

## Sally Potter: Selected Academic Bibliography

### Career Overviews: Books

The second, longer annotation for each of these books is quoted from:

Lucy BOLTON, "Catherine Fowler, *Sally Potter* and Sophie Mayer, *The Cinema of Sally Potter*" [review] *Screen* 51:3 (2010), pp. 285-289.

Please cite any quotation from Bolton's review appropriately.

Catherine FOWLER, *Sally Potter* (Contemporary Film Directors series). Chicago: University of Illinois, 2009.

Fowler's book offers an extended and detailed reading of Potter's early performance work and Expanded Cinema events, staking a bold claim for reading the later features through the lens of the Expanded Cinema project, with its emphasis on performativity, liveness, and the deconstruction of classical asymmetric and gendered relations both on-screen and between screen and audience. Fowler offers both a career overview and a sustained close reading of individual films with particular awareness of camera movement, space, and performance as they shape the narrative opportunities that Potter newly imagines for her female characters.

"By entitling the section on Potter's evolution as a 'Search for a "frame of her own"', Fowler situates the director firmly in a feminist tradition. For Fowler, Potter's films explore the tension for women between creativity and company, and Potter's onscreen observers become 'surrogate Sallys' in this regard (p. 25).

Fowler describes how Potter's films engage with theory and criticism, as she deconstructs and troubles the gaze with her 'ambivalent camera' (p. 28), the movement of which is 'designed to make seeing difficult' (p. 193). For Fowler, Potter's films have at their heart the desire to free women from the narrative conventions of patriarchal cinema, having an editing style and mise-en-scene that never objectifies or fetishizes women; rather, Fowler argues, Potter's women are free to explore female friendships and different power relationships, uncoupled, as it were, from narratives that prescribe heterosexual union.

Fowler sets up Potter as a fighting feminist filmmaker and cites the critical response to *The Tango Lesson* (1997) as an illustration of 'the unequal ground on which female directors have to build their careers' (p. 3). Fowler extends this need for battle-hardiness to the spectators of Potter's films: 'It seems only right, given the fighting spirit with which Potter has approached her calling, that those who watch and study her films should do battle with their preconceived notions of what cinema can and should be' (p. 4). This perspective suggests that there is something of the 'Potter apologist' about Fowler. This is evident more subtly when Fowler speaks of Potter's interest in 'the audio-visual attack' that cinema offers (p. 46) and in the discussions of Potter's perceived early problems with cinematic pleasure (p. 55). As if to demonstrate the validity of the battle, Fowler analyses Potter's films and links them to her origins as a mixed-media performance artist and her collaborative relationships with other performers, such as Lindsay Cooper and Rose English. The integration of elements of live performance with film, Fowler argues, explains some of Potter's unconventional film form: 'breaking the frame, invading her audience's space and performative use of film language' (p. 20). Fowler discusses shot transitions, framing, space and colour, and she identifies several stylistic themes, such as Potter's driving, moving camera, and swift edits (p. 31). Fowler draws out links between Potter's films, such as the dancing body and ideals of femininity, but also picks up on details specific to particular films that would bear further attention. For example, having identified a connection between Suzie and Lola (*The Man Who Cried* [2000]) and Mimi and Musetta (*Thriller* [1979]), Fowler comments upon Potter's use of music in both films, and her exploration of non-verbal

language more generally; but she also observes the way in which ‘Lola hesitates and fumbles with the back of her neck, a movement she often employs when she is lacking confidence’ (p. 91). Observations such as this are somewhat fleeting, but their curtailment is sadly necessary in a book of this length and in this introductory series. Fowler’s approach suggests that Potter’s early radical political filmmaking is hard work all round, but her analysis demonstrates Potter’s ‘dual approach to theory and the wider world’ (p. 34) through the explorations of Potter’s accomplishment as a ‘multi-media polymath’ (p. 61), stressing the depth and breadth of her work, entailing ‘looking differently and looking again’ (p. 108).” (Bolton, 286-87)

Sophie MAYER, *The Cinema of Sally Potter: A Politics of Love* (Director’s Cut series). London: Wallflower, 2009.

Mayer’s book includes both archival material and new, extensive interviews with Potter, examining the filmmaker’s process, politics and poetics. Interleaving chapters on formal aspects of the films (including narration, performance, colour, music, and space) with accounts of the production and reception of each of Potter’s features from *Thriller* to *RAGE*, the book emphasises both the coherence and the continual evolution, including the increasing integration, of all aspects of Potter’s filmmaking with its singular intention of reaching out to the audience, rooted in feminist ideals. By situating each film in its cultural context – from *Thriller*’s relation to punk to *RAGE*’s prescient suggestion of an anti-capitalist revolution – Mayer offers viewers a way in to the complexities of Potter’s work, with an emphasis on both affective and aesthetic apprehension.

“Julie Christie’s introduction sets the tone for Mayer’s approach. From Christie’s admission that she considered *The Gold Diggers* ‘terribly alternative’, to her comments upon Potter’s clothes, her laugh and her ‘enormous style’, the writing is generous, frank and personal. Mayer’s confessional opening reveals the impact on her of seeing *Orlando* (1992) as a teenager: ‘By opening my eyes to the idea that all art forms could change the individual and society, Orlando became part of a cavalcade of popular culture that altered my relationship with power and hierarchy in all its forms: not only gender and sexuality, but also nation, class and ethnicity’ (p. 3).

Mayer, like Fowler, stresses the nature of Potter’s filmmaking as collaborative – with composers, artists and producers, but also with viewers – and Mayer’s book is testament to that particular relationship. Again picking up on the idea of non-verbal communication, Mayer draws on the idea that Potter’s films develop ways of touching the viewer and that her use of film form, such as the close-up and rhythmic editing, enables the films to ‘reach out and affect our bodies’ (p. 6). Referring to the work of Laura Marks on film phenomenology and haptic visuality, Mayer describes Potter’s films as becoming ‘events that have happened to us’ (p. 7). Thus Mayer describes the revolutionary nature of *Rage* in cinematic terms as a refashioning of film, but also by confessing that it ‘looks and feels like no other film I have ever seen’ (p. 10).

Mayer alternates analysis of specific films with thematic chapters (Working, Moving, Colouring, Listening, Feeling and Loving), aiming to create a framework of dialogue, bookended by chapters on ‘Becoming’, parts 1 and 2. This notion of dialogue and respecting the other derives here from Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, a book Potter reads onscreen in *The Tango Lesson* by way of contrast with Pablo’s narcissistic appreciation of Marlon Brando’s biography. For Mayer, and for Potter, the relationship of one to another – being in two – is a political entity. As ‘a spiral that keeps opening outward to the world’, the exchange between two happens in Potter’s film ‘between characters, and between the film and the viewer’ (p. 23). This exchange exists, according to Mayer, where the feelings or thoughts inspired by the film are taken out into the wider world by the receiver of the filmic gift. Mayer grounds her discussion in the editing, pace, sound and colour onscreen, believing that: ‘Potter’s films have the radical potential to restore love to its political efficacy’ (p. 26).

Inspired by Potter's searching protagonists, Mayer declares her book to be about an 'inner exchange' between one viewer and the films, with the aim of circulating the films' gift (p. 25). This is where the concept of love comes in, not as the romantic love of the couple, but as something more political concerned with exchange, respect and carrying forward. In practice, this means situating *Thriller* alongside the 'rip in the mainstream' (p. 30) effected by contemporary social and cultural movements such as punk, The Sex Pistols and Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*: '*Thriller*'s Musetta ... combines punk's performance energy and Carter's fascination with women who use their wits to survive' (p. 29). These seem to be more suitable artistic referents than the psychoanalytic work of Mulvey and others, which Potter saw as limiting in its discussion of for Potter, 'The case is not closed' (p. 33); she sees beyond the analysis of lack to the possibility of alternative ways of being.

Having the space to develop points of close textual analysis at greater length than Fowler, Mayer considers Lola in the context of performance. For Mayer, Lola is always performing – even during sex and at the moment of death (p. 73), which may account for the nervousness identified by Fowler. Mayer considers other performing females alongside her, including the performance of female beauty by Jude Law as Minx in *Rage* (p. 80). This focus on performance enables Mayer to discuss how ideas are conveyed onscreen through cinematic means – colour, light, costume, speech – across Potter's films as evolving, connected and circulating... Mayer's language is lyrical and poetic: 'History blows through Potter's films as a storm of language and music. The auteure is born aloft not by her power of annunciation, but her willingness to listen' (p. 156)." (Bolton, 287-89).

## Articles

Anne CIECKO, "Sally Potter: The Making of a British Woman Filmmaker." *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*. Ed. Yvonne Tasker. London: Routledge, 2002. 272–280.

Ciecko describes Potter as "the foremost woman director to have emerged in the UK in the last twenty years," partially because of her European and global remit (272). Potter's most recent film (at the time of publication) *The Man Who Cried* illustrates this claim: it was a French co-production with Hollywood stars, a cinematographer from the European arthouse tradition, which imagined "the feature film as a composite artwork" with strong, relevant, contemporary themes (272). Her previous film *The Tango Lesson* reflexively explored what it means to be a British-international independent filmmaker "in an industry where female film directors are few and far between" (273). Ciecko situates Potter's dynamic international success in the context of the many British women directors making shorts, television and collaborative projects, and contrasts Potter's self-taught background at the London Film-makers' Co-op, and her involvement with small organisations such as ArtsLab, with the current structure of film schools and government-funded workshops. She points to the influence of Potter's generation of filmmakers and theorists, including Laura Mulvey and Claire Johnston, in creating spaces in which women could produce and exhibit films, and in changing the canonical histories of cinema that excluded women. Potter is "widely celebrated as a model for independent filmmaking" at independent and feminist festivals globally. Ciecko argues that this dates back to the excitement around *Thriller* in the critical community, and that Potter's films have moved towards the mainstream and narrative while retaining their critical eye and genre-blending strategies. She extended these skills to directing two television documentaries that looked at the British and Russian cultural consciousness as represented in cinema, but resisted the further lure of television or Hollywood to remain independent. *Orlando*'s commercial and critical success marked the value of Potter's stringently independent model, which she pursued even after she was considered "high risk" due to *The Gold Diggers*. *Orlando*'s post-national and transnational consciousness fit

with the zeitgeist of post-Thatcher England and suggested a filmic and social European community, as well as being connected visually to the work of British arthouse directors Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway. Like them, Potter is to be recognised as an auteur for her singular vision.

Verina GLAESSNER, “Sally Potter.” *Women Filmmakers and Their Films*. Eds. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, Amy Unterburger and Katrien Jacobs. St James’ Press: 1998. 340-42.

Glaessner draws attention to the way in which Potter has participated in and drawn on avant-garde, independent, feminist and experimental cinema while also considering herself part of entertainment and show business, thus refusing to be labelled or contained – and suffering from economic structures that seek to label and contain filmmakers. She connects this hybrid identity to Potter’s performance background, which survives in her practice of touring extensively with the films, and offering Q&As and masterclasses. Glaessner offers accounts of *The Gold Diggers* and *Orlando* that make connections between the economic circumstances and labour of production and visual, aesthetic and emotional appeal of the finished films. She stresses the difference of Potter’s choices from the mainstream of filmmakers, and the pleasure in cinema that informs them, and that they in turn give to the viewer.

