

Sally Potter's "écrands seconds"

A Reading of Sally Potter's Work

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During a discussion with English film scholar Pam Cook in 1984 about visual representations of the female body director Sally Potter is asked whether she agrees with the strategy of certain female artists to completely avoid imaging the female body. Sally Potter answers

Yes, I do, though I don't share it entirely. In my performance art in the past, I have been seen on an ice rink with no clothes on, holding a microphone, debating what's it like to be both the muse, the female nude, and speaking for the muse.

Sally Potter's first fiction film *Thriller* (30 minutes) from 1979 is a kind of meditation upon Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. In *Thriller* the dead Mimi reflects on her role in the opera and at the same time she is reflected visually in a kind of avant garde doubling of scenes from the opera as frozen frames and pantomime tableaux. In Potter's latest film *The Tango Lesson* (1997), the overall narrative principle takes the form of a doubling, too, the director placing herself both behind and in front of the camera, the auteur thus being both inside and outside the film.

Although different with respect to both narrative form and visual style, the three mentioned examples from Potter's work are united through the principle of reflexivity, from the performance artist's work in the beginning of her career, through the early short and to her recent film. In the above quotation there is a twofold enunciation. The artist is talking about reflexivity as a strategy and the role is referring to the pose she is adopting. In *Thriller*, the role is, likewise, talking both from the inside of the operatic diegesis and from the outside. She is trying to understand what happened to the seamstress Mimi, and at the same time she is repeating the melodramatic narrative of which she is a central part, by recalling that "I was told that the story is this". Hereafter she retells the story of the opera. In *The Tango Lesson*, reflexivity is inscribed in the metafilmic narrative: A film director is preparing the film that has unfolded in front of our eyes. But reflexivity is at the same time present in a more subtle way in the sense that real life director Sally Potter is doubled as a diegetic character, namely a film director called Sally Potter. Thus, *The Tango Lesson* is about a film director named Sally Potter, played by Sally Potter who, in the beginning of the film, thinks she is working on a thriller called *Rage*, the setting of which is the glamorous world of fashion. But she abandons the project because the American financiers want a story that she is not willing to either write or direct. At the same time she becomes infatuated with the tango and, not least, a tango performer and therefore she decides to start on a whole different film

project about the tango. In the end of the film she is preparing this new film, which is seemingly the film we have been watching. Or is it?

A Formal Principle

Whereas the textual doubling in the first two examples from Potter's work, the performance and the short film, is reflected upon verbally, in *The Tango Lesson*, it is embedded in the story, despite the emphasized metareflexivity. Whereas enunciative positions are clearly demarcated in the first two examples by means of a reflexive voice – even though, in *Thriller* this voice comes from a dead character in another fiction, an opera – in *The Tango Lesson* the image maker just installs herself in the fiction as a character – fictitious or not.

In the very first shot in *Thriller* a dark skinned woman sits in a chair in an empty room, laughing. There is a dissolve to a full length shot of a set piece of a room in an attic and on the sound track we hear a few notes from Bernhard Herrmann's score to *Psycho*. These notes form a sound bridge to the third shot, an extremely unbalanced ultra close-up of an arm and a pair of feet. Herrmann's score again forms a sound bridge to the fourth shot, where the title is written upon a freeze frame of the laughing woman from the first shot, Mimi. Her face is turned towards the audience and she holds her hand over her mouth in a frightened gesture. Behind her her image is doubled ad infinity in a kind of mirror effect.

This visual construction can be regarded as one very distinct example of the formal principle and formal expression that Christian Metz, in his reflections upon *Les écrans seconds* (1991) calls *mise en abîme*, diminued or, as he puts it, “reproduced and “reduced”” (se reproduit et se “réduit”” (Metz 1991: 73)), in principle endless, doublings of the work within the work, “the work that buds by growing smaller” (“l'oeuvre qui bourgonne en se rapetissant”(Metz 1991: 74) – miniatures of the same. In principle stories within stories ad infinity, a kind of *structure of inscrutability* (Thobo-Carsen 1999: 69). *Mise en abîme* is one of the rhetorical expressions of textual reflexivity. It points out the level of enunciation and here, in the fourth shot in *Thriller* it points towards the very meaning of the film. But, furthermore, it points forward towards the interlaced, ornamental structure in *The Tango Lesson*.

Metz remarks that *mise en abîme* is just one formal construction of an *écran second*. But often this secondary screen is not a condensation of the first; it is not just the work reproduced en miniature, but rather refers to the very basic elements of the cinematographic medium, “procédé d'aiguillage du regard et témoignage semi-involontaire de cinématisme” (Metz 1991: 74), forming frames within frames, scenes and stages, characters framed within windows, doors and so on.

Style categories *mise-en-scène* and cinematography establish frames within frames in the last examples. Thus, *l'écran second* is most often a pictorial figure. Referring to French film scholar Marc Vernet Metz then continues in more general terms to talk about “diégétisation du dispositif”(Metz 1991: 74). Hereby he understands the many different formal strategies for inscribing profilmic and extrafilmic processes within the diegesis in a more or less invisible manner – of which *l'écran second* is just one:¹

De la même façon, le filmage à travers un rideau incomplètement transparent (Sternberg, ophuls) “equivaut” sensiblement, pour l'effet, à un flou. Dans *espoir* de Malraux, la voiture des partisans qui se jette contre le canon franquiste, se sacrifiant pour le détruire, nous vaut un spectaculaire travelling-agent[...] Il y a en somme

une correspondance, imparfaite et précise à la fois, entre certains effets optiques et certains motifs ou déplacements diégétiques. Ou plutôt, peut-être, entre deux *mouvements symboliques*, contraires et complémentaires, complices adverses et enchevêtrés qui s'expliquent l'un par l'autre: de même que les procédés techniques, bien qu'ils modifient, modulent et même modèlent notre perception de la diégèse, sont interprétés le plus souvent comme des caractères naturels et préexistants de l'histoire racontée, de même – ou inversement – certains éléments de la diégèse peuvent se “décoller” d'elle sans la désertter, mimer l'intervention discursive, et façonner notre point de vue sur les autres motifs de la fable (Metz 1991: 77)²

What I am interested in in the following is, nevertheless, more specifically *l'écran second* as a pictorial principle and *mise en abîme* as doublings and structures of inscrutability. In Sally Potter's work constructions of beautiful images, *mise-en-scène*, visual pleasure, emotionality and entertainment are mixed with diegetized reflections upon the very same visual pleasure. Over and over again she forms *écrans seconds* within *The Tango Lesson's* *mise-en-scène* on both a metafilmic and metacinematographic level in the same manner that Metz points out that *l'écran second* as a formal principle is always metacinematographic whereas it is not necessarily always metafilmic.

