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“She Looks at Him with the Eyes of a Camera”: Female Visual Pleasures and the Polemic with Fetishism in Sally Potter’s *Tango Lesson*

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Introduction

Released in 1997, Sally Potter’s *Tango Lesson* is a film about how the British director starts learning how to dance tango; meets and falls in love with the Argentine tanguero Pablo Verón, and decides to shoot a tango film where she is the female lead, and he is the male protagonist. Divided into eleven “lessons,” the film narrates the sentimental education of Pablo, who, under Sally’s lead, sheds his immature “macho” conduct to become increasingly involved in a professional and romantic relationship with her. I suggest that, in *Tango Lesson*, Potter closely engages Laura Mulvey’s (1975, 1989, 1996) critique of fetishism in Hollywood cinema to propose a gaze that has the power to act out feminine desire, thus reclaiming woman’s visual pleasure. Through a close reading of both the film and its published script (1997b), I show how Potter’s (and her alter ego Sally’s) camera-like gaze successfully ensnares its unreflexive male object into a Lacanian web of visibility, thus engaging him in an unequal relationship: one that patently reverses the gender asymmetry of Hollywood films by positing woman as the carrier of the agentive look, and man as her object. Yet, I also contend that, in pursuing her visual pleasure, Potter

ends up reproducing yet another exploitative visual structure: that of the desiring, and controlling, imperial gaze firmly cast on its Latin American object as a fetishistic image that, under its spectacularity, conceals the politics of its making.

The Film that Could not Be, or: Who Is Shooting (at) Women?

In her foundational essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975) put forth the well-known argument that, in Hollywood cinema, man is the bearer of the dominant, agentive gaze, whereas woman is reduced to the passive role of the “to-be-looked-at” object. According to Mulvey, in the phallic system, woman is constructed exclusively as sexual difference; her lack of a penis issues a castration threat to the male unconscious, which reacts either through sadistic voyeurism or through scopophilic fetishism. Sadistic voyeurism pictures woman as a mystery to be investigated and then either punished for her lack of a penis, or saved through marriage. Scopophilic fetishism, instead, entails the disavowal of castration through a fetish object (which both replaces the penis and signals its absence), or by turning the female star into the fetish itself, thus overcoming the male fear of castration. In *Tango Lesson*, Potter draws explicitly on Mulvey’s critique to carry out her own polemic with Hollywood cinema. More specifically, Potter engages her spectators in her critical reflections by showing how *Tango Lesson* matures out of the impossibility to make a different film: *Rage*. The latter is a mystery that polemically displays several of the ingredients Mulvey identified in Hollywood films: the dominant male gaze; the to-be-looked-at-ness of female characters; sadistic voyeurism, and scopophilic fetishism.

Tango Lesson opens with the sight of Sally who, paralysed by writer's block, sits at a table in her London home fruitlessly fantasizing about how three fashion models are murdered in Versailles in the presence of a legless designer and a crowd of paparazzi. The contrast between *Rage* (which exists only in Sally's fantasy) and *Tango Lesson* (in which Sally herself exists) is striking, underscored by the vivid, eye-catching colors of the former vis-à-vis the black-and-white sobriety of the latter. Yet the opposition becomes even more evident upon comparing how the two films portray female characters. Whereas Sally, Potter's visible embodiment, wears sober clothes (namely slacks and flat shoes), the to-be-looked-at-ness of the female characters in *Rage* is explicitly inscribed into the statuary bodies of the models. Long-haired, tall, and beautiful, these women are clad in baroque evening gowns that flash onto the spectator the most vivid colors in the film: primary yellow, blue, and red. Epitomized by their sumptuous clothes, the to-be-looked-at-ness of the *Rage* models is precisely what hinders their movements.¹ Theirs is the situation of the "phallic woman" as described by Mulvey (1989) in her critique of Allen Jones' work. While standing erect on their high heels, Mulvey observes, Jones' women have trouble balancing: "anything upright—a woman walking a tightrope or balancing a tray on the balls of her feet—implies a possible catastrophe that may befall," thus reinforcing, rather than soothing, the (always-again male) spectator's castration anxieties (1989:12). *Ditto*: trapped by their phallic, fetishistic visibility, one by one the three models of *Rage* lose their balance and fall to their death.