Sue HARPER, “Directors” [section]. *Women in British Cinema: Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know*. London & New York: Continuum, 2000. 201-02, 208-10.

Harper describes Potter as “undoubtedly the most imaginative” of the British female directors emerging from the 1970s avant-garde (201). She describes *Thriller* as a “major cinematic innovation” for its deconstruction of *La Bohème* in such a way as to reveal the problematic pleasures of the opera’s politics, while finding new pleasures that reversed or re-imagined power and identity (201-02). This pleasure, she argues, was not an endorsement of feminist psychoanalytic criticism and did not stem from critical theory, but rather from Potter’s performance practice (202). Similarly, *The Gold Diggers*, which dealt thematically with complex theories surplus value connecting the circulation of gold and the objectification of women, is described as “rivetingly entertaining, with a quixotic lightness of touch” (209). Harper sees its intellectual quest as part of its aesthetic pleasure, and comments on Potter’s conception of the film as a spiral rather than linear. *Orlando*, argues Harper, takes Virginia Woolf’s long essay on gender and sexuality and finds a visually arresting, sensual story in which difference – of nationality, gender, physicality – is the source of harmony and pleasure (210).

Tim HAYES, “Sharing Something Closer to Paradise: An Interview with Sally Potter.” *cléo: a journal of film and feminism* 2:3 (2014). <http://cleojournal.com/2014/12/03/sharing-something-closer-to-paradise-an-interview-with-sally-potter/>

- An up-to-date career interview that took place during a retrospective of Potter’s work at the Bradford International Film Festival, 2014. Includes detailed discussion of the role of her dance and music background, early film influences, politics on film, and digital technology.

Kate INCE, “Feminist Phenomenology and the Films of Sally Potter” in *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Beauvoirian Perspective*, eds. Jean-Pierre Boule and Ursula Tidd. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012.

- An in-depth discussion of feminist critiques of *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson* in relation to Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenology, specifically her development of Edmund Husserl’s “the lived body” as being particularised in a concrete historical situation (162), and contrasts with poststructuralist approaches to gender and

embodiment exemplified by Judith Butler, which focus on performative gender and productively destabilise the concept of the female. Ince follows Elena del Rio's use of phenomenology in her article on *Thriller* (2004, see below), "detailing the pleasure women take in movement and bodily action... while also considering the meaning offered by their living, acting bodies and the symbolic framework within which their agency and physical actions take place" (163). Ince argues that *Orlando* "gloriously stages... the comparison of woman's becoming to man's Beauvoir speaks of in *The Second Sex*" (165), with a review of the critical literature on *Orlando*, feminism, costume drama and movement. Ince argues that the film "strikingly stages vision as female" (165), and also uses movement and spatial relations to mark the becoming-woman; she debates Julianna Pidduck's assertion that *Orlando*'s movement is stilled once he becomes a woman, and argues that the narrative retains its dynamism, with becoming-woman its endpoint (168). Ince argues that this becomes more complex and more reflexive in *The Tango Lesson*, which places a female filmmaker visibly onscreen, "imitating her camera" with her gaze (170), thus engaging with many of the same philosophical questions as the cine-phenomenology of the 1990s practiced by Vivian Sobchack and Laura Marks, which enquired into how film touches the viewer through the exchange of looks across the frame.

Scott MACDONALD, "Interview with Sally Potter." *Camera Obscura*. 35 (1995). 187–220. Reprinted in *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. 397–427.

MacDonald's interview is particularly useful for its depth of coverage, which includes descriptions and discussions of Potter's early short films and expanded cinema works, revealing the development of her work from shorts to features, and from performance to directing. The lengthy, richly detailed introduction covers Potter's career from *Jerk* (1971) to *Orlando* (1993), drawing particular attention to *Orlando*'s gaze to camera as Potter's comedic and engaging solution to the unison of feminist theory and popular filmmaking. At the start of the interview, MacDonald compares Potter's radical reinventions of herself, and the hiatus in her career between *The Gold Diggers* and *Orlando*, to *Orlando*'s transformative sleeps. Potter comments that she is a continuum to herself, but she also has to yoke together multiple facets: she's currently learning tango *and* talking to film journalists. She continues that she is often in a love/hate relationship with current projects, but what sustained her through *Orlando*'s long genesis was the "idea of being able to emerge into a continual present... saying good-bye to a past" (401). MacDonald alludes to her multi-disciplinary training as her past, and Potter responds that she is still a musician, dancer and filmmaker, and the first two are always involved in the last. She traces her background in film, as her primary medium, to borrowing a camera from her uncle, and making films with him and his partner, filmmaker Sandy Daley, with family support and artistic autonomy. She left school a few years later and joined the London Film-makers' Co-op, and showed her films in underground film festivals, but felt excluded from the English structuralist scene, both aesthetically and socially. She talks about her experimental shorts, made on her kitchen table, and that they were handmade, very basic but asking complex questions about space, time and embodiment. MacDonald asks about the relationship between these avant-garde films and Potter's current narrative filmmaking. She answers that she doesn't perceive them as different, although the earlier work was more concentrated, and very focused on her love of the medium itself – and of editing, which was cheap. She describes the austerity of the early films as images of herself, as a filmmaker lacking financial resources, and seeking to go "beyond the edge of the frame" (405). These frustrations led her to dance and choreography, where she learnt how to direct performers, and had the experience of conceiving and delivering "full"

shows (as opposed to shorts). She then discusses how *Thriller* emerged from her living situation as a squatting artist surviving on grants, and her perception of the class difference that allowed her to make art while a seamstress couldn't, and a resulting interest in poverty. She investigated the gender and class politics of opera, but still found herself moved by Puccini's music for Mimi's death scene in *La Bohème*. Although *Thriller* is often read as heavily theoretical, Potter points out that the response to questions about the meaning and importance of theory in life and film, in *Thriller*, is laughter. Yet the film is also a thriller, very dislocating and eerie, and Potter describes the making of the film as itself a thriller because she was moving on uncharted territory. But audiences were incredibly responsive, and it encouraged Potter to begin work on *The Gold Diggers*, which MacDonald describes as conjoining *Thriller's* structuralist and critical concerns with the form of a commercial entertainment. Potter narrates the process of making the second film, which followed a similar route to *Thriller* in that it did not have a completed script, with the idea being that it would be constructed in the editing room. But it was a larger-scale film, shot in hostile weather conditions with an inexperienced crew and a large budget – and Potter had never cut 35mm before. However, she enjoyed directing the large cast, and felt comfortable doing so after her performance experience. They discuss the imagery in *The Gold Diggers*: its references to the history of cinema, its argument about the equation of women and gold, and conclude that many viewers didn't get it. Potter comments that “it was [her] attempt to respect the audience's intelligence,” and that audiences were passionately divided in their responses (414). As well as teaching her through reception from more varied audiences than she was used to, *The Gold Diggers* taught Potter a great deal from its production: about the need for a script, about working to a schedule, and about communication. She was ready to begin a new film immediately with all this new knowledge, but found it hard to raise funding. *The London Story* was devised to have a short production time and be easier to make and fund, and its completion was very satisfying. *I Am An Ox* was also satisfying because of Potter's connection to Russia and Russian cinema, from her several trips to the country, which gave her insight into a completely different model of cinematic production. MacDonald then talks about how she achieved communication in *Orlando* through the to-camera look, and its comedic and intimate power. MacDonald mentions that the novel lacks that intimacy, and Potter talks about the choices she made in adaptation, including her very different handling of the transformation scene – and how the film version works because of the relationship built up by the to-camera looks, and by the transformative editing, which is something else Potter learnt on *The Gold Diggers*. The transformation is also different from the novel because Potter needed to create some narrative logic, and saw an opportunity to critique Woolf's colonial and class politics. Potter discusses her relationship with Tilda Swinton, who came on board in 1988, *Orlando's* bracketing with *The Piano*, the film's budget (approx. \$4 million) and her mentoring relationship with Michael Powell, and the film's other dedicatee, Beatrice Quennell, Potter's grandmother. MacDonald then asks about future projects and Potter's personal life; she is reluctant to talk about either, and points to the theme of polymorphous desire and refusing labels that runs through her work. She connects her refusal to identify with a particular identity with *Orlando's* queer frame, seeing its difference as productive.

Sophie MAYER, “The Archivist Tango: Sally Potter Collects Herself” in *There She Goes: Feminism, Filmmaking and Beyond*, eds. Corinn Columpar and Sophie Mayer. Detroit MI: Wayne State UP, 2009. 34-48.

Mayer considers the ways in which Potter's films think about memory, both remembering and recording, and how the embodiment of these practices disrupts the distinction between archive (static, stable and institutional) and repertoire (kinetic, mutable and

embodied) set up by Diana Taylor. The essay considers a number of paratextual items from Potter's archive (published and unpublished), including the short stories about the Archivist included in the published screenplay of *The Tango Lesson*, the making-of documentary included on Artificial Eye's *Orlando* DVD, flyers for performance art and SP-ARK, the website for Potter's digital archive. What unites these, Mayer argues, is an attention to affective ephemerality, as discussed by Ann Cvetkovich in *The Archive of Feelings*. This is apparent in the attention to, for example, the dancing female body in *Thriller*, and the circulation of song in *The Man Who Cried*: rather than official archives, it is these affective, embodied forms that carry memory, both for the characters, and for the films' viewers, creating an open archive that extends to the collection of viewer affect, which in turn informs the emerging shape of Potter's aesthetic.

Patricia MELLENCAMP. *A Fine Romance: Five Ages of Film Feminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.

From the picture of Tilda Swinton in her elaborate 18<sup>th</sup> century costume as Orlando on the cover of this book to Mellencamp's personal anecdote about travelling to a women filmmakers' conference in Tblisi, Georgia with Swinton and Potter, it's clear that Sally Potter's oeuvre and approach to filmmaking is central to Mellencamp's arguments. Potter is the first, and exemplary director, of the third "age," Experimental Feminism, which is prefaced by a still from *Thriller*. Mellencamp reads both *Thriller* (156-59) and *The Gold Diggers* (159-64) as doing feminist theory, and as being ahead of their times. She notes that both films are concerned with work, money and age (156), and work by raising questions about what Potter calls the "personal historical" (156). Mellencamp usefully narrates both films with dialogue quotations, and draws connections between *Thriller's* commentary on women's exclusion from participating in both a capitalist economy and the arts with Potter's working practices (159). She notes that *The Gold Diggers* offers a multi-faceted critique of genre and continues *Thriller's* critique of the sexual economy, by looking at the star system, as well as reinstating a powerful female gaze and an active female protagonist (161-63). The book's final section is called "What Virginia Woolf did Tell Sally Potter," and argues that the film's lavish yet independent production is comparable to Woolf's "room of one's own," (281-82) offering a vision of history as high fashion (as opposed to the slavish recreations of traditional costume drama), and witty dissection of the English class system (285), ending with a celebration of imagination and change and the present, characteristics that Mellencamp explores and praises in other contemporary women filmmakers.

"Sally POTTER." *Contemporary Authors Online*.

A condensed critical bibliography that offers brief insights into the conflicting reception of each of Potter's feature films in the international media, focusing on well-known reviewers such as Janet Maslin and Elvis Mitchell, demonstrating how Potter's films have passionately polarised viewers. Stresses the range, ambition and beauty of Potter's work, and the themes of relationship, history, politics and aesthetics that run through her *oeuvre*. Useful bibliography.