The film wraps up dance numbers in *écrans seconds*. Often shots are framed symmetrically through the rooms' ornaments so that the edges of the frame seem to form a stage, columns frame the characters dancing in the same way that a door and a *curtière* form a curtain in a theatre in Pablo's performance in the kitchen. Again and again *écrans seconds* are extrapolated, the film thus calling attention to the fictional and the scenic. Likewise the director's gaze is multiplied inscrutably within the metafilmic register. The audience is invited to look at Pablo the way the director looks at him as a woman in love. But we are also given access to a different gaze that, although the two ways of looking are not completely inseparable, Sally occupies in scenes where she is trying out possible camera positions for her *Rage* project and hesitatingly forms *écrans seconds* with her hands in front of her eyes. What seems in one moment an obvious metafilmic gesture suddenly transforms into mute *écrans seconds*, the second – or secondary – screen both doubling and covering the first because the character Sally's framing gaze equals the camera's. In this respects, *l'écran second* may both as scenic frames within frames and Sally's framing gaze be characterized as *mise en abîme* constructions, *because* director and main character is one and the same. The gaze of the diegetic director, the film director, is always, simultaneously, superimposed onto the gaze of the extradiegetic director, the film's director. Nevertheless, this *mise en abîme* construction has got nothing to do with privacy.

The film maintains a profound visual ambiguity. Put differently, the film insists that personal and professional matters are inseparable. The director inscribes herself within the story as herself and yet as someone completely other. When the diegetic Sally's look is emphasized in point of view shots she is a corporealized character and at the same time diegetized filmic apparatus. The fictive character looks primarily at others; but she is also looked upon by herself. Confronted with this dizzying filmic abyss one is likely to ask: Supposing the film we are watching is the finished film, so to speak, is Sally within the fiction then constructed by another fictive Sally – or is she constructed by Sally Potter?

Following from the above argument I disagree with critics who have stated that *The Tango Lesson* is too private.³ It seems to me that quite the contrary is the case. The film captures the viewer in an abyssal interpretative crisis or in the middle of a visual *mise*

en abîme structure of inscrutability, surrounded by the director in front of and behind the camera. In this respect the level of privacy is present as the very epitome of inscrutability. To a certain extent the same tension between fiction and biography is installed in Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* from 1928, upon which Potter's film *Orlando* is based. The novel was originally titled "Orlando. A Biography". Woolf used her friend and lover Vita Sackville-West as a model for the novel's title character Orlando, and, on top of it, both the first edition of the novel and the Danish translation contained photographs of Vita Sackville-West allegedly representing Orlando.

The novel has been titled the "longest and most charming love letter in history" by Vita's son Nigel Nicholson (cf. Glaessner 1992). Originally the book was meant as a refractory fantasy, a kind of reconstruction of the friend's history. Among other things, and contrary to the film, Woolf donates Orlando her ancestral estate because she gives birth to a son. And, one last layer in this intertwined reality-biography palimpsest: it is said in the text following Philip's cd recording of *La Bohème*, Sir Colin Davis conducting Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Katia Ricciarelli and José Carreras singing Mimi and Rodolfo, that Henry Murger's novel *Scènes de la vie de Bohème* from 1851 from which Puccini's opera is adapted contained autobiographical traces. In this respect, *The Tango Lesson* resembles *Orlando* and *Thriller* by containing (auto)biographical traces that are transformed and subverted. A further point with respect to all three films is that no basic text is nearer to reality than any other: The biographical part of *The Tango Lesson* is just as much a fiction as Woolf's biographical fantasy and Puccini's adaptation of a transformed autobiography.

Feminism, Transformations and the Essential Being

Sally Potter often mentions that she has never been interested in destroying the visual pleasure produced by classical Hollywood. When *Orlando* is looking directly into our eyes this is not part of a strategy of *verfremdung* in the Brechtian sense. Neither may *Thriller* be understood in this manner, contrary to the work of other 1970s avantgarde artists – and contrary to open declarations by feminist film critics who wished to destroy visual pleasure.⁴ Rather, Potter's films from 1979 and till now situate themselves within an interesting tension and creative paradox: On the one hand the director is obviously fascinated with and inspired by mainstream cinema and on the other hand this popular film tradition is always at the same time deconstructed and taken into new directions.

There is an obvious fascination with *genre* films running through Potter's work. She has worked within musicals, thrillers, and costume films. At the same time she transcends and transforms genre formulas in a substantial manner which is very obvious in *The Tango Lesson*, at the same time as the film makes tribute to and refers to a range of classical musicals. Likewise *Orlando* is, of course, neither a costume film nor a historical film. Sally Potter situates herself in the middle of this paradox by describing herself as part of an "avant-garde show business", and she works with what she calls "the pleasure mode" (Florence 1993). On the one hand *Thriller* forms a profound critique of a deep rooted tradition in Western art history of inscribing woman as victim and sufferer, she who has to die spectacularly and beautifully in art in order that the male artist (inside and outside fiction) may continue and prosper as an artist. This is, of course, basically what *La Bohème* is about, the poor seamstress falls in love with poet Rodolfo and dies in his arms by the end of the fourth act. But at the same time Potter says of this seductive and melodious tear jerker that "After I'd listened to *La Bohème* a thousand

times I could still find myself moved to tears at the end of the death scene, not by the heroine's victimization, but perhaps by the melancholy and the loss within" (MacDonald 1995). In Potter's reception of the opera, loss transgresses the gendered embodiment of the emotion and turns into a general human experience and a kind of aesthetics of suffering.

