queer gaze.

Potter's *Orlando* instead questions the roles of men and women and compares the two genders through the eyes of Orlando, who is once a man, then a woman, with the experience of both.

Both films utilise the queer gaze to present these characters who playfully break gender norms and encourages us as viewers to engage in their stories.

## Contents

1. Abstract .....	pg. 2
2. Contents .....	pg. 3
3. List of Illustrations .....	pg. 4
4. Breaking the Binary	
I. <i>Tomboy</i> .....	pg. 5
II. <i>Orlando</i> .....	pg. 8
5. Bibliography .....	pg. 12

## List of Illustrations

1. Fig.1, Sciamma, C. (2011) *Tomboy*. [Screenshot] France, Canal+. Available from: <https://film-grab.com/2020/08/26/tomboy/#> [Accessed: 17/2/2022]
2. Fig.2, Sciamma, C. (2011) *Tomboy*. [Screenshot] France, Canal+. Available from: <https://film-grab.com/2020/08/26/tomboy/#> [Accessed: 17/2/2022]
3. Fig.3, Potter, S. (1993) *Orlando*. [Screenshot] United Kingdom, Sony Pictures Classics. Available from: <https://film-grab.com/2016/12/01/orlando/> [Accessed: 17/2/2022]
4. Fig.4, Potter, S. (1993) *Orlando*. [Screenshot] United Kingdom, Sony Pictures Classics. Available from: <https://film-grab.com/2016/12/01/orlando/> [Accessed: 17/2/2022]
5. Fig.5, Potter, S. (1993) *Orlando*. [Screenshot] United Kingdom, Sony Pictures Classics. Available from: <https://film-grab.com/2016/12/01/orlando/> [Accessed: 17/2/2022]
6. Fig.6, Potter, S. (1993) *Orlando*. [Screenshot] United Kingdom, Sony Pictures Classics. Available from: <https://film-grab.com/2016/12/01/orlando/> [Accessed: 17/2/2022]

## **Breaking the Binary: How the Queer Gaze is enacted in Celine Sciamma's *Tomboy* (2011) & Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993)**

Society is full of people and stories that do not fit into the standard gender binary notions that have dominated the modern western world. Historically, films have perpetuated such notions through Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' theory, which creates a gendered power imbalance on screen. The subversion of the male gaze has been created, appropriately named the 'female gaze.' What happens if a story follows someone who does not comfortably fit into either category? What if they fit into both?

*"The queer gaze would create a world completely free from binary notions of desire and storytelling, creating space for plural identities and possibilities."* (Moss, (2019))

I will explore how the queer gaze is enacted in Celine Sciamma's *Tomboy* (2011) and Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993) as both films feature characters who do not fit easily into the gender binary, yet the two films explore gender identity in different ways.

The sources for this essay comprise of mostly books, articles, and direct quotations from interviews with Sciamma and Potter in their DVD special features. The books include John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and Katharina Lindner's *Film Bodies*. The articles include Darren Waldron's *Embodying Gender Non-Conformity in 'Girls': Celine Sciamma's Tomboy*, and Nuria Enciso's *Turning the Gaze around and Orlando*.

### Tomboy

One aspect of the Queer Gaze is the viewer's participation in the narrative. In *Tomboy*, we as an audience are immediately participating in the story by questioning and making assumptions on what Laure (the protagonist) gender may be. The film begins with a very sensuous scene, where we are shown little of Laure's androgynous face. We observe them driving with their father, with the wind blowing in their hair, and a shallow focus. (See fig.1)



(fig.1, Back of Laure's head, *Tomboy* (2011))

In John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, he claims that "*the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male.*" (P.64, 1972) This is clearly not the case in Sciamma's *Tomboy*, she wants each spectator to bring their own history – regardless of gender – to the film and interpret Laure as they wish to. As Lindner posits in *Film Bodies*, Laure's gender "*is entirely dependent on the knowledge and experience that we bring to the encounter.*" (p.209, 2018) The Queer gaze does not assume any spectator's gender, unlike that of male or female gaze, it instead encourages you to come to your own conclusions.

Another aspect of the Queer Gaze is how it does not question or examine its subjects. In the case of *Tomboy*, Laure's behaviour throughout the film is never questioned. We are simply observers, while the camera itself never intrudes. It is always a safe distance away, giving Laure space to breathe, and the appropriate privacy to do what feels natural to them. "*It is not a mental film,*" (Sciamma, 2011). It is not *why* Laure is exploring their gender identity, but *how*. The film puts Laure in a variety of situations which they must overcome to express their gender identity. In every scene Laure is *active*, whether that is hiding from other children to use the bathroom, learning how to spit like the other boys, or crafting a fake penis out of play dough. All of Laure's actions are logical and purposeful. It must also be noted that Laure is a ten-year-old child. Children will behave in a way that feels natural to them, without societal pressures and norms shaping their actions. The queer gaze allows this childish freedom to explore one's gender identity without any veils of judgement.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Sciamma chooses to portray Laure's behaviour free from judgement, and this objectivity allows us to explore questions that would not be raised in films that enact the male gaze – is gender innate? Or is gender all a performance? In a scene where Laure watches the boys play football from the side-lines, they watch as the boys take their shirts off, spit unceremoniously, and (one boy) challenges Laure's own gaze with an aggressive glance of his own. In this shot – counter shot, Laure is the outsider, the camera watches the boys, almost from Laure's POV, trying to make sense of the chaos, detailing every action in succession. In the following scene, Laure imitates these behaviours in the mirror with a natural ease. Laure is comfortable that they can pass as a boy, and in the next football scene they integrate seamlessly with the other boys. *“By swaggering, spitting, playing football, and fighting, Laure implies that the outward signs of masculinity have no innate grounding in boys.”* (Waldron, 2013) It suggests that the behaviour of the boys is not something that is naturally occurring due to their biological sex, it is something that they pick up from one another during playtime. This attitude towards gender – that it is a performance and something that can be played with, is an attitude that is integral to the queer gaze.