B. Ruby RICH, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1998.

*Chick Flicks* is unlike any other book on this list, in that it combines autobiography with critical theory, following Rich's central involvement in shaping feminist cinema through her work as a journalist, academic and programmer. As well as an anecdotal record of Rich's friendship with Potter and members of her circle (Lindsay Cooper, Julie Christie), the book includes Rich's ground-breaking review of *Thriller* from the *Chicago Reader*. Rich

and Potter met in 1976 at the Edinburgh Film Festival, when Potter was a celebrated performance artist thinking about making film. Rich situates this meeting in the context of the publication of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the new American independents, and changing directions (away from structuralism) in avant-garde cinema. Three years later, she saw *Thriller* at Edinburgh, and invited Potter to bring *Thriller* to the US to speak at her class in Chicago, while Potter, Rose English and Lindsay Cooper waited to hear from the BFI about money for *The Gold Diggers*. Rich offers an account of Potter and English's performance *Berlin*, which she regrets not having seen, and celebrates having heard Potter's lecture to her class, which attracted no less a personage than Stan Brakhage, who engaged Potter in furious debate. Rich persuaded Potter to distribute *Thriller* through a small, feminist company called Serious Business, who were successful on the educational circuit, but lacked paying venues. Potter returned to the US in 1981 for a fractious yet influential panel on feminist cinema; Potter was also in New York to perform with the Marx Brothers, formed by her and Cooper, at one of English's events. The style of this musical evening presaged that of *The Gold Diggers*, which went into production shortly thereafter. Rich returned Potter's visit, travelling to the UK in 1982 to see the rough cut of the new film, then called *Gold*, with the BFI's (all-male) panel. Rich found the film "emotionally exhilarating" and praised it in her report, as well as filing an interview with Julie Christie, who rarely granted them. Rich attributes the critical attacks on *The Gold Diggers* by UK film journalists to the perceived hubris of Potter being asked to program a season at the NFT by new programmer Sheila Whittaker. Rich narrates Potter's journey from the disaster of *The Gold Diggers* to making *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson*. She ends with an instructive question: "how many films were lost in those lean years?" (226).

Kristi McKIM, "'A State of Loving Detachment': Sally Potter's Impassioned and Intellectual Cinema." *Senses of Cinema*. 2006.

<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/06/potter.html>

McKim argues that, although Potter's formal concerns have altered throughout her career, her emphasis on the "cinema's transformative capacity." She roots this in Potter's dance and performance training, and considers the "choreographic grace" that informs and structures her films. After looking briefly at *Thriller* and *The Gold Diggers*, McKim considers how Potter combined the structuralist and political concerns of these earlier films with the sumptuous virtuosity of *Orlando*, and found increasing critical admiration. She argues that the spectator's experience of the films is characterised by a mixture "of detachment and fascination" with her complex, intelligent characters who defy categorisation, as the spectator follows them on a quest for harmony and integration. She argues that critics who are dismissive of Potter's ardent refusal to create simplistic characters and forms are impatient with, or disturbed by, the emotive, personal and unscripted force of her "moments of extreme wonder" (Jane Campion on *Orlando*). *Yes* represents, for McKim, the culmination of Potter's work, and marks her increasing comfort with the sensual body and the integration of multiple cinematic languages (colour, sound, speech, music, bodily gesture) to interweave narrative and metaphor. She considers how these metaphors, which appear throughout Potter's *oeuvre*, stem from a unique use of "charmed spaces," which operate like close-ups (another meaningful term in Potter's cinematic vocabulary) to create intense, non-realist conjunctions of time and space in which sensuous detail is emphasised as a route to transformation. This, she argues, derives from Potter's close involvement with all aspects of the filmmaking process, and her work with the actors, as seen in the extra on the *YES* DVD, "Finding Scene 54." The emotionality of the rehearsal process, and the difficult journeys of the



protagonists within the films, result in open, hopeful endings that are not sentimental but satisfyingly complete.

Sharon Lin TAY, “On the Edges of Art Cinema: Sally Potter and the Feminist Response” in *Women on the Edge: Twelve Political Film Practices*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 84-107.

Tay opens by stating that “[o]f all the filmmakers discussed in this book, Sally Potter’s career as a director is most closely aligned with the trajectory of the feminist film movement in both political and theoretical terms” (84). She considers how Potter’s non-realist counter-cinema takes up feminist film practice “at the same time that she manages to exceed the limited scope of a feminist film movement conceived in, and defined by, the politics of the 1970s” (85). Tay argues that *The Gold Diggers* both extends *Thriller*’s consideration of representation of women within the text, and “shows a broader feminist critique of the oppression of women by delving further into the material conditions,” mirroring a shift in academic feminist theory from psychoanalysis to Cultural Studies (87). *Orlando* shifts both from the counter-cinematic anti-pleasure and the second wave’s essentialism, using performative strategies – including Orlando’s to-camera address – that solicit subversive laughter. Tay links the emphasis on performativity (including gesture, casting, and performances-within-the-film) backwards to *The London Story* and forwards to *The Man Who Cried*, arguing that they reach a particular intensity in *The Tango Lesson* as it is an “experimental autobiography,” wherein the performative acts as a channel between the personal and the political (93). “*The Tango Lesson* reverse engineers Potter’s supposed contract with feminist theory filmmaking,” however, highlighting pleasure, desire and ambiguity (96). This intimate and self-reflexive film is followed by *The Man Who Cried* and *Yes*, which “might be seen as [Potter’s] recognition and exploration of discursive, aesthetic, historical and political imperatives” (97). Potter uses the opera stage in *The Man Who Cried* to “set up... parallels that further explore the convergence of different aesthetic forms,” leading her to direct *Carmen* for the English National Opera in 2007, which also returns to *Thriller*’s concern with fatal opera heroines and their social context (101). Potter’s ethical resistance to operatic conventions, both narrative and performative, in her staging of *Carmen* prompted harsh criticism from the mainstream, but the use of a contemporary setting and hybrid/convergent media “opens up the production to conversations about the politics of aesthetics” (103). *Yes*, argues Tay, relatedly proposes a feminist aesthetics for addressing the political, offering “more than any of [Potter’s] previous films... a direct feminist response to the world around her,” whose directness and aesthetic choices offer a reformulated activist feminist cinema (105).

Kristy WIDDECOMBE, “The Contemporary Auteur: An Interview with Sally Potter.” BFI 16+ guides. <http://www.bfi.org.uk/filmtvinfo/publications/16+/potter.html>

Potter talks about the idea of the *auteur*, and the balance in recognising that filmmaking operates on the labour of hundreds of people collaborating, but that final decisions rest with the director, who manages the work of her collaborators. She discusses her diverse filmmaking experiences, from doing all the technical work on *Thriller*, to making *The Gold Diggers* collaboratively, to adapting *Orlando* from Virginia Woolf’s novel and building a transnational production company. Potter notes that the term *auteur* is applied to male directors, even if they have long-term collaborators or producing partners; but when women do – as Potter has worked with producer Christopher Sheppard on all her films since *Orlando* – they forfeit the term. She talks about Sheppard’s role as a producer in running Adventure Pictures, and the way they work together, describing his considerable input, as well as the input of her collaborators behind and in front of the camera. These collaborations, she insists, are *part* of being an *auteur*, and it’s important to consider both the director as decision-maker, and the way that she interacts with her cast and crew in

thinking about auteur theory. Widdecombe points out that this aspect is little discussed, and Potter notes that female directors may be readier to admit collaboration and recognise the work of all involved in filmmaking, but says that she does not limit herself with the term “female director” or “feminist” (which has become an insulting shorthand in the media), because it can stop viewers from engaging with the aesthetics and wider cultural politics of her films. Potter talks about the difference between writing (alone) and production (with a large team), and how working with different budgets can affect her sense of herself as an auteur. She talks about *Yes*, which was in process at the time of the interview, and about her methods of writing and filmmaking: finding an idea, returning to it through the various stages of making the film, and finally knowing when to let go – and dealing with the film’s unpredictable reception.

## Short Films & Performance Work

Catherine FOWLER, *Sally Potter* (Contemporary Film Directors series). Chicago: University of Illinois, 2009.

Fowler’s book offers a detailed excavation of Potter’s early short films (available on the *Thriller/Gold Diggers* DVD released by the BFI) and their relation to her Expanded Cinema and performance work.

Sophie MAYER, ‘From Expanded Cinema to Web 2.0: Sally Potter Onstage/Onscreen/Online.’ *Screen*. 49:2 (June 2008). 194-202.

This essay takes up Donna Haraway’s 1985 ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ to consider the ways in which technologies of visibility, hybridity and interaction appear consistently across Potter’s work from her use of film projections in dance performances in the 1970s to her use of digital technology to create paratexts supporting *YES* and the SP-ARK archive. The essay offers detailed discussion of *Play* (1976), set in its production context around the London Filmmakers’ Co-op, to think through the ‘productive – and politicised – tension between technologies of vision’ in Potter’s films, from the use of stills in *Thriller* through Orlando’s daughter’s video camera to the inclusion of CCTV video in *Yes*. The disruption of one visual medium by another reframes the cinematic gaze, so that “not only does the performer ‘look back,’ but the audience is invited to see their gaze as participatory.” A discussion of Potter’s multimedia dance piece *Combines* (1972) (the film from which forms ‘a shadow-archive of both process and performance’) takes up Jackie Hatfield’s concept of artists’ film and video’s investment in “‘overlapping, multilayered histories”’ to discuss the repetitions, non-linearity, spirals and feedback loops that move through Potter’s work from the 1970s to her proliferating online presence. Finally, in relation to repetition, the essay discusses *Daily* (1968), Potter’s first publicly-exhibited film, screened as part of a dance performance, in light of feminist theories of dailiness and domesticity as locations of affect that remain unarchived, and how Potter’s work strives to archive this ephemeral material.

## Films

### THRILLER (1979)

Joan COPJEC, “*Thriller*: An Intrigue of Identification.” *Ciné-tracts*. 3:3 (Autumn 1980). 33-38.

Copjec demonstrates that *Thriller* has the potential to cast light on the problematic nature of identification as discussed in psychoanalysis, and to complicate the simplistic manner in which the psychoanalytic concept of identification has been treated in film theory.

Metz, for example, describes it as entirely of the order of the Imaginary, proceeding only through visual means. Film theory has been too dependent on Lacan’s mirror stage, which renders the spectator absent and erases the body. Copjec points instead to Freud’s

constantly revised concept of identification, culminating in a triple definition which relates identification to signifying systems – that is, identification is concerned with the shift from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, and therefore is less voyeuristic and alienating than Metz implies. *Thriller* occurs in the space of this shift. The way in which it uses mirrors, and in which the shadow of the camera operator is visible, proposes a completely different scheme of film-spectator relations than Metz does, one that is rooted in melancholia and the incorporation of loss. To demonstrate this, Copjec compares *Thriller* to *Oedipus*: both are thrillers in which the narrative is initiated by a detective who has to solve a mystery about his or her self. “Although both...are replete with images of vision, eyes, mirrors, sight, it is primarily through the medium of the voice that their narratives are related” (37). The voice, which is made spectacular in *La Bobème* by virtuosic singing, is returned to meaning in *Thriller*, and its particular meaning for Copjec is that Rodolfo consumes Mimi, emphasized by Potter’s counterpointing of Rodolfo’s singing with Mimi’s tubercular cough. Copjec also discusses the ways in which the carrying on and off of women in *La Bobème*, foregrounded by Potter’s retelling, reiterates this narrative of consumption, in which the female character, Mimi, is included in order to be excluded, to sustain Rodolfo’s power. The film “changes the diva of the opera into an *operant*... and a *revenant*,” a detective and a ghost or corpse, and this activeness, which splits the character between performers, creates difference, showing that identification is not logical and singular, but illogical and multiple (38). Change to structural power can therefore take place because there is no fixed system or originary moment. The operant and the revenant can, and must, exist together and interact.