Sally Potter is born in 1949. At first this year of birth tells a great deal about her development as a film maker. She belongs to a generation of female artists, who were part of or at least in different ways influenced by the 1970s feminist movement. Potter's work has in one sense developed along the lines typical for the way understandings of gender has changed both within art, science and cultural debates during the past 30 years but also, more narrowly, among female artist rooted in feminism and experimental film and art groups in the 1970s. First, it is possibly to trace a movement towards mainstream or away from a too narrow and basically quite unheroic and artistically marginalized (low budget) position – at least from the point of view of Sally Potter. Second, the preoccupation with gender has shifted both from mere political-didactical positions and from understandings of relations between the sexes as simple, biased power relations. Instead, what followed is stories about relationships between men and women which are extremely difficult and filled with conflicts but at the same time also joyful and equal. In *Thriller* and *The Gold Diggers* (1983) male characters are constructed as anonymous symbolizations of power, whereas in both *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson* they are charismatic macho figures filled with androgynous charm; fascinating creations of a different world than the female. But at the same time they are looked upon by both the female characters and the director with mixed feelings of infatuation and humour.

This change of view in Sally Potter's work may be illuminated by comparing the beginning and the end of *The Gold Diggers* from 1983 with the final dance sequence in the large room in *The Tango Lesson*. In the beginning of *The Gold Diggers* Ruby, played by Julie Christie, is led down the stairs from the balcony to the ballroom by her father's hand. In her beautiful costume she is queen of the ball, stared at with admiration and awe by everyone, and given away by her father as a kind of precious gift in order to circulate among the men on the dance floor. This scene is repeated in the end of the film, with a marked difference. Now Ruby kicks each man's shin so that he falls ridiculously to the floor. Finally all the men lie defeated while the female guests gather to look at them.

The idea is, of course, in the manner of feminist cinema at the time, to end the film by letting the woman rise and fight against suppression, defying the fetishistic circulation of her as exchange object and aestheticized commodity in patriarchy. In the magnificent, energetic and sensual dance sequence in *The Tango Lesson*, on the other hand, the very physicality in the dance takes center stage. In contrast to the earlier film, dancing bears no symbolic value, and Sally circulates seemingly weightless, graceful and joyful between the three men. Now she dances with one of them, now with an other and now again with the three of them together. Finally, lying outstretched horizontally on Pablo Veron's shoulder, her body circles floatingly dizzy and euphoric. Contrary to the ritualistic and fetishized exchange in *The Gold Diggers*, dancing is here constructed as the outmost bodily well-being.

Of course it is difficult not to understand both *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson* as films about gender. The preoccupation with gender and gender differences runs through the whole Potter *oeuvre*, from descriptions of gender differences and suppression in her first two films to notions of a fundamental equality in her last two films, a kind of hu-

man essence and solidarity that transgresses gender differences: “Same person, just a different sex”, says Orlando in front of her mirror image right after ‘he’ has turned into ‘she’. And in *The Tango Lesson*, romantic tensions are added to the power struggle between Pablo and Sally. Their relationship is thus symbolically duplicated in the tango which is a dance of passion more than of power, built upon a notion of the reciprocity of difference. But Potter’s films are *not only* about gender. It is important to her not to be labeled feminist film maker; she has underlined this often in interviews and talks about *Orlando*. To Potter *Orlando* is less a film about femininity and difference than it is about what she with a reference to Virginia Woolf calls “the essential self” (Glaessner 1992), a notion that in a way abolishes gender differences. Overall, Potter is rather reluctant to talk about feminism these years – contrary to what she did in the 1980s. In an interview in 1993 she says that

Feminism is a really difficult thing to talk about. I’ve been asked so many times by the, let’s say, populist sort of journalists: “Are you a feminist?” It’s like laying the gauntlet down. If I say yes, then it’s – Ah, we know who she is and we’ll put her back in her box and we don’t need to think about her anymore. But more important than that they all thought they knew what a feminist was. So if I said, “Yes, I’m a feminist”, it would slot in with their definition, which was a cliché of a protesting radical – 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 – not trigger jargon words that turn people off (in Ehrenstein 1993).

In another interview in the middle of the 1990s Sally Potter makes a big thing of having left school when she was fifteen (MacDonald 1995), of being a “hands-on person”, a practical person, and that she has just about read enough book jackets to know academic discussions and to be able to join the conversation. But in the years around 1980 the director spoke in a very different manner and in accordance with the ideas of the avantgarde of the time. In the aforementioned talk about *The Gold Diggers* from 1984 conducted by Pam Cook, one of feminist film theory’s leading writers, Sally Potter speaks confidently about such marxist terms as surplus value, fetichism and commodities, and she cites at length from Michel Foucault’s *Les mots et les choses* which inspired her into making *The Gold Diggers*. Nevertheless, neither in this early interview does she consider herself a maker of feminist films. In this respect she resembles many other female artists who were in sympathy, but only to a certain degree, with the feminist movement of the 1970s:

As an artist, filmmaker, or whatever, one is on some level essentially androgynous. I mean my identifications historically are with Hitchcock, Godard, Tati and other great male mentors, and the exceptions to, like Dorothy Arzner. But in cinematic history most of the filming has been done by men. I think of myself as a director and want that sense of collegueship, of history and tradition. It gets dangerous to say that because you’re a woman you haven’t got a cultural history. That’s not true, that history is ours, too (in Cook 1984).

But even though Sally Potter has become a famous film director by the end of the 1990s, who has travelled around the world and presented her much admired and critically acclaimed *Orlando*, and even though her view upon film and their use value is different today from what it was 20 years ago, there is nevertheless an interest in questions of gender and art and a preoccupation with film language that unite her works throughout these 20 years. I shall elaborate further on these topics in the following by continuing

my discussion about reflexivity, *écrans seconds*, and narrative mise en abîmes. More specifically I shall deal with the relationship between fiction/illusion and reality in the films; this discussion is, especially in *The Tango Lesson*, intertwined with reflections upon the relationship between fiction and biography. And, furthermore, I shall go into those parts of the films that may be regarded as reflections upon ways of seeing connected to the films' level of reflexivity as well as to their construction of gender. For example, in *Orlando* through Orlando's glances into the camera and by way of casting – Tilda Swinton plays both the man and the woman Orlando through 400 years and Quentin Crisp plays Queen Elizabeth – and, in *The Tango Lesson*, through the characters' repeated discussions – or arguments – about looking, about being able to see each other and about change of views.