In one shot, a model steps down a stone staircase, her ankles—writes Potter in her published script—"wobbling" on impossibly high heels (1997b:9). In another clip, the models "wobble horribly" on shells floating on a pond as they pose to be photographed

(1997b:10). In yet a third snippet of *Rage*, a model walks “gingerly” with the support of two men who look like bodyguards (1997b:12). In each instance, the fate of these women is that of the victim: the woman in yellow dies when her high heels catch in the train of her dress and she falls down the stone steps. The woman in blue is shot as she struggles to stand straight on her shell. The woman in red, too, is shot twice by an invisible murderer. She runs, falls after the first gunshot, then pulls out a gun from her bodice, stands up and runs again before she is shot for the second and last time. The second shot finishes her off. Who killed her?

The murderer, in *Rage*, is invisible. The spectator doesn’t see him (my gendering of the faceless villain is purposeful), nor, apparently, do the models—or do they? Perhaps the woman in red does. As she points her gun at the fashion designer and the paparazzi, she is apparently confused. She is behaving “wildly,” Potter points out in her script (1997b: 22), and, at first, the film viewer and the script reader are tempted to agree. After all, the fashion designer does not have a weapon, nor seem to do any of the paparazzi: the faceless multitude constantly crowding the background. Yet, as the models are killed one after the other, the paparazzi are *shooting* them—shooting *at* them?—with their cameras. Through their mechanical eyes relentlessly pointed at the three women, the photographers epitomize the sadistic voyeurism of the male gaze: the one that “objectifies, petrifies even, the woman in his power” (Smelik 1998:110). By combining scopophilic fetishism and sadistic voyeurism, this gaze constructs the cage of to-be-looked-at-ness that constricts the women’s movements, reduces them to highly visible wobbly objects, and kills them.² Much of these women’s immobility is caused by their high-heeled shoes.

A “classic fetishistic image” (Mulvey 1989:10), high-heeled shoes in *Rage* represent the constrictions that are intrinsic to the subaltern sexualized feminine roles of objects and victims of the male gaze. High heels are culprits in the wobbling models’ boundedness and the loss of balance and mobility that leads to their death. However, the *Rage* models are not the only ones who are limited in their movements and rendered vulnerable by fetishistic shoes. Clad in their hypermasculine black suits and sunglasses, the bodyguards who attempt to support the woman-in-red have trouble walking, too. Just like the model, they are donning absurd footwear: black ballet shoes that have them staggering alongside the model. Instead of shielding her, the feminized bodyguards, too, are targeted by the wounding flashes of the photographers’ cameras.³ The shoes they wear hinder their movements. Betrayed, rather than aided, by the fetish, the emasculated bodyguards fall way short of the role of the triumphant male protagonists of so many Hollywood films. They cannot support, let alone protect, the model trapped in the visual cage. The woman in red must be aware of this, because the sight of the men’s bleeding feet—their castration wound—has her running for her life and even pulling a gun before she is shot and killed.

In *Rear Window*, the Hitchcock film analyzed by Mulvey (1975, 1989), the wheelchair-bound protagonist successfully utilizes Lisa-fetish to achieve his purposes, thus overcoming his temporarily incapacitation (a momentarily castration). Like Hitchcock’s character, the legless fashion designer of *Rage* is an embodiment of the gaze that observes, disciplines, and utilizes the to-be-looked-at female body. However, whereas Hitchcock’s character is redeemed by his prosthetic use of Lisa, and, even though he is still bed-ridden at the end of the film, he will be eventually returned the use of his legs, the mutilated

designer does not stand a chance of recovering his lost limbs; in other words, his castration is permanent. While, according to Mulvey (1975, 1989), the agentive male star in Hollywood films is the image with which spectators identify, the legless, hence himself partially immobilized, designer who desperately runs on his hands to escape from the “wild” model hardly appeases the castration fear that, for Mulvey, is pivotal to Hollywood cinema. Hence, the designer, too, fails to provide a satisfactory identification to the spectatorial gaze. Potter’s message is clear: not only do sadistic voyeurism and scopophilic fetishism immobilize and destroy woman, but they also offer man no real possibility for reassurance and uplift.