Elena DEL RIO, “Rethinking Feminist Film Theory: Counter-Narcissistic Performance in Sally Potter’s *Thriller*.” *Quarterly Journal of Film and Video*. 21:1 (2004). 11-24.

From a vantage point of twenty years, del Rio argues that feminist psychoanalytic film theory, in trying to undo the Aristotelian connection between the female and the bodily by erasing signs of embodiment, came dangerously close to erasing the power of the female body and voice to upset signification. *Thriller*, which was read influentially by a number of psychoanalytic feminist film theorists as part of their erasure of the feminised body and its sensory pleasures, can be read more productively with phenomenology to reveal traces of the lived body in its use of dance performance and of Colette Laffont’s distinctive voice. The body in *Thriller* is unlike the body in classical cinema because it divests itself of the surface beauty and feminised gestures that make the female icon a source of traditional visual pleasure. This is because *Thriller* is influenced by melodrama, but examines rather than stages the emotions through its emphasis on Laffont’s voice as one of the bearers of meaning. Del Rio takes issue with Kaja Silverman’s claim that the female voice has to be disconnected from the body in order to escape the narrative trap of classical cinema. Instead, Laffont’s voice, which is anchored in the specificity of her French accent, “construct[s] a kind of communal female body and agency” by speaking as and of all of the female characters (Mimi, Musetta, the seamstresses) at various points, and with shifting pronouns (15). Laffont’s voice also becomes the sole sensual element as opera is stripped of its sensory overload, and this minimalism reveals a new set of female gestures that are not constrained by patriarchy but chosen for their controlled expressivity. The syncing of the voice when Laffont reads from *Tel Quel* repeats this, indicating the potential for reuniting language and the (female) body alienated by patriarchy, and then again by feminist theory.

E. Ann KAPLAN, “Night at the Opera: Investigating the Heroine in Sally Potter’s *Thriller*.” *Millennium Film Journal*. 10/11. (Autumn/Winter 1981). 115-22.

Kaplan argues that *Thriller* is not a rejection of psychoanalytic theory, but an engagement

with it and refusal to be determined by it. *Thriller* moves from psychoanalysis as a first stage (looking at the individual) to Marxist critique (looking at the individual in society), and these two methods of investigation are intertwined. These are represented in the film by Mimi's investigation of her death, and Mimi's psychoanalytic discovery that as a female subject she lacks a place (in the thriller genre) from which to speak; and her materialist investigation of classical narrative's exclusion of women, workers and mothers. Potter is then able to link narrative, psychoanalytic discourse and historical discourse. This is communicated visually, rather than verbally, and through a specific and unusual relationship between visual and aural languages. Mimi's ability to speak – both on voice-over and diegetically – accompany her non-traditional appearance and gestural language to suggest that she has found a position as a speaking subject, in contrast with “Mimi 2,” the Mimi of Puccini's opera, which is quoted on the soundtrack and in intercut stills. The frozenness of the stills, and their traditional framing, is contrasted with the stark set “Mimi 1” (Laffont/English) inhabits, which is shadowy, minimalist and ominous. Mimi 1's arabesque repeats and undoes the choreographed death scene of Mimi 2. The physical and visual realisation of Mimi 1's questions about identity underlines what is at stake: representation and its burden of patriarchal discourse. This is particularly true of the representation of Mimi 1 as a split subject, through mirror reflections, shadows and cast doubling. She reads Laffont's laughter at *Tel Quel* as a rejection not of theory, but of texts (as opposed to self-reflection). In the third iteration of the opera's narrative, following Laffont's laugh, Mimi 1 recognises and analyses the *material* conditions of the story, comparing the different types of poverty experienced by Mimi and Rodolfo. Kaplan sees Potter's intervention into conventional narrative and her creative use of theory as “exciting,” arguing that it “offers the possibility for change” (121, 122).

Sue THORNAM, *What If I Had Been the Hero?: Investigating Women's Cinema*. Basingstoke: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

“[My title] ‘What if I had been the hero?’ is taken from Sally Potter's experimental film *Thriller* (1979), and is a conflation of two questions asked there: ‘Would I have preferred to be the hero?’ and ‘What if I had been the subject of this scenario instead of its object?’ Potter's film, unlike its postfeminist successors, suggests that a simple gender reversal of hero/heroine, activity/passivity, subject/object produce outcomes that self-evidently don't work — indeed, are absurd... women's film-making... *must* engage with all the implications of Potter's question if it is to put women at the centre of its narratives.” Thornham, editor of the widely-used *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader* (1999), suggests that the question posed by Mimi in *Thriller* remains relevant in contemporary cinema — and moreover, that women's filmmaking is still searching for devices as radical as those employed by Potter to challenge the narrative status quo. She notes that “Mimi's doubled question, ‘What if I had been the hero/subject?’ is one which has haunted feminist film theory” as well as women's filmmaking (9). *Thriller* is cited as a reference for the possibilities of a deconstructive narrative feminist cinema throughout the introduction, and is treated specifically in the ‘Avant-Garde’ section of the chapter on “Women's Liberation Cinema” (59-64). Thornham cites *Thriller*, along with Michelle Citron's *Daughter Rite* (1979), as an example of B. Ruby Rich's ‘Reconstructive Cinema’ (59). She then considers it as a reconstructive address to the “masochistic scenario” (Hilary Radner, qtd. 60) of the romance narrative, in which the female protagonist can only be a heroine if she is silent and obedient. Potter's Mimi tries to find a space from which to speak, one that emerges importantly through her connection with her opposite, Musetta. Although using comparable rhetorical strategies, *Thriller* is distinct from earlier feminist cinema embedded in documentary practice, using “the narrative space of *La Bohème* and the internalised space of Mimi's split subjectivity” (62). Its use of documentary archival photography points towards a residual belief in the

importance of authenticity, despite the film's consistent deconstruction of narrative. The disjunction between the specificity of Mimi and the anonymity of the historical images means "the film remains within its internalised attic space, gesturing towards the possibilities" (63). The film's influence is explored in relation to *Morvern Callar* (Lynne Ramsay), whose female protagonist confronts the death of her writer boyfriend (inverting Mimi and Rodolfo) and the question of authorship (110).

Jane WEINSTOCK, "She Who Laughs First Laughs Last (*Thriller* by Sally Potter)." *Camera Obscura* 5 (1980). 100-11. <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/cinetracts/CT11.pdf>

Weinstock reads Colette Laffont's laughter in *Thriller* via the work of Jacques Lacan on the mirror and the Other, arguing that although Laffont laughs at the theoretical text that she reads, critical theory represents the avant-garde from which *Thriller* draws its energy; Potter is powerfully exploring the psychoanalytic question of women's place in patriarchal discourse through the dissociation of voice, body and identity in Laffont's performance. Weinstock argues that Julia Kristeva's idea of the semiotic *chora*, or maternal sound-space, offers a productive reading of Potter's use of voice. She comments on Potter's incorporation of historical photographs of seamstresses as a record of women's history, returning the "mother" to visibility by refusing cinematic realism. She analyses Potter's use of the mirror in the film and how it engages the spectator intellectually, as well as creating – in concert with the camera – split subjects, or rather a new category of being "dancing in that ambiguous space between subjecthood and objecthood" (106). Weinstock questions, like Mimi, whether it would have been better to be the hero, and – like Potter – dismisses it, considering the potential for relationships between women. Quoting Kristeva on humour, Weinstock connects female spaces, dance and laughter as ways of obtaining pleasure, as opposed to Freudian jokes, which create male pleasure at female expense. This is the potential she observes in *Thriller's* anarchic spaces.

### **THE GOLD DIGGERS** (1983)

Pam COOK, "British Independents: *The Gold Diggers*." *Framework* 24 (Spring 1984). 12-30.

Cook opens by quoting Potter's press notes in full as preface to an in depth interview. They begin by talking about gold, and its multiple levels of meaning, both material and metaphysical. However, Potter comments that "a film doesn't set out to be an academic treatise... it achieves... a poetic clarity" (14). She then quotes a passage from Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* about the metaphysics of money, and the elusiveness of gold as a symbol, which Potter relates to the standard of female beauty. The film deals with these interlocking concepts through visual and verbal puns, "deep play with the language of film" (15). The relationship between Celeste and Ruby is predicated on exposing the equivalence of women and gold, and suggesting new relations and seeing differently as an act of change. This also affected the structure of the film, which is a spiral, enabling events to be repeated and reworked to create change. Potter talks about the structure as producing detachment, and the importance of not falling into the trap of being identified, as a woman, with excessive emotionality, but rather to see the fluent expression of emotions as creating a kind of detachment. This relates to the film's "great passion in austerity" and the pleasure of formalism – although this doesn't exclude play and humour in the film (Potter, 18). Potter talks about how her background in performance art enables her to represent the female body without objectifying it, because she has also been the subject of the gaze. The female protagonists are not subjects of narrative identification, but rather abstracts that encourage the viewer to identify with structures or processes, be they alchemical, material, or unconscious. Celeste's detachment is not only a deterrent to vicarious identification, but a reversal of the casting

of black women in excessively emotional roles, while Ruby's role, which retains a lot of the femininity rejected by feminists, represents negotiation between complex selves rather than collusion. Iceland, which Potter visited while touring with the Feminist Improvising Group, offered similar contradictions and detachments as a landscape, standing in both for the colonialist Gold Rush and (thus for) the male appropriation of female bodies. Cook observes that the film absents the tragedy of the working class man; Potter counters that the film focuses on sexism rather than class, and that all the men in the film are presented comedically rather than cruelly or with prejudice – and the end of the film focuses on the politics of the men's movement, in which men have to negotiate with and address each other as sensual bodies. They discuss the careful choices of music and costume that define the film's feel, and the creation of the protagonists' roles, and the variety of new roles opening for women that don't mimic male heroism. These roles are achieved through "dream or vision," and through realising that gender roles are not fixed but historically constructed. This is why Potter found an all-female crew, to show that those roles could be taken by women, but she also says that "as an artist... one is on some level essentially androgynous," and that she has access to all of cinematic history (27). Potter comments that she would like to reach a mass audience, and to make universal cinema, and doesn't see these aims as incompatible with her politics. She argues for a "reconciliation between those [different] kinds of cinematic spaces... reject[ing] the idea that independent cinema is inherently superior to, or better than, mass cinema" (29). This connects back to Potter's argument that minimalism and pleasure can co-exist in one film, and she argues that independent cinema can succeed on its own terms, and as entertainment.