What unites these two films, and *The Gold Diggers*, too, is the theme of *transformation*: "I think the key word in my work is transformation" Sally Potter said in 1995 (in MacDonald 1995). Likewise she has Julie Christie's character in *The Gold Diggers* say: "I search for the secrets of transformation. I search for the secrets of my own transformation". In *The Gold Diggers* the topic of transformation is further connected to gold and alchemy, a subject that Potter often refers to in interviews, possibly because of the mystical-philosophical level in alchemy. Whereas individual transformation is at stake in both *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson*. These stories are not merely about individual growth in a more traditional understanding of the term, though, about characters reaching their essential self in a psychological sense. Especially the latest two films may be understood as stories about *cosmopolitan subjects*, who have *transformation* and *travel* as their final destination (whether through the centuries, across continents or from male into female). Characters are cosmopolitan subjects rooted in what German philosopher Georg Lukács calls *transcendental homelessness* in his work *Theory of the Novel* (1916/1971) – although in quite a different context. Therefore, being homeless in a broad existential understanding of the word is the artist's destiny as well as her or his creative possibility. The transformational self is the essential self in Potter's work. *The Tango Lesson* finishes with Pablo speaking his fear of never being "chez moi" anywhere, his fear of "d'être quelqu'un sans racines", of disappearing without leaving a single trace. But Sally responds that this was maybe the reason why they met each other. The result of their meeting, the film itself, is therefore a trace and a miracle which at least and almost literally may establish an "imaginary homeland" to borrow Salman Rushdie's phrase (1991).⁵

Sally Potter's Work

Before I go further into the latest film I want to say a little more about Sally Potter's earlier work. As a multi artist she has worked both as a dancer and a choreographer – she formed the Limited Dance Company in 1974 and participated in a number of dance shows throughout the 1970s. She makes music (for example Jimmy Summerville's song in *Orlando*), she sings (the final songs in *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson*) and she has combined film with other art forms. In the 1970s she was especially interested in experimenting with the basic elements in film language such as the frame and the cut and she worked with both 8 and 16 mm film stock. Her work *Combines* from 1972 which she made in collaboration with The London Contemporary Dance Theatre consisted of both live dance and projections of the very same dance onto three screens behind the dancers. Thus, early in her work she showed the interest in the relationship between reality and illusion that seems to me to form a fundamental tension in *The Tango Lesson*.

In preparation of her work *Play* from 1971 Potter filmed three pairs of twins who play on a sidewalk. All three pairs of children were filmed with two cameras, so that each camera covered one part of the sidewalk. When the work was shown to audiences two projectors presented the two different takes of each pair of twins side by side and, thus, Potter produced a kind of split screen effect. In this way the whole width of the sidewalk was projected at once, separated only by the film frame. What is seen is therefore the sidewalk projected as one unit and yet divided in two different cinematographic spaces. The original separation of the profilmic space is further enhanced by projecting the left part in colour and the right part in black and white. In this way Potter underlines the magical breaking open of both film space and film frame when one twin suddenly jumps from one screen to another and from one film space to the other.⁶

After *Combines* Potter made *Thriller* (1979) which is primarily based on Puccini's opera; but it refers likewise to Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. The following *The Gold Diggers* (1983) is also an avantgarde work. It starred Julie Christie in one of the two leading roles and was produced by an entirely female crew. It goes for both *Thriller* and *The Gold Diggers* that they are stories about the symbolic role of femininity in Western art and culture; thus woman and gold are repeatedly made synonymous in *The Gold Diggers*. Furthermore, like *Thriller* it is about female friendships as an alternative to the commodified, fetichized or stigmatized circulation of women among men. In the last sequence the black woman liberates the white woman. She rides into the ball room on a white horse and rescues the Christie character like the Prince rescued Snow White and together they ride towards new and promising horizons.

The Gold Diggers did extremely poor at the box office. It seems among other things that casting Julie Christie, one of England's most admired actresses and most photographed faces in the 1960s and 1970s, gave rise to quite wrong expectations. It appears that the failure with *The Gold Diggers* has been quite traumatic to Potter. In all her interviews after *Orlando* she mentions how terrible it was to see people leaving the theatre before the end ("After *The Gold Diggers* I was cinematically in the wilderness for a decade", she recounts, for example (in Ehrenstein 1993)). Furthermore, she underlines that she does not find it attractive at all to be placed in a marginalized position, heroic or not, she wants more than just a narrow audience. She got a big audience nine years later, in 1992, when she made *Orlando*. She had worked on the project for several years, most of the time together with Tilda Swinton, at the same time as she tried to find ways of financing the film without funding from the BFI who had blacklisted her after *The Gold Diggers*. Simultaneously, she made other projects, for example two documentaries for Channel 4, one of which is a programme about female characters in Russian cinema called *I Am an Ox, I Am a Horse, I Am a Man, I Am a Woman* (1989) – she had therefore spent some time in the USSR before she made the scenes with the Russian princess in *Orlando* which is Russian co-produced. Likewise, she made a kind of spy film parody called *The London Story* in 1986.

Metatextual reflexions run through all Sally Potter's works in the sense that they are all about art, about visibility and gender and the cultural circumstances under which art is produced. Thus, *Thriller* is basically about the perpetual and pathetic construction of female figures as victims. Female characters represent emotion and eternal beauty. Therefore, when Mimi is carried away from the attic "in arabesque" as she simultaneously describes her pose off screen, she mimes, or forms a posture in classical ballet, *the arabesque*, where the dancer is standing on one leg, with the other stretched and lifted backwards, and often with the arms stretched as well. In death, the female characters are transformed into pure emotionality and ethereal pathos.