The queer gaze never falters in *Tomboy*, even after Laure's gender is 'revealed' to the rest of the characters. I believe that *Tomboy* is more about expression than deception. There is no malicious reason for Laure to present themselves as Mikaël, but nevertheless the risk of being found out permeates the film. *“The children find out that Laure is 'really' a girl when the films interior/domestic and exterior worlds collide.”* (Lindner, P.211, 2018). Laure has simultaneously presented as a girl in their home (interior) and as a boy outside (exterior). These worlds collide when a neighbour comes to complain to Laure's mother that her son (Laure) has fought with her own boy. Quickly, Laure's mother punishes Laure by putting them in a dress and telling their friends the truth. Although Laure is put into a dress, they remain unchanged. Sciamma does not change the way Laure is presented post-reveal. Despite being found out; Laure is not submitting to the confines of heteronormativity in the way they act and present themselves. In the final scene of the film, we see Laure approach Lisa in the garden. They wear masculine clothing – a bold red t-shirt – as they have done for the entire film. (See fig.2) They tell Lisa their real name is Laure. Sciamma states that this is Laure's liberation, they no longer have to live a lie. I believe it is up to the viewer to determine what Laure's truth really is. The one and only constant is how Laure presents themselves to the people in their life, and to us as the viewer.



(fig.2, Laure & Lisa stand against a tree, *Tomboy* (2011))

### Orlando

As we have discussed previously, the viewer's participation in the narrative is a fundamental aspect of the Queer gaze, and this aspect is also seen in Sally Potter's *Orlando*, although it is enacted in a very different manner to *Tomboy*. We are introduced to our protagonist Orlando in the first scene very bluntly. Orlando paces underneath a tree in a wide shot, as the narrator introduces us to him "*there can be no doubt about his sex,*" the narrator affirms his gender, as Orlando's appearance is certainly androgynous. The next shot is a close up, a more intimate look at Orlando's face, he immediately breaks the fourth wall, interrupting the narrator to say, "*that is, I.*" (See fig.3 & 4) Sally Potter explains that this is intentional. To create "*complicity with the camera.*" Why do this? For the audience to engage with the narrative, and to eliminate any objectification of Orlando, "*the possibility of voyeurism is cast out as soon as Orlando establishes contact with the audience.*" (Enciso). Throughout the film Orlando breaks the fourth wall, he does not always speak to the audience, but shares a glance before engaging with other characters, making us his ally.





(fig.3, Orlando paces in a wide shot, *Orlando* (1993))



(fig.4, Orlando breaks the fourth wall, *Orlando* (1993))

The queer gaze is abundantly clear in the casting process of Sally Potter's *Orlando*. Immediately gender-identity and non-conformity is something that is played with. The casting of Tilda Swinton as Orlando was an obvious choice for Potter, and she deliberately refrained from masculinizing Tilda in any way. Thus, Orlando's appearance is virtually unchanged (clothing and genitals aside) after he turns into a woman. Potter plays with this further by casting actor Quentin Crisp as Queen Elizabeth I, essentially "*turning the issue of sex and gender on its head right from the beginning.*" (Potter, 1993) The Queer gaze is in action even before the cameras start rolling. Once again, the attitude that gender is a playful performance is present in the Queer gaze.

Orlando, now a woman in the latter part of the film, encounters Shelmerdine, who becomes her lover and father of her child. Although Orlando and Shelmerdine present themselves as a woman and a man respectively, as an audience we know what Orlando has previously experienced (manhood). In a scene where Orlando helps Shelmerdine heal his ankle, they discuss what it means to be a man or a woman. The camera shoots this scene continuously, dollying back and forth between Orlando and Shelmerdine's faces while the two maintain eye contact. Focusing on both the subjects in this way signifies that Orlando and Shelmerdine are equals, and we understand that they agree the constraints of gender performance are unnecessary and limiting. This makes their sex scene one that enacts the queer gaze, having these characters have an exchange that subverts the male gaze entirely (Orlando is the character looking at Shelmerdine, Shelmerdine is the one being objectified) (see fig.5 & 6). It is not simply a subversion, but a deconstruction of the gender-based power dynamics displayed in heterosexual sex scenes, given all Orlando has experienced.

*“Through Orlando, Woolf and Potter attempt a new regime of representation which endeavours to redefine, or even abolish, gender boundaries and structures.”* (Enciso)



(fig.5, Orlando gazes at Shelmerdine, *Orlando* (1993))



(fig.6, close up of Shelmerdine, *Orlando* (1993))

The queer gaze is most certainly enacted in both Sciamma's *Tomboy*, and Potter's *Orlando*. The queer gaze participates the viewer in the narrative, allows the characters to be authentically themselves without interference, and most importantly, allows gender to be something ever-changing, "*Gender is neither stable nor dictated by fate but, in the best case, something to be played with.*" (Sommer's *World Literature to Go*, (2017))

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