Jonathan ROSENBAUM, "The Gold Diggers: A Preview." *Camera Obscura* 12 (Summer 1984): 126-29.

Rosenbaum opens by discussing the cool reception of *The Gold Diggers*, and unable to understand their antipathy considering that he found the film "visually stunning, witty and pleurably inventive throughout" (127). He relates it to Potter's performance art background, and describes it as "marginal in the best and most potent sense" (127). He also identifies its feminist politics as linked to its experimental form. Rosenbaum goes on to quote Potter's press notes at length (concerning the thematic drive of the picture and its realisation through formal choices in editing, cinematography, casting and location shooting, as well as the film's references to multiple genres, particularly the musical) along with the list of films she programmed at the NFT to contextualise *The Gold Diggers* on its release. He concludes with Potter's statement that her "desire was and is to give pleasure; to heal the 'pleasure time blues' of the opening song" (qtd. 129).

Mandy MERCK, "Composing for the films: Mandy Merck asks Lindsay Cooper about Scoring the Independents," *Screen* 25:3 (May-June 1984). 40-54.

Lindsay Cooper, who composed the score for *The Gold Diggers*, also worked with Potter in a number of live music improvisation groups, including FIG (the Feminist Improvising Group) and the Marx Brothers, around the same time as she collaborated with Potter on the collective process (with Rose English) of creating *The Gold Diggers*. Cooper also scored, with some vocals by Potter, the feminist classic, *The Song of the Shirt*, shown as Edinburgh in 1979 alongside *Thriller*. She talks to Merck about the precise structure of *The Gold Diggers*, which is almost through-scored, the cross-referencing that was made possible by her having been involved with the film from the beginning. She also talks about the film's relationship to Hollywood musicals, its use of diegetic song, the dominance of dance forms in the score (and the relevance of this to the film's story), and the relation of the score to Potter's rhythmic editing. She describes Potter as "light years

ahead of everybody else” in terms of her understanding of music, due to her background as a singer and live performer (51). Merck comments that Potter is unusual in this, as few feminist filmmakers in the 1970s were interested in sound, being preoccupied with altering the visual field. Cooper comments that the first pressing of *The Gold Diggers* soundtrack sold out immediately, highlighting Potter’s commitment to and foregrounding of sound in her films.

Kaja SILVERMAN, “Disembodying the Female Voice” [section]. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988. 178-186.

Silverman offers a narrative account of *The Gold Diggers* that concentrates on the operation of voice in relation to the image, at the conclusion of a book-length study of the problematic female voice in classical Hollywood cinema, particularly thrillers in which the voice traps women into confession and erasure. “Seeing Red,” the song that Potter sings over the pre-credit sequence of *The Gold Diggers*, espouses a similar opinion of classical cinema, focusing on the director as a spectator, and the association of pleasurable female spectatorship with the mother, whose image is juxtaposed with these song lyrics about the loss of pleasure. The song sketches the quest that forms the narrative of the film, in which Ruby (Julie Christie) searches her memory for her mother, the woman seeing laughing silently during the song. The search, in which Ruby has to move her memories from her unconscious to her consciousness, demonstrates a similar collapsing of classical narrative logic to Potter’s song, which erases the foundational distance between director and spectator; the distinction between spectator and fictional character is then collapsed by a riddle spoken as voice-over in which Ruby describes herself as the cinematic image, and Celeste repeats it – varying the pronoun from “I” to “you” – to position herself as a spectator within the film. The fictional character has absorbed the viewer, reversing the process described by psychoanalytic critics. Inside and outside are reversed via unanchored voice-overs, calling into question the boundary between interior and exterior that is marked by voice in classical cinema. Both Celeste and Ruby pass, in the course of the narrative, from spectator to performer, particularly when Ruby passes through an *Alice in Wonderland* like sequence to perform in a stage version of her own life – while she still sits in the audience. When the *Alice in Wonderland* sequence then seems to repeat, instead of re-entering the stage, Ruby enters the landscape of her childhood and interacts with herself as a child. Like Ruby moving fluidly through impossible yet united spaces, the voices in the film move between inner and outer, dialogue and voice-over, synch and voice off. This undermines the economy of subject and object, suggesting a transversal, horizontal cinema, in which viewer and performer can exchange positions. This also threatens the social order, and the film’s subtext about discovering and disrupting the parallel economies of gold and female beauty, suggests the political potential of the fluid voice. Silverman turns to Luce Irigaray’s essays on commodity and exchange value to examine this aspect of the film. Irigaray argues that when men are able to be in touch with one another without women as a mediating exchange value, both men and women gain in pleasure. Silverman argues that this is borne out by the second iteration of the ball scene in *The Gold Diggers*, in which the men dance among themselves as Ruby and Celeste ride off together.

## **ORLANDO** (1992)

Stella BRUZZI, “The Erotic Strategies of Androgyny” [section]. *Undressing Cinema: Clothing and Identity in the Movies*. London & New York: Routledge, 1997. 189-99.

Bruzzi, having considered how clothing in films operates to construct spectatorial desire and identification, follows a chapter in which she claims cross-dressing as conservative with a final chapter considering the radical potential of androgyny. She asserts that androgyny is both more erotic and more transgressive than cross-dressing, “because it is not defined by an acceptance of the fixity of gender binaries, but rather by the effect of ambiguity” (172). Considering *Orlando* alongside its immediate contemporaries *The Crying Game* and *The Ballad of Little Jo*, Ciecko argues that “[o]n the androgynous body is enacted ambiguity, the diminution of difference, and what is manifested is a softening of the contours – between corporeality and metaphor, male and female, straight and gay” (176). Bruzzi reads the revelation of the mirror scene as the pleasurable conclusion to one series of possibilities: that the Lord Orlando’s (feminised) clothing might slip and reveal “doubt about his sex,” and initiates another pleasurable sequence, in which the Lady Orlando might “reveal” her previous masculine existence – which, indeed, she does: gathering her skirts to run, intimating to Shelmerdine that she had been a man, and arriving in “The Present” as a motorbiking androgyne. Following Judith Butler, Bruzzi endorses this constant play between and across gender boundaries, asking “[i]f a radical statement is intended, a public declaration of dissidence, what is the point of keeping the motions of that transgression (the gender fluidities) invisible, wrapped in the secretive veils of passing?” (190). She quotes Potter’s post-gender comments from interviews, and refers approvingly to the generative potential of “Orlando’s radical, utopian androgyny: an androgyny less about transgressing genders than leaving them behind” (191). In a related move, she reads the clothing as less concerned with historical accuracy than with excessive, parodic and “citational” performance (193). Considering the second half of the film, Bruzzi notes Shelmerdine’s Romantic and anarchist sexuality, which is feminised in appearance and in his treatment as the object of Orlando’s (and the viewer’s) gaze. In their relationship, “androgyny comes to encompass both the corporeal and the cerebral. Their ambiguous, shared desire is then represented, when they are in bed, through the abstraction of the body... mak[ing] the body (the most obviously gendered sign of all) into an abstract, unrecognisable image” (198). In unsettling the specifics of whose body the camera/spectator is desiring, Potter’s choices also unsettle the gendered desire of the spectator, and imparts to them a sense of productive and liberatory instability that reside in a pleasurable body able to experiment through clothing rather than be confined by it. Androgyny, as between Orlando and Shelmerdine, depends on the eye of the beholder, and thus reveals the gendering of vision and visual desire – and our ability to alter it.

Anne CIECKO, “Transgender, Transgenre, and the Transnational: Sally Potter’s *Orlando*.” *Velvet Light Trap* 11 (1998). 19-34.

Ciecko is primarily concerned with film history and the ‘costume drama’ genre. She argues that Potter’s film subverts the generic classification afforded to the tradition of British middle-class national cinema of literary adaptation firstly through its transnational production and financing, and secondly through the film’s critique and subversion of gender. In order to position the film in relation both to British establishment filmmaking and gender theory, Ciecko offers an overview of Potter’s career and the critical reception of the film. She quotes critics such as Marjorie Garber and Jane Marcus, and unpicks their arguments concerning anxiety over Potter’s fidelity to Virginia Woolf’s novel. She suggests that Potter escapes archival questions of fidelity by not regarding Woolf as a cultural or historical product, or an academic set text, but an interlocutor. Having established the film’s relation to stately home cinema and its associated cultural economy, she considers the way that Potter subverts it through inclusion and deconstruction. Reading Quentin Crisp’s casting as Queen Elizabeth I, Ciecko refers to his self-designation as “one of the stately homos of England,” and considers an alternate British,



working class and theatrical cultural history in which gender-bending is a *cultural* tradition (27). Pointing to Potter's background in performance, Ciecko teases out the vaudeville and cabaret aspects of *Orlando*, illustrating its connections to popular and queer culture through the casting of Jimmy Somerville. Alluding to Potter's multiple roles in conceiving the film across genres, Ciecko considers the importance of writing as a code unites Orlando, Woolf and Potter as female artists engaged in a quest to create a sense of community mediated through the act of 'writing' (28). Writing is identified as a female, feminist and class-radical activity, when Orlando writes for only the second time in the film, to sign away her house and inheritance. This radical alteration of Woolf's narrative forms part of Ciecko's argument about Potter's work of adaptation, and in her epilogue, she parallels Potter's successful unison of costume drama, class and imperial critique, and queer pop sensibility with the triangulation of gender identity, imperial politics and torch song in *The Crying Game*.

David EHRENSTEIN, "Out of the Wilderness: An Interview with Sally Potter." *Film Quarterly* 47:1 (Autumn 1993). 2-7. <http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Parc/8797/article/fq.html>

Ehrenstein is a long-term fan, enabling him contextualise *Orlando* in Potter's earlier work as a film-maker, choreographer and musician, as well as drawing her to comment on her influences (Powell, Jarman), beginning with a personal conversation about the history of British alternative film. Potter, exploring her own place in that alternative history, comments on the critical failure of *The Gold Diggers*, describing the film as coming from a theatrical practice of improvisation: "I learned that if you have a rock-solid script, you can move really fast to get what you need, and then you can improvise and make changes at the spur of the moment" (3). Having developed a "rock-solid script," Potter welcomes *Orlando*'s commercial success as a personal success in terms of communication with the audience. She credits some of this success to the influence of her mentor, Michael Powell, observing implicitly the unison in which costume, location and performer operate in *Orlando*: "There's one thing I think I unconsciously stole from his film *Gone with the Wind*: the scene where she's running in the garden in her dress. That's the key to using costumes in films – you have to discover how they move" (4). Furthermore, she foregrounds the importance of choreography, not just in dance scenes but also as a through composition for the film: "What you're doing in making a film is choreographing the relationship between the camera, the actors, and the space" (5). She relates this to her background in performance and dance, and discusses with Ehrenstein other things she has learned from her training outside of cinema. Of the music in the film, she observes that "I know from music that the whole thing about women having high voices and men having low voices is all rubbish. So I rewrote the ending so that the film would be bracketed by Jimmy." Continuing this thought, she compares her ending with Woolf's and argues that the feeling is similar to Woolf's incoming airplane, and the effect is equally, and more immediately, ecstatic. "So I end the film in this way on a high, on an up – in ecstasy" (6). This ecstasy, and her process of finding a cinematic language for Woolf relates to Woolf's description of the novel as " 'exteriorising consciousness' " (5) in a very image-led manner. Woolf also felt that *Orlando*, unlike her other novels was an entertainment, which accords with Potter's desire to make films that entertain and partake of entertainment traditions. But she comments that this does not exclude the film from bearing meaning: "sometimes when somebody sets out to make an 'entertainment' the more serious issues surface in their own right in a less pedantic or polemic way" (5). With reference to this mediation of entertainment and politics, Ehrenstein raises the question of gender politics insistently, recalling to Potter her previous association with the women's movement. Potter's, like Orlando, is not evasive of definition but finds it limiting when employed by other people, expressed by her comments on identity politics, and the film's utopian

potential for radical queer identities, “that the film’s contribution to that area is not so much about gaining identity as it is about blurring identity. It’s about the claiming of an essential self, not just in sexual terms. It’s about the immortal soul” (6-7). In this context, she is troubled by the dominant culture’s appropriation/definition of feminism, and how it led others to mis-define her as “everything they fear. But I’ve learned that to win, you’ve got to have cover. You’ve got to be clever. You’ve got to speak freshly with nice juicy words that intoxicate” (7).