Sally Potter lets the dead Mimi ask herself whether this is really the story of her life and the story of her death. In this respect not only the title frames but the whole narrative forms a *mise en abîme*. The diegetic character reflects upon the reasons for the very short life given to her in another fiction, an opera, performed for the first time in another time and place, in Torino in the beginning of 1896. A corresponding reflexive figure is repeated in *Orlando*, which is furthermore a story about the birth of an artist, a writer. In the beginning we see the young page sitting under a tree with a pile of blank paper in his lap. In the part called "Poetry", in 1650, we meet Orlando as the romantic young man who tries to write poems. But, even though the renowned poet who visits Orlando is constructed as a vulgar opportunist, there seems to be no doubt that his opinion of Orlando's writings is right. Nevertheless, Orlando wrote a poem called "Death of a Lover" in the part of the film that follows immediately after Sasha has left him. In the "Birth" part of the film both a girl and a book is born. Orlando gives her manuscript to an editor, who wants more love and a happy ending just as the American producer in *The Tango Lesson* wants something different than Sally Potter has written. In the final scene in the film, Orlando sits under the same tree as in the beginning, only this time she has no paper in her lap. The blank paper has been filled simultaneously with the progression of her own history. The book is finished – maybe the written version of the film that we have just seen. Writing a book is at the same time creating the essential transformational self in *Orlando*.

In an interview about *The Tango Lesson* in Time Out (Andrew 1997) Sally Potter mentions that she is inspired by Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes* from 1948 "which is about the compulsion to dance". The same inspiration is obvious in *Orlando* which is also dedicated to Michael Powell (1905-1990). The dedication may surprise if one is only familiar with Michael Powell's infamous horror film *Peeping Tom* from 1960. But together with Hungarian immigrant Emeric Pressburger, Powell made a range of film in the second part of the 1940s who were both praised and criticized for their flamboyant visual style and rhythm, their extremely choreographed use of colour and their unique blend of fantasy and reality, for example *Black Narcissus* (1947), *The Red Shoes* (1948), and *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1951). The last two films are ballet films and both *The Tango Lesson* and *Orlando* enter into a dialogic relationship with *The Red Shoes* in several ways. The train, for example, is a leitmotif in *The Red Shoes* – just like the train or rather, the sound and the smoke from a train represent "the future" in *Orlando*. And like *The Red Shoes* *The Tango Lesson* is about the difficult relationship between love and art.

The Red Shoes is a tale about a ballet dancer, Victoria Page, who is divided between her devotion to her work and her private love life. Therefore she is in a sense also divided between two men. One of them is the ballet master Lermontov who has made her a great artist and intends to make her an even greater artist and contends that "a dancer who falls in love will never be a great dancer". The other is her beloved husband Julian Kraster who is also a composer and conductor and who, on his side, could not imagine having a wife who would not devote her whole life to him. This visual masterpiece's impossible and absurd solution to this dilemma is to have Victoria take her own life. She returns to the ballet, because this is all she can do. Even though it will ruin her marriage and her life she returns once more in order to dance the prima ballerina's part in the ballet "The Red Shoes" based upon Hans Christian Andersen's story about a girl who danced herself into death, while at the same time life and love just passed her by. But right before the curtain rises her feet in the red ballet shoes takes her life into theirs and lead her onto a balcony from which she throws herself in front of a train.

Both *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson* can be regarded at one and the same time as contemporary versions of *The Red Shoes*. But they are also kind of defiant alternatives to Powell and Pressburger's notion of woman as artist. Even though *The Red Shoes* is more complex and rich than I have made it, it suggests that sublime art can only be created in a realm of solitude, in seclusion from every day social life. Likewise, it suggests that it is the female artist who has to choose between impossible alternatives. Whereas both *The Tango Lesson* and *Orlando*, on the contrary, suggest that art is part of life and great art arises from the interplay between everyday life and creation. Not in the sense that art is just confessions in disguise. *Orlando* is far from this and *The Tango Lesson*, too, even though it has been referred to as documentary (underlined by its blank and white images) or semi-biographical privacy. Rather, both films believe in an absolutely anti-romantic notion of art.

Mimi's death in *La Bohème* produces the ending's melodramatic pathos. But in *Thriller* she rises from the dead or speaks from the beyond of opera history. Since she is already dead she is in a sense placed in a privileged enunciative position as a disembodied voice over. She looks at the scenery and asks herself whether this tragic death was not in reality a murder.⁷ In *Thriller*, the voice-over refers to herself as both "I" and "you" and thus she creates a fluid enunciation – at the same time she is both homodiegetic and heterodiegetic. *Orlando* starts by having the young page Orlando turn towards the audience and make clear what the voice-over is referring to: "But when he. . ." says the narrator, but then Orlando interrupts and says "that is, I", and the narrator then continues ". . . came into the world". Thus the voice-over seems at once to be both frame narrator and embedded narrator. In *The Tango Lesson* one might say that the voice-over narrator is embodied and transformed into a fictional character within the diegesis. It is thus no coincidence that the film besides music from *La Bohème* uses the famous score by Bernhard Herrmann in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* – one further correspondence being that in *Psycho*, too, the heroine dies tragically. As is well known she is murdered brutally quite early in the film. Both Mimi's talk and the whole film takes the form of a quest for the answer to this murder question, and embedded in this narrative quest is a complaint that she and the opera's second female character, Musetta, who is a prostitute and the mistress of painter Marcello were just "set up as complementary characters to serve our roles" – the good girl and the bad girl – "we never got to know each other, perhaps we would have loved each other". The only diegetic sound is Mimi's laughter in the beginning and in the end of the film. Thus, the hearty laughter as a non-discursive bodily expression functions here, like in other feminist films from the same period (Marleen Gorris' *A Question of Silence* (1982) and Anja Breiens *Hustruer* (Wives, 1975)), as a subversive strategy towards patriarchal discourses. And yet, besides the dissonant style and avantgarde form there is still the popular and melodic Puccini opera music – at least today the music is widely known and popular. There is the beautiful bodily postures that even in this first film transcends any critical discussion of the construction of the female body in Western art. And finally, there is the ambivalent invocation of the arabesque, that refers back to Potter's career as a dancer but likewise points towards the construction of the dancing body in *The Tango Lesson*.