Rose LUCAS, “Orlando.” *The Cinema of Britain and Ireland*. Ed. Brian McFarlane. London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2005. 217-226

Lucas, asserting *Orlando*’s place in the canon of British cinematic excellence, argues that the film follows, and enlarges on, the novel in asking fundamental questions about individual and cultural identity: how it is constructed by historical circumstance, how it changes, how it is richer than labels or categories, and how it relates to the creative process. She connects this series of questions to Potter’s own background as a creative artist working independently in a highly structured and conformist medium. Lucas points to Potter’s concerns with labour, economics and use value as they relate to gender and to artistic production, as expressed in *Thriller* and *The Gold Diggers*, and their reworking in *Orlando*, and connects this to Potter’s post-*Orlando* positioning between commercial success and a UK art-house tradition, and specifically Derek Jarman and Michael Powell. Having established Potter’s credentials and relation to the British scene, Lucas points out that the film, although concerned with Englishness and empire, explores it appropriately through multi-national locations, with transnational financing and a global cast and crew, reflecting on the exclusion of women, working class people, and ethnic Others from the category of Englishness. This external perspective is connected to Woolf’s feminism and her critique of patriarchy. Lucas points out that *Orlando* is the most successful of a number of Woolf adaptations from the same period, through its discovery of a cinematic language for Woolf’s radical, experimental prose style, which move the adaptation away from the realist demands of costume drama. Lucas contrasts the film with popular Merchant-Ivory and Kenneth Branagh literary adaptations due to its lack of nostalgia, its disinterest in verisimilitude, and its freedom from “slavish ‘fidelity’... with all the adherences to hierarchical class values that this implies” (221). The film is engaged with showing and critiquing the history of representation, rather than naturalising it, and operating similarly with adaptation, situating the film and novel as fluidly related intertexts rather than in a dominant-subservient position. This invites “active, interpretative engagement from the spectator” and frees Orlando from the specular economy of the male gaze (221). This is further supported by the film’s challenges to rigid gender boundaries, both in its visual language and casting, and in the changes Potter makes to Woolf’s narrative (Orlando having a daughter rather than a son, not marrying Shelmerdine, losing the house, and finding herself in “The Present”). In all its strategies, the film seeks to conjoin Woolf’s experimental modernism with the instabilities of postmodernism around sex/gender and class politics. Lucas finishes by reading Orlando’s journey through gender, and a close reading of the moment of her transformation, in light of Judith Butler’s influential critical work *Gender Trouble*. She concludes that Orlando as travelled beyond sameness to find “the possibilities of difference” (224).

Ruth Lee MARTIN, “Framing Desire and Ambiguity through Musical Means in Sally Potter’s Film *Orlando*.” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 5:1 (Spring 2011), 25-37.

- An in-depth analysis of the score for the film, which concludes that the gender ambiguity present throughout Woolf’s novel, and maintained in its conclusion, is made apparent in

Potter's film through the use of music. Martin notes that "It is significant that the ambiguous voice of the countertenor [sung by Jimmy Somerville] is both the first and last thing we hear in the film, as Potter even adapted the screenplay, in part at least, to accommodate this idea" (p. 28). Similar in its implications of non-binary gender, "[t]he 'Eliza motif' travels with Orlando across the vast historical landscape and carries Elizabeth I along with it, thus endowing the Queen herself with a kind of immortality as well. Thus, the androgyne is symbolised throughout the film on a deep, subliminal, aural level" (p. 31). Martin notes that there is both external music in the film, a combination of pre-existing historically-appropriate music, and original compositions that make reference to historically-appropriate music; and 'internal' music, combining drones and breathy female voices, that marks attention to Orlando's subjectivity, and based on the 'Eliza motif' so that Orlando's desire is related through his initial relation to the Queen. Martin suggests that "underlying the sexual attraction that Orlando feels throughout the film for a variety of lovers is a desire for something more primal – a desire that is ultimately connected with the Queen Eliza, the giver of life," drawing on French feminist ideas relating to sound *in utero* (33). These echoes can be heard both in scenes with Sasha and Shelmerdine and in the closing song, denoting "a desire that allows for multiple selves; a desire that is bound by the symbolism of the mother and infant in the time of the pre-symbolic" (35).

Sharon OUDITT, "Orlando: Coming Across the Divide." *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*. Eds. Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan. London & New York: Routledge, 1999. 146-56.

Ouditt focuses on the question of literary/cinematic relationship, and asks whether the adaptation of a Modernist novel previously considered unfilmable means "we catching the death knell of the printed book [in the angel's song]" (146). She argues, however that Virginia Woolf was more pro-cinema than is usually presented, but insisted that film would have to develop its own language rather than relying on literary sources and techniques, particularly in developing an emotive or kinaesthetic language that would replace/supplement speech: "the cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression" (Woolf, qtd. 147). Indeed, as Ouditt points out, Woolf argued that literature "could learn from the more abstract potentialities of the use of the moving image, and from its different ways of handling narrative" (147). She reads the oak tree in the film as a cinematic version of Orlando's poem (in the novel) "The Oak Tree," seeing them as metaphors for artistic production and feminist inheritance. Following Woolf, she reads several scenes of the novel as filmic, using pans to establish setting, or close ups to 'read' the body (150). She also observes instances of montage, cross-cutting, flashbacks, dissolve, and tracking (151). In moving to the film, she makes the important point that "Potter is less constrained by a particular biography" (unlike Woolf writing about Vita Sackville-West) and that her adaptation has a political edge despite being a commodification of a commodification of intimacy (153). Looking at the (juxtaposed) use of cinematic conventions in the film, such as establishing shots and title cards, she comments that "conventions are not only ways of making us see, but ways of making us see that we are looking" (154). She reinforces the potential for embodiment in film when she notes that "[w]here the novel makes use of flashbacks, the film will frequently dwell on an image or a face, inviting the viewer to explore its associations" (154). She concludes that Potter's adaptation is successful because of its response to "Woolf's consciousness of the interplay between word and image, her openness to the capacities of form to convey meaning, her visual imagination and interest in multiple perspectives... Potter seems to accept it, to embellish it... and invites viewers to take part in the dialogue which she has established" (156).

## THE TANGO LESSON (1997)

Corinn COLUMPAR, “The Dancing Body: Sally Potter as Feminist Auteure” in *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*. Eds. Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul. 108-16.

Columpar is concerned to discover why Potter’s film, in which she plays a semi-autobiographical character called Sally, was received poorly by many (male) film critics who praised a similar act of self-staging in Woody Allen’s contemporaneous *Deconstructing Harry*. In undermining the gendered charge of narcissism, Columpar focuses on the female body as the source of critics’ anxiety and of the film’s investigative pleasures. She connects the *dancing* body both with the film’s genre-bending combination of backstage musical, romantic comedy and autobiographical essay on creativity, and with Potter’s virtuosity as a filmmaker (as well as a dancer). She points to Potter’s long professional and personal involvement with dance, and the influence of her dance training on her filmmaking from *Thriller* onwards. Dance, according to Jane Desmond, is “a potential utopian site for imagining what a feminist politics of the body might look like” (qtd. 111), and it is this utopian politics that Columpar observes in the film’s self-reflexive structure hinging on the visible, performing female bodies of the models in *Rage* (the film-within-a-film) and Sally’s dancing body. Columpar contends that some critics denigrated Potter as a performer to mask their deeper anxieties about a woman director, specifically one whose visual language is so different from classical cinema. This is emphasised by the film’s reflexivity, borne out by the formal contrasts between the black and white “real world” footage and the technicolor glimpses of *Rage*, that make the viewer aware of how Potter, as director, uses her eyes. The specular focus on Pablo Veron also draws attention to this different visual economy, and the construction of Pablo as spectacle is connected to the display of dancing male bodies in classical Hollywood cinema – but also different, because Pablo is neither forced to perform (hyper) masculinity, nor fetishised like a female icon; Columpar argues that this connects back to the dancing body as a meaningful, and shared identity. This sharing allows the film to “eras[e] the distinction between spectacle and narrative that is inherent in the structure of a typical musical,” encouraging the viewer to read all dance as part of the film’s rejection of illusionistic realism, and all gesture as performed and significant (113). This latter provides the structure in which the film’s theme of (mis)communication and multiple languages (verbal, gestural, visual) can be explored, and suggests the shared, responsive, learned gestural language of dance as a “utopian” site of both identity and communication. An emphasis is placed on a subjectivity grounded in corporeality, which Potter has explored, through the language of dance, throughout her work. Columpar draws attention to the deconstruction of the arabesque pose in *Thriller* and to Orlando’s transformation – and the themes and visual languages of both films are incorporated into *The Tango Lesson*, mirroring the development of her own filmmaking, as shown in the movement, within the narrative, from making *Rage* to making *The Tango Lesson*. This grounding in Potter’s own experience balances “practised embodiment” and Potter’s visual virtuosity, a balance that can be seen in the poster image of Pablo and Sally in a tango pose beneath a painting of Jacob and the Angel (115).

Elena del RIO, “Dancing Feminisms” in *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008. 113-147.

del Rio considers Potter’s use of the body in *Thriller* via phenomenology, to consider what early feminist film theory omitted in designating the body purely a fetish, and how Potter’s films represent lived embodiment via a Spinozan “ethics that emphasises the body’s powers

of affection,” rather than its objectification (114). The theoretical framework for this consideration brings together Gilles Deleuze’s consideration “of the body as both normative structure and excessive, destabilizing entity” with the phenomenological concerns of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as brought into film theory by Vivian Sobchack, and Elizabeth Grosz’ feminist use of both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze to understand the gendered body, and to “stress the body’s powers of relation and affection... [whereby] the body only exists in relation, which is to say in performance” (116). This explains del Rio’s emphasis on *Thriller* and *The Tango Lesson*, which are explicitly and reflexively concerned with performance. *Thriller*’s work with the ‘master narrative’ of *La Bohème* (more broadly of melodrama, and more broadly still of femicide) operates on a rigid schema of both balletic and minimalist choreographic discipline, but within it – through the use of the affective power of the voice – produces “body images that surpass the ordinary possibilities and normal conditions of the body” (117). *The Tango Lesson* is more fluid, with the distinction between the affective, complex framing narrative, with its shifts of status and cycling of attention between Sally and Pablo, and the film-within-a-film *Rage*, which has *Thriller*’s highly stylised choreographic stiffness and diagrammatic apprehension of gender politics, marking a shift in feminist theory as well as Potter’s filmmaking, towards an engagement with pleasures including narcissism as “the way to the undoing of identity’s boundaries” (117). Going beyond this in her conclusion, she explores *YES* as a model for a micropolitics of peace concentrated in bodily affect.

Lucy FISCHER, “‘Dancing through the Minefield’: Passion, Pedagogy, Politics, and Production in *The Tango Lesson*” in *Cinema Journal*. 43:3 (Spring 2004). 42-58. Reprinted as “Sally Potter: Passion, Politics and Production in *The Tango Lesson*” in *Women & Experimental Filmmaking*. Eds. Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. 131-146.

Mirroring the structure of the film, Fischer’s article is divided into ten “lessons,” exploring what it is that the film teaches through *its* lessons, how it does so, and why the concept of film as pedagogical is so important. Fischer argues that *Thriller* was received as a “theory film,” a cinematic work that, rather than being focused on narrative, was focused on laying out a theoretical position *through* narrative, and observing its consequences. *The Tango Lesson* is a revised “theory film” that responds to changes in critical theory and its relation with filmmaking, and to Potter’s development as a filmmaker. Lesson 1 concerns the film’s staging of the female author, who writes (or doesn’t write) with a pencil rather than a pen(is), is distracted by domestic issues, and whose domestic space disintegrates. The second lesson looks at the film Sally was writing, *Rage*, and Sally’s decision to abandon it, which Fischer sees as an exchange of the emotion of rage for the pleasure of tango. This focus on pleasure represents and engages with the post-Laura Mulvey search for a feminine aesthetic language, and alludes to the surge in studies of popular culture and women’s pleasurable spectatorship. This pleasure, suggests Fischer in Lesson 3, is for Sally, Potter and the viewer, and relates to the film’s basis in, and transformation of, lived experience. Fischer highlights the critical anxiety provoked by Potter reversing the trajectory of the women in cinema: from behind to in front of the camera, instead of the usual vice-versa. Lesson 4 notes that several avant-garde dancers have made films that display virtuosity in both dance and cinema, and also to films such as Dorothy Arzner’s *Dance, Girl, Dance*, which use dance to foreground and critique the place of the female icon in the entertainment industry. Thus, Potter’s use of dance refers both to the pleasures of mainstream musicals, and to the cerebral pleasures of avant-garde film, demonstrating the sensuality and complexity of both. Specifically, she focuses on the tango – the subject of Lessons 5 through 8 – with its particular class, gender and colonial politics. Fischer, assaying the film against Marta Savigliano’s study of tango,

suggests that Potter deconstructs the association of the dance with female melodrama, and – as a white woman dancing with a Latin American male – subverts the colonial gaze cast on tango. Fischer also elucidates Potter’s reference to feeling Jewish as part of this refusal of exoticisation, and connection to “the history of tango [as] as history of exiles” (Savigliano, qtd 53). Fischer argues that this revises the canon of EuroWestern cinema’s use of tango, including *The Four Horsemen* and *Last Tango in Paris*, in terms of both sexual and colonial politics. By taking the role of the white traveller, Potter undermines the connection of masculinity with autonomy, and by casting Pablo as the object of the gaze, suggests a fluidity and exchange of gendered characteristics in which Sally and Pablo are doubles. Fischer uses her ninth lesson to compare Potter’s film in detail to Carlos Saura’s *Tango*, released a year later, which, despite its tacked-on overt reference to Argentinean politics, stages the drama of the male artist at the expense of his female partner, and is complicit in the exoticised, colonial reading of tango as violent. Fischer concludes that this reverses the “shot/counter-shot” tradition of women’s filmmaking, as Saura had to respond to Potter – like Pablo entering the tango embrace with Sally, based on the painting. The blank page of the film’s opening can now be re-read as “an emblem of how the tables have turned” (56).

Ulrike VOLLMER, “Towards an Ethics of Seeing: Sally Potter’s *The Tango Lesson*.” *Literature & Theology*, 19:1 (March 2005). 74-85.

Vollmer’s aim is “by examining *The Tango Lesson*, a film that focuses on the act of seeing... to be able to suggest how cinema might be religious, how seeing itself could be an act of faith” (74). She sets out previous definitions of the interconnection between film and religion, and argues for her own, which is ethics-based, drawing on feminist theology’s structuring principle of relation and Emanuel Levinas’ definition of religion as “the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality” (qtd. 76). It is this act of seeing as a positive relation, mediated by language, that Vollmer traces through *The Tango Lesson*. She points to the difference between the operations of the gaze in *Rage*, where there is no relation, and in the black-and-white *Tango Lesson*, where there is a journey to relation through dance, love and filmmaking. She reads Sally’s gaze at Pablo, mirroring Potter’s gaze, as relational in that it is interested in Pablo’s subjectivity as a dancer and a human being; her vision enables Pablo as a dancer and performer. The film demonstrates seeing as not only an act of witnessing, but of creating or helping the Other create themselves. Pablo, because he has been seen in full subjectivity, is able to resist Sally when she wants him to cry on screen, to demonstrate that images cannot contain everything that is seen. Images are contested by the Other who looks back at the I, destabilizing the totalizing nature of the image, and making possible a visual relation that is ethics-based. Vollmer extracts several tenets towards an ethics-based reading of film as religion from her reading of *The Tango Lesson*, including a rebuke to Paul Schrader’s concern with transcendental style, which replaces seeing with believing. Vollmer places the embodied, reciprocal look at the centre of her ethics, and at the centre of *The Tango Lesson*.

## THE MAN WHO CRIED (2000)

Ginette VINCENDEAU, “The Man Who Cried” [review]. *Sight and Sound* 11:1 (January 2001). 54.

Vincendeau connects *The Man Who Cried* to *Thriller*’s fascination with the power of opera, and to *Orlando*’s lavish cinematography and design. She describes the film as having an “‘operatic’ sensibility” that connects the high art of opera, and the denigrated melodrama,

or women's picture. The review praises the film's aesthetic realisation, particularly its "superb music," which not only expresses but narrates the multiple ethnic and cultural identities of the central characters. She draws attention to music's power to express different forms of love, from the father-daughter love that bookends the film, to sexual desire, romance, community, the love of power, and the love of art itself. This is supported by passionate performances from the main cast, and by the arrangement of history as spectacle in a series of striking visual images.

## YES (2005)

Giulian BRUNO, "Yes, It's about Time, A Virtual Letter to Sally Potter from Giuliana Bruno." *Journal of Visual Culture* 7:1 (2008). 27-40.

- Bruno offers an informally-framed response to *Yes*, that begins by considering whether Potter's use of the *Yes* website to recount her travels with the film could inform a re-conception of blogging as a new form of the 'republic of letters.' Bruno reflects on a panel discussion at the 2006 American Psychoanalytic Association in New York, as a location for interrogating her own bond to the film (co-produced by her husband Andrew Fierberg) and the notion of 'critical distance', which is itself contested by the film. "Your film engages love and war as well as the complexities of diverse class, gender, and religious positions. It goes to the heart of our current situation... It paints a picture of the elaborate socio-sexual tapestry we not only live in but also think about; hasn't our friendship been an intimate way of keeping a dialogue going on these vital issues?" (p. 28). Bruno's description of the film is interwoven with an account of its production during times of war, which affected shooting in Beirut and Cuba. "Responding imaginatively to obstacles intruding from the real world, your film shows a strong sense of what Russian film director Vsevolod Pudovkin called 'creative geography'" (p. 29). She notes that the film's narrative geography is reflected not only in its form – interwoven narratives of multiple characters – but also in its use of verbal language (iambic pentameter; monologues to-camera) in a manner that is unusual in film: "This diversity of the cultural landscape of the film is reflected in its narrative topography and in its choice of language. Yes is a gesture toward enhancing language without diminishing the power of the visual" (p. 29). Locations are chosen because they are possible "sites of discourse" (p. 30), such as a key location: the car park, "the site of negotiation for both emotional and cultural departures and arrivals" (p. 30). Bruno notes that this scene was particularly compelling to the psychoanalysts who took part in the discussion, because it places She in the analytic position when she asks "tell me more" – and the conclusion of the scene shows the empathic limits of the analytic mode.

The film is more empathic, through its structure and use of verse as "the site of the transmission of affects" (p. 31): "Yes positively and affirmatively represents the receding world of desire and love, and presents it as a reprieve from a sea of pain. It offers the 'bonds of love' as a site of healing" (p. 31). The repeated verbal rhythms and stable pattern allow the iambic dialogue to become a 'holding' space for psychic trauma in the midst of cultural and personal change, and thus a 'holding' space for the viewer to process the film's complexity: it has "an inner movement, eventually becoming a vehicle for exiting the psychic war zones," because its rhythm is close to breath and thus to life forces (p. 32). This is particularly apparent in the Cleaner, who describes her work as "therapy / For homes," an attention to the domestic, material and intimate that is also psychically affective. "Thus metaphysically fabricated and analytically exposed, cellular matters become the actual material of the film. This philosophical passage in *Yes* connects life with dirt and pain, engaging the meaning itself of metaphor, in its etymological sense from the Greek: transport" (p. 33). The Cleaner's analysis of the

relation between dirt and pain as that which leaves a trace offers a “metaphysics of dirt becomes evidence of psychic motion. Materialized in this cellular shape is a real ‘moving’ texture: the motion of an emotion” (p. 34). This is actualised through the haptic camera movements developed with Alexei Rodionov, and the shift in the film’s colour palette from cool to warm.

This very material address to the senses enables the viewer to contemplate the film’s take on time, “enhance the perception of duration as a mental state, working particularly in intervals,” through the use of different camera speeds (p. 35). Through the concentration and expansion of time, there is also an attention to surfaces such as skin, fabric and glass, connecting touch and temporality: “in *Yes* you sense that paint can brush away, and be brushed into, the fabric of time. These visual brush strokes reach into the actual texture of temporality – the affective, mnemonic, imaginative fabric out of which we are made over time” (p. 35). The film offers an “erotics of slow time” that runs counter to contemporary technologisation and loss of affective bonds. “Slow time is shown seductively, in a physical way, as a substantive form of visual care. The material fabric of the film flows in an elaborate formal structure” through extreme stylisation, which in turn relates to the characters’ inner fashioning as relayed through the high-flown verse (p. 36). Through She’s work as a molecular biologist the construction of the self is put into question at molecular level, underlined by the examination of biological and non-biological kinship relations in the film, particularly between She and her aunt, and between She and her goddaughter, depicting “alternative forms of relational care” to the convention of motherhood (p. 38).

Through her relation to her Aunt, the time of mourning is paralleled to the slow time of romantic love (and of film spectatorship); the film demands the time to hold and experience these powerful emotions. In order to preserve the time of mourning, the film “ends on a note of hope... I mean hope, and not a happy ending,” where hope relates to the function of the imagination, reflected externally by She’s trip to Cuba, a socialist utopian project (p. 39). “This trip to Havana embodies the kind of mnemonic journey that is embedded in the process of mourning. In this city of lost socialist dreams, our scientist confronts not only the loss of the aunt but also her own loss of self, and her lack of faith” (p. 40). Having confronted this, her final reunion with He in Cuba offers hope.