The Tango Lesson has the arabesque both as its basic formal principle and the focus of its visual fascination. Primarily we find these interlaced patterns without reference and without meaning in the tango's intertwined ornamental figures and close-ups of the dancers' legs which without effort wind around each other in stylized and sensuous pat-

terns. Furthermore, through the stylized interaction between the male and the female tango dancer the film resumes Potter's discussion about female figures' function as ornamentation within masculine projects in art. Thus, Pablo states right after Sally has performed as his tango partner in a show that "you should do nothing when you dance, just follow; otherwise you block my freedom to move, my liberty". What is interesting in *The Tango Lesson*, though, is that there is a reversal of these gendered positions in the second half of the film. And obviously man and woman are not fundamentally antagonistic. Furthermore, *The Tango Lesson* makes no effort to describe friendships between Sally and the other female characters. On the contrary, as a matter of fact:

In the scene where Sally sees Pablo Veron dance for the first time, he is finally framed solely by Sally Potter's camera when he and his partner are applauded after their flawless performance. To a certain extent the director has brutally cut out den female dancer. This framing might on one hand be understood as a point of view shot, expressing that Sally has only eyes for Pablo, a cinematographic expression of love at first sight. But the framing might also be understood in a different way. The framing might be understood as the extradiegetic director's imprint within this *mise en abîme* structure, where illusion and reality, diegetic and cinematographic levels form their own arabesque. From beyond fictional time and space Sally Potter inscribes here almost invisibly the jealousy that is not represented diegetically until in a later sequence. In an interview in *Time Out* Potter responds when asked about the biographical material in the film that "It was far more tempestuous in reality! [...] I had to tone everything down" (in Andrew 1997). But after the fact and behind the camera director Sally Potter can alone decide to cut out the female dance partner from the image frame that the character Sally Potter has great difficulty to admit she is jealous of.

Apparently *The Tango Lesson* is a film about what it is like to be a (female) film director, and it is about the preparation of the finished film that we are watching. That is, a more or less autobiographical film, the reconstruction of a part of a personal past. Sally Potter plays herself, and the same goes for Pablo Veron and other characters. But *The Tango Lesson* is *not* a documentary. Rather, it is at once a musical and a tribute to the non-American and non-commercial cinema. Evidently, the film is an informed critique of Hollywood films and the economical cynicism and cynical populism in the business. This is expressed most clearly in the swimmingpool scene with its caricature of the American producer and his team. But the film is more subtle than just being a caricature. Because, just like the film director Sally Potter can manipulate Pablo Veron's dance partner out of the image frame she can conjure up an actor without legs. The sequences about Sally's *Rage*-project might thus also be regarded from the point of view of *mise en abîme* doublings: a defiant comment upon the American producers' reluctance to cast her fantasy about a film director without legs in a wheeling chair: not the diegetic Sally but Sally Potter's colourful takes belies the fictitious – but maybe also biographically authentic – producers' words. Films are economical realities but also magic. Therefore, the *Rage* sequences may be understood as an act, a number which basically stages film director Sally Potter's superiority. She gets her revenge in more than one sense, contrary to the diegetic Sally who by the end of the film has still not raised enough money for her tango film. The director Sally Potter makes a whole different film and at the same time she shows that she might just as easily and with equally magnificent results have made the first one.

Thriller recreates *La Bohème* as a theatrical performance. Film recordings of earlier performances of the opera are intercut with Mimi's reconstructions and reflections that

take place in a theatre set piece. Likewise, *The Gold Diggers* mixes a theatrical setting with a ‘realistic’ setting, since a range of the film’s scenes take place in a theatre, both on stage and behind stage. This goes for *The Tango Lesson*, too, only the theatre stage is here more subtly and invisibly staged as “ecran second”. Like an ordinary musical *The Tango Lesson* consists of a range of dance numbers. It refers openly to some of the classical musicals, for example in the scene where Pablo and Sally dance at the Seine which refers to Gene Kelly’s and Leslie Caron’s dance on the same location in *An American in Paris* (1951). In both films this particular scene furthermore takes place during the couples’ first rendez vous. Likewise, the rain dance after Pablo’s and Sally’s arrival in Buenos Aires refers to the title number in *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). Overall, there is a lot of Gene Kelly in Pablo Veron’s dance.⁸

The filmic highlights are the dance numbers just like in other musicals, and the story is more often a means of tying the dance numbers together. Like in many other musicals dance numbers are motivated in the sense that they take place in a ballroom, on a stage or otherwise are spontaneous expressions of joy. But some of the narrative sequences in between dance numbers in *The Tango Lesson* turn out to be numbers – or stagings – as well. In a sense they resemble the dance numbers because they suspend the flow of narrative time and transform the scene into illuminated and condensed moments. Thus, *The Tango Lesson* equals dance and love, or maybe, rather, the film tries in a time bound medium to transcend this very specificity of the medium in order to construct feelings of *joissance*.

Dance may be understood as signifiers without signified. An art form which just like music does not mean anything and does not refer to anything in itself (cf. Kolbojensen 1998).⁹ Dance often constructs its own space on film. Although dance numbers take place in well-defined and narratively motivated places the scenes often transform these places into dream spaces beyond time where the body is capable of transcending its daily physical capacity. Thus, dance is an essential expression of *transformation* in Sally Potter’s work. And dance make us forget “ce corps trop terrestre” (Hadj-Moussa 1993). But the camera’s choreography and movements contribute to this – in *The Tango Lesson* for example when Sally dances with Pablo after she has returned from Argentine for the first time or, later in the film, the dance number in the large hall in which the movements are enhanced and enlarged through the grandiose camera travellings along the four dancing persons. Thus, Ratiba Hadj-Moussa’s important point is that cinematography contributes as much as choreography to the creation of beauty, sensuality, weightlessness, and bodily energy in filmed dance. In this respect dance as suspended time in *The Tango Lesson* becomes yet another miniature image of the whole film, a *mise en abîme* frame within the frame. Even though from the outset the film seems quite simple narratively, its fundamental *mise en abîme* forms a temporal arabesque and thus the film may finally be regarded as a complex interlaced pattern.