Cynthia LUCIE, “Saying *Yes* to Taking Risks.” *Cineaste* 30:4 (Autumn 2005). 24-30.

<http://www.cineaste.com/fall05potter.htm>

Lucie opens her article with a review of Potter’s career that draws attention to her originality, her virtuosity and her choreographic filmmaking. She considers the mixed reception of Potter’s films, and argues that “critics consistently acknowledge Potter’s genuine talent and versatility.” She describes *Yes* as a tour de force, and specifically discusses the film’s metaphysical concerns and their integration into the formal languages employed “in complete accord.” Potter responds to questions about 9/11 and about the identity of the protagonists, both of whom are from religiously-divided cities, by talking about humanizing the enemy, and the long traditions of inter-cultural friendships and communities even in bitterly factional areas. She’s American identity both reflects that the majority of Americans are immigrants, and that power structures do affect and intrude on intimate relationships. Her character’s profession, as a molecular biologist, is multi-faceted, permitting a commentary on the relation of the very small to the very large (in terms of both mirroring and affectivity), and on the power dynamics of a relationship between a white professional woman and a deprofessionalised Arab immigrant man. But the science in the film is not hard-edged and materialist, but rather a way of connecting with the metaphysical. The resolution of the relationship at the end of the film is on a similarly metaphysical, non-realist level, Lucie suggests, and Potter comments that when



She addresses the camera as God, She is addressing the audience. Cleaners also address the audience, and their central role in the film marks our inability to clean up after ourselves, and our dismissal of the people who do. The cleaner's visibility – and her ability to “see” us – reverses our perception, and also allows for comedy between more weighty scenes. Visibility is a key theme in the film, which considers the invasive “invisible” watching of surveillance cameras and the invisibilising of the immigrant experience, and searches for a respectful form of making visible. This leads to the conflict between He or She, and She's eventual resolution to let go of her anger and accept that she fits the dominant subject position, and so listen to He. The reconciliation in Cuba thus happens in a thirdspace, one that is not identified with either of them, and is unresolved – hopeful, but not necessarily happy, says Potter. Lucie suggests that She is still caught in the Western individualistic “me” at the end of the film, even in a Communist country, but Potter argues that change has to start with the individual questioning herself, particularly in a place like Cuba where it is only possible to be a tourist and no false sense of community or belonging can be enjoined. Lucie raises the question of Potter's visual and structural choices, in having sections shot at six frames per second, and in introducing the aunt three-quarters of the way through the film, with an eight-page monologue. Potter discusses these formally experimental decisions, and their engaging effect, as both break down realism and create a space in which the viewer can engage with the themes and characters rather than illusionistic narrative and emotion. They then discuss a third formal innovation, the verse screenplay, which Potter agrees was a risk, and part of her history of taking risks – but also part of a long history of narrative drama, as well as being non-realist, and able to fluently incorporate Potter's tendency to introduce multiple, interconnecting themes into her films. This relates to Potter's unconventional and complex characters, including Antony, for whom she feels great sympathy, and Grace, who represents the potential for intergenerational relationships between women, and the difficulties of the post-feminist generation who have all the rights but have not been politically radicalized. Potter observes that these interpersonal dynamics, as well as themes of exile and identity, and formal experimentation, have formed a thread through her work.

Daniel GARRETT, “Dreaming Wide Awake.” *Offscreen*. 9:9 (September 2005).

[http://www.offscreen.com/biblio/essays/dreaming\\_wide\\_awake/](http://www.offscreen.com/biblio/essays/dreaming_wide_awake/)

Garrett describes a Q&A featuring Potter and Joan Allen at Barnes & Noble in New York in June 2005, and compares the film to a number of contemporaneous releases that are committed to representing emotional authenticity, partially to assess whether there is a cultural zeitgeist shaping the year's releases, which all concern relationality in one way or another. He considers *Yes* as the most successful because of its combination of an investment in aesthetic precision and a subtle political awareness predicated on the relationship between individuals. He notes that “He and She have inherited the history—that is to say, the conflicts—of the world, and when they remember that, when they allow themselves to be only social beings, not individual beings, they begin to trip themselves and each other up.” He examines the way in which all the characters in the film hold and lose their illusions through their interaction with other characters who are searching for truths. He offers a review of the US reception of the film, drawing particular attention to the positive reviews it received outside of New York, from Jonathan Rosenbaum and Roger Ebert (both Chicago), as well as Bill White (Seattle). In closing, he compares the film to Ingmar Bergman's *Saraband*, as both films conceive of cinema as a canvas for “human experience; for films that assume what happens between people can be of personal, philosophical, and political importance.”

## **RAGE** (2009)

Nick BRADSHAW, “Phoning it In.” *Sight & Sound* 19:10 (October 2009), pp. 38-39.

Bradshaw talks to Potter about *RAGE*, asking ‘[h]ow to film an already highly visualised un-film? Potter’s answer was, in a sense, not to film it – or at any rate to swing the camera around and show reaction rather than action.’ He notes that ‘*Rage* suggests the abstract grammar of advertising in its studio-bound close-ups and pop-coloured backgrounds,’ but rather than using the fragmented structure of advertising, it links its fragments into a narrative feature. Potter comments that, in contra-distinction to presumptions about film viewership, it’s the film’s clarity and simplicity that retains the viewer’s interest: “That was the tightrope dance, how much can one do with the least? No reverse shots, no cutaways, no backgrounds, just colour and a face.” She relates this practice back to her beginnings as a filmmaker, where, “You know, on the very first films I made, I shot – I got the footage out of dustbins in Soho – I printed, I processed. That’s what you did.” This both comes from and becomes, she suggests, an eco-politics of filmmaking: “Now is the moment to really think about what’s necessary – not what’s going to feed some superficial need, but what will fulfil a deeper need, and a feeling of responsibility for putting things out there.” This politics extends from production to distribution, with the film the first to be simultaneously released on multiple platforms, including online streaming. As Potter says, “So that’s part of the ethos, the aesthetic and the life of this film: throw it out there, give it away... I feel with the whole internet phenomenon, if you go with that energy and do something with it, it’s fantastically energising, and if you just give it away then in that act something comes back that’s astonishing.”<sup>2626</sup>

Catherine GRANT, “Angelism and *RAGE*: Sally Potter Links.” *Film Studies for Free*, 21 Sept 2009. <http://filmstudiesforfree.blogspot.co.uk/2009/09/sally-potter-links.html>

A useful round-up of material available online concerned with gender, embodiment and queerness in Potter’s work pre-*RAGE* that offers a framework in which to read the film. The blog post also includes a fascinating note by Adrian Martin on Raymond Bellour’s concept of ‘angelism,’ which Bellour coined in relation to the end of *Orlando*, where, within cinema ‘video moments can point forward to utopian, transcendent, sometimes mystical states and experiences’ — an idea highly relevant to the video diaries that make up *RAGE*.

Sophie MAYER, “The Art of (Feminist Film) Work in the Age of Digital Reproduction.” *cléo: a journal of film and feminism* 2:2 (2014) <http://cleojournal.com/2014/08/21/the-art-of-feminist-film-work-in-the-age-of-digital-reproduction-2/>

Mayer reads *RAGE* alongside Barbara Kopple’s *Harlan County USA* and Sophie Hyde’s *52 Tuesdays* to enquire into the changing nature of women’s labour on film; specifically considering the ‘off hours’ of domestic or affective labour as opposed to paid workplace labour. Looking at the later films, Mayer discusses the difference wrought by the digital in terms of the relationship between temporality, labour and identity. In *RAGE*, labour has expanded in the ‘off’ time of backstage, not least as the ubiquitous camera demands ‘on’ personae from all the interviewees, just as globalised capital inserts labour into all temporality. The mode of filmmaking – close continuity for each performer, in a short space of time – reverses this, so that the filmmaker’s labour is what “welcomes us into the ‘off hours’” of viewing... from escapist no-time to collaborative immediacy.”

## **Ginger & Rosa** (2012)

Jonathan MURRAY, “*Ginger & Rosa* [review].” 38:2 *Cineaste* (Summer 2013). 41-43.

Murray's review essay on *Ginger & Rosa* focuses on the resonances between the global and local storylines in the film, arguing that "the significance and sophistication of the director's approach to this material lies in her accordance of equal respect to each plotline. In Potter's vision, the possible obliteration of one person's world holds as much aesthetic and ideological importance as the obliteration of the world per se" (41). This is structured by "an intricately conceived and executed range of visual and narrative motifs" linking the two, including "copying, doubling and repetition" (41), beginning with the reflections between the two leads. But this performance of female friendship is troubled by other doubles, for example between WWII and 1962, in a dialogue between Ginger and her godfathers (42), and signs of the nascent feminist movement trouble romantic notions of pair-bonding (42). "Potter deftly uses well-worn dramaturgical conventions... in order to paint a nuanced picture of the complexities unleashed by progressive political change" (42), and particularly to look critically at the romanticisation both of the progressive 1960s and of the pre-60s era, something that's particularly evident in the characterisation of charismatic leftist Roland (42). "No matter how the girls seek to understand and influence the wider world, there is always a male role model, personally known or otherwise, waiting to provide a route map," including the leadership of CND and newsreaders (42). Thus, institutional structures are not the key to lasting social change; instead, the film points to interpersonal connection as its source: "enduringly progressive social change is dependent upon our willingness to understand the personal choices of romantic and familial life as politically meaningful ones" (42). This is the rationale for the "intricate public/private parallels" (42), and thus the film is "a valuable extension of the signature that have informed [Potter's] filmmaking career more generally" (43).

## Other Resources

*Vertigo* magazine were long-time supporters of Sally Potter's work. You can access three significant articles (with illustrations) via their excellent archive on *Close Up*:

For all three articles:

[http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/search\\_results/?query=sally+potter&search\\_paths%5B%5D=](http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/search_results/?query=sally+potter&search_paths%5B%5D=)

Sally POTTER and John BERGER, "Affirmative Actions: Sally Potter on *YES*." *Vertigo* 2:8 (Spring-Summer 2005)

[http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo\\_magazine/volume-2-issue-8-spring-summer-2005/affirmative-actions-sally-potter-on-yes/](http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-2-issue-8-spring-summer-2005/affirmative-actions-sally-potter-on-yes/)

John BERGER, "Her Name is Red: John Berger in Conversation about Sally Potter's *Carmen*." *Vertigo* 13 (2007)

[http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo\\_magazine/issue-13-november-2007/john-berger-on-sally-potter/](http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/issue-13-november-2007/john-berger-on-sally-potter/)

Sophie MAYER, "The Emperor's New Clothes: Sally Potter's *RAGE*." *Vertigo* 4:3 (Summer 2009)

[http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo\\_magazine/volume-4-issue-3-summer-2009/the-empires-new-clothes-sally-potters-rage/](http://www.closeupfilmcentre.com/vertigo_magazine/volume-4-issue-3-summer-2009/the-empires-new-clothes-sally-potters-rage/)

A full bibliography of academic writing on Potter's work to 1998:

<http://www.arts.ac.uk/research/filmcentre/bibliographies/potter.html>