Sally Potter once stated that one cannot capture “the experience of dancing, at least not directly. You may get the surface of it, but you don’t get anything that resembles the incredible feeling in the body that dance gives you” (in MacDonald 1995). I think she touches very precisely upon a fundamental aspect of the fascination with both dance and the musical genre; and like Jane Feuer said, too, this genre has an air about it of total freedom. It gives us “a glimpse of what it would like to be free” (Feuer 1982: 84), liberated from bodily gravity, freed from social bonds, completely absorbed in bodily harmony. Maybe Sally Potter tries to evoke the same feeling outside dance numbers by means of her fundamental deconstruction of narrative time. One might say that in a

certain respect she tries to visualize what cannot, paradoxically enough, be visualized in moving images.

An example of the film's deconstruction of continuous time: In "The Fifth Lesson" Pablo and Sally sit in a cafe and talk philosophically about God and our ability to control our own destinies. She says that she would call herself an atheist, but that on the other hand she feels that she is a Jew. Hereafter he says "I'm a dancer – and a Jew". In the following shots they take each other's hands at the same time as tears run down the chin of both of them, so real and yet so finished so that they almost resemble glycerine tears. This feeling of artificiality and voluntary pathos is confirmed by the rumble of thunder on the sound track – which together with melodious and yet dissonant tones from a clarinet leads into the next 'number' in the airport, where infatuation and parting is at once melodramatized and parodied. In "The Eleventh Lesson" where Pablo asks Sally whether he has any lines in her film and that he must take "acting lessons", she asks him to say "je suis un danseur". He tries to say the line, but then he asks why he has to say it, since she already knows that. Then Sally asks him to imagine exactly the scene in the cafe, that we have already seen; the only difference is that she asks him to say in French what he said before in English. To which he responds that maybe he doesn't want to cry at all on film.

Again, the scene may be understood in different ways. First, Sally's and Pablo's argument may be understood straightforward: the director gets an idea to a scene from her own experiences, and she transforms reality into fiction with artistic liberty (here: The line is changed from English to French). But the scene might also be regarded as one more expression of and contribution to the collapsing of continuous time. Regarded from this point of view the feeling of glycerine tears is confirmed: The idea to the scene, that we saw earlier, is conceived here, and, thus, at this point in the film, the earlier scene is transformed into one of the stagings in the film that Sally is both inside and outside and which Sally Potter is both inside and outside. When Pablo cries in the earlier scene this might be understood as yet one more expression of the superiority of film director Sally Potter: Despite his alleged unwillingness she has Pablo Veron crying in *The Tango Lesson*. She may be the female dancer in the tango but she is also able to lead.

Of course it is also a joke that Sally Potter lets Pablo pronounce with such naïvety that she already knows he is a dancer. The line is one example of the film's very affectionate and yet ironic construction of Pablo Veron as an at once self-centred and brilliant dancer. (Another example is the funny shot of him sitting in the bath tub with a mirror in front of him, reading a book about Marlon Brando). But Pablo's remark contributes at the same time to the film's overall question: what is illusion and what is reality. Sally insists upon inscribing reality in fiction, and she says in the beautiful mirror-scene in the barber shop that work and private life is one and the same thing to her: "What do you see?" Pablo asks to her mirror image. And Sally replies, "I see you on a screen". Pablo thinks this implies that then she is not present, because she has transformed herself into a camera, but Sally denies: "That's how I love you, Pablo. With my eyes. With my work". Again this is an example of a multi layered construction of *l'écran second*: Sally tells Pablo that she is looking upon him from a certain, filmic, point of view. She constantly installs him into inner frames, so to speak, and, thus the film's many point of view shots are already *écrans seconds*. In this scene she is furthermore framed in a mirror at the same time as she is observed by the director outside the film. – At least one of the layers of fiction is eliminated as the camera pans away from the mirror image.

The ambiguous construction of fiction and reality is likewise linked to Potter's choice of actors in *Orlando* and to questions of a gendered gaze. Just like the question is whether the Sally Potter character in *The Tango Lesson* is Sally Potter, so the question in *Orlando* is whether we look at a man or a woman. It seems that profilmic reality keeps intruding when we look at the characters and really want to see them. The fact, for example that Queen Elizabeth is played by a man (the late Quentin Crisp), who is, furthermore, a famous gay personality, creates a tension that may to a certain extent place the diegetic characters above gender: It seems to me that when the queen in a close up tells the handsome and almost dewy page Orlando *not to fade, not to wither and not to grow old*, then the image of her is freed from gendered determinations as much as Orlando is by the end of the film. Both the camera angle, the close-up, and the portrait within the frame, the old face, contributes to the creation of a melancholic awareness of aging and bodily decay that seem to make gender transparent. Like when Potter talks about her love of *La Bohème* the close-up filled with pathos and melancholy illuminates loss, the loss of youth, the loss of life. Thus, it makes reference to the *essential self* at the same time as the image constructs a gender labyrinth: a queen playing a Queen, or a man playing a woman who is said, in reality, to have told about herself that she was a woman on the outside but a man on the inside.

The very same ambivalence is constructed in casting Tilda Swinton as the man Orlando, especially in the scenes with Sasha. On the one hand we have a romantic young man who falls madly in love with a joyful young woman. But the ambivalent interplay between diegetic and extra diegetic levels likewise stages a woman looking intensely at another woman and kissing another woman as they sit together in the sleigh on the iced over river. So in a double movement both a homosexual and a heterosexual scenario is established. "There can be no doubt about his/her sex" says the voice-over narrator in the beginning and the end of the film respectively. Thus, biological sex is beyond doubt while gender, on the other hand, is a question of variable positions. And yet the film confuses our understanding of sex, too, which is actually the funniest part of the film. The confusion of gender as sex and sex as gender is more radical than just the demonstrations of patriarchal stupidity, for example in the conversation between Lady Orlando, Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope. Or, likewise, when Archduke Henry angrily warns Orlando who has declined his offer of marriage that because of her sexual ambiguity she shall most likely end her days a spinster. But his prophecy does not come true and basically his anger was rooted in the fact that the archduke loved the man Orlando.

Final Remarks

It seems to a certain extent that even though *The Tango Lesson* and Sally Potter's *oeuvre* in general is so unique and not easily fitted into categories, her latest film also forms part of certain trends within 1990s cinema in general. Thematically, *The Tango Lesson* resembles a range of contemporary films about dancing and woman's transformation through dancing (Emile Ardolino's *Dirty Dancing* (1987) and Baz Luhrman's *Strictly Ballroom* (1992)). *Dirty Dancing* is about a girl's transformation into a woman and both *Strictly Ballroom* and *The Tango Lesson* are about the realization and blossoming of femininity. Off go the glasses in *Strictly Ballroom* and beauty breaks through, whereas, in *The Tango Lesson*, Sally purchases high heels and puts on smooth and soft skirts. Especially *Strictly Ballroom* is also about dance as absorption and timelessness and it visualizes bodily capacities beyond daily realities. *The Tango Lesson* visualizes

extendedly the sovereign and coherent body, which is able to climb up walls – in one of Pablo's equilibristic dance numbers. Likewise, the body seems to be in such control of its movements so that it appears to be filmed in slow motion – this is marvelously done in Veron's initial dance with his first dance partner. The moving camera never intervenes but follows the dancing bodies obedient and thus it underlines the virtuosity of the bodies.

In quite another end of contemporary film culture the same bodily sovereignty is constructed visually but here digital camera and editing technique does much of the work. I am referring to *The Matrix* (1999) whose special effects produce the perfectly controlled body which is so fast so that it seems to transcend gravitational pull. The art scene as well as film and cultural analyses have within the last decade been very interested in bodily excesses and morcellated bodies. Both in art theory and film analyses, especially in analyses of horrorfilms and images of fragmented bodies terms such as "traumas", "wounds", "the return of the real", "bodies without organs", and "abjection" have been widely used. But as far as I can see there has been another tendency as well. In 1990s art scene in general the body has also found a more complete form, first and foremost staged on the dance scene which has formed an important part of contemporary visual culture but also for example in the return of adventure movies and the elegantly dancing action-body, corporealized first and foremost in the actor Antonio Banderas. Dance films are another examples of the construction of this sovereign body, *The Tango Lesson* not least.

It seems to me, too, that *The Tango Lesson* is one of several films from the past decade who are preoccupied with *enunciation* – films like *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam, 1995), *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), *Lost Highway* (David Lynch, 1997), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999). By using many different formal strategies these films deconstruct narrative time and space, they deny narrative coherence and continuity and thus, basically, they *deny endings*. In the end they place the spectator within a kind of visual loop because meaning making becomes almost impossible at the same time as the films invite the use of classical reading procedures. But like in *The Tango Lesson* none of these films use their narrative strategies in order to establish *verfremdung*. Rather, *The Tango Lesson* like a range of other films seem to problematize the very idea of order and linearity that is embedded in the narrative forms that they, likewise, use.

Notes

1. The concept obviously refers to 1970s theory about *the cinematic apparatus*. But here it must be understood solely as a formal principle without the psychoanalytical foundation that was crucial to the understanding of the apparatus.
2. A slightly longer version of the chapter in *L'enonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film* is translated into Danish by Palle Schantz Lauridsen in *Trylleygten* 1, 1991.
3. The following brings quotations from reviews in three Danish newspapers: In *Kristeligt Dagblad* (11-7-1998) Søren Marquardt Frederiksen writes that "As I mentioned "The Tango Lesson" is a very personal film and maybe the problem is that it is too personal. In order to fully appreciate the film one has to be a female fan of the tango but maybe even a Sally Potter-fan, too. Or it is possible that one has to be Sally Potter in order to like it". Kim Skotte writes in his review in *Politiken* (10-7-1998), that "the film is more personal than really concerning. It is more dancing pages from a diary than romance". His review ends in the following way: "But when one gradually starts rotating restlessly in the seat, it is not from a desire to start dancing, but because, in the long run, it is almost unbearable to continue to look at Sally Potters oh so sensitive features on the screen. A fascinating film and an unbearable ever present main character. This is some dilemma". Finally Ebbe Iversen writes in *Berlingske Tidende*: "And this film is identical to "The

Tango Lesson”, which is, thus, narcissistically about itself and its own creation. If this isn’t coquettish affectation. It is hard to imagine that anyone on this earth would be as glad to see the film as Sally Potter herself”. His concluding paragraph goes like this: “And first and foremost it feels a bit embarrassing to sit and look into another person’s very personal diary, because this is what “The Tango Lesson” looks like more than anything else”.

4. It would be obvious, maybe even too obvious to discuss Sally Potter’s first two films with Laura Mulvey’s famous article from 1975 as the starting point.
5. In *Orlando* transformation and the journey as utopian destination is inscribed for example in the final voice-over comment: “She is no longer trapped by destiny – and ever since she let go of the past [England – “since this is England”], she found that her life was beginning”. *Orlando* starts with the part called *Death* and ends with *Birth*. The point of departure is the death of two patriarchs, namely Orlando’s father and the queen. Their deaths make transformation possible, though, and the film ends with the birth of a human being, Orlando.
6. Although constructed in quite different ways there is the same effort to open up space or to blur dimensions and boundaries within space construction in *The Tango Lesson*. The primary stylistic device for disturbing the uninterrupted construction of space is mirrors. For example in the elevator scene where Potter places Sally and Pablo with their heads turned in the same direction within the frame and centers the image so that one of the old fashioned elevator’s iron bars divides the frame vertically between them. But although they seem from the outset to look in the same direction and, thus, not to speak directly to each other, within the constructed space and because of the mirror in the elevator, “in reality” they do look at each other and they do talk directly into each other’s face.
7. The reflexive structure of inscrutability is enhanced in both *Thriller* and *The Tango Lesson* by means of the complex use of *voice-over* that constantly shifts between the four formal categories that Sarah Kozloff (through Genette) uses in her book *Invisible Storytellers* (1998). She talks first about a *frame narrator* or an *embedded narrator* who tells a story in the story. Second she talks about either a *heterodiegetic* or a *homodiegetic* narrator, i.e. is the voice-over narrator at the same time a character in his or her story or not.
8. Cf. Kolbjørnsen (1998) who remarks that childishness is an important part of Kelly’s star persona. This is in accordance with Sally Potter’s description of Veron as a playful child.
9. Sociology as well as interdisciplinary youth culture research would understand dance from another more functionalistic point of view, cf. For example Andrew Ward’s article “Dancing in the Dark. Rationalism and the Neglect of Social Dance” but also other articles in Thomas 1993.

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