Sally Goes to Hollywood

Writing the *Rage* script is obviously difficult for Sally, the cinematic personification of a feminist film director who would hardly espouse the objectification and victimization of women. As a reaction to the impossibility of writing *Rage*, Sally’s heart and mind become increasingly set on what is turning out to be her real film (the one she both inhabits and shoots): *Tango Lesson*. Why, then, would she even bother pursuing an endeavour that is so removed from Potter’s intellectual and ideological itinerary? Potter’s goal, I suggest, is to engage in a polemic with Hollywood cinema. It is for Hollywood producers that Sally is writing *Rage*, and it is with them that she discusses the script before dropping it once and for all.

In staging Sally’s encounter with “Hollywood”, Potter launches a brief, though devastating, attack on the philistine nature of the world’s leading film industry. Potter’s critique largely echoes Mulvey’s (1989) analysis of Hollywood imperialism and the

dynamics through which the “Detroit of cinema” manages to merge Freudian fetishism, i.e., the disavowal of castration that takes place through the objectification and the spectacularization of the female body, with the commodity fetishism that Marx defined as a concern with the surface appearance of objects that conceals the underlying relations of production. As she sits with the Hollywood executives around an extravagant pool with sensual women strutting their bikinied bodies on the background, Sally is obviously uncomfortable. She and the executives keep talking past each other. While the latter complain that Sally’s voice is not loud enough for them, they keep silencing her with statements that, by clashing with both Sally’s character and Potter’s style, exemplify the arrogant vulgarity of Hollywood’s mass production. What the executives like about Sally’s script is the “carnage on the catwalk” theme--the brutal murder of glamorous women, Potter implies, is a commodity Hollywood producers are all too keen on selling. Yet, the executives object to Sally’s choice of French as the language of her film: “If it is not in English, we’ll lose 75 percent of the market,” blurts one of them. Potter’s sarcasm against Hollywood’s hegemony is all the more evident since, in the introduction to her published script, she explicitly argues against the domination of the English language in the international film market. The Hollywood executives Potter portrays make it clear that cash, not art, is what their films are all about. Silenced by the self-confident crudity of Hollywood producers, Sally stares at them “wordlessly” (Potter 1997b:34). It is only back in Paris that Sally will find her voice again--once she decides to move on to a film that is more true to herself (and Potter): *Tango Lesson*.

Learning the First Lesson

Even though Potter's stance on fetishism is adamant, at this stage Sally is not ready to shed the temptations of phallic womanhood and its promise of capturing the scopophilic gaze. Yet, while the *Rage* models are immobilized by their use of their high-heeled shoes, Sally is on a quest for a fetish that will enhance her own agentive mobility. This is partly the reason why she becomes intrigued with a dance form—namely tango--and this is why, on her first trip to Buenos Aires, she stops at a shoe shop to buy dance footwear. The no-nonsense British professional woman is getting ready for her adventure in the exotic world of Argentinean tango. She drops her street shoes—which Potter in her script describes as “mannish, sensible boots”—to try on “spindly... high heels” (1997b:17), which she eventually buys and wears to her next private tango lesson with Argentine *tangueros* Gustavo and Fabian.

Fetishistic shoes cause risks, but, for a while, they may also provide advantages. Whereas high heels and ballet footwear doomed the *Rage* models and their bodyguards, at first Sally's spindly shoes seem fit to become her weapon in the gender struggle intrinsic to the tango embrace. Even as she temporarily turns herself into a high-heeled, Allen-Jones-style phallic woman, Sally is not nearly as wobbly as the *Rage* models. Her agency keeps shining through her exploratory incursion into the uncharted terrain of tango. While dancing with her eager Argentinean teachers, Sally sweeps her “high heeled black foot along the floor and kicks between Gustavo's legs.” The latter grimaces and begs: “not so strongly” (1997b:18). As she is handed back and forth like a doll between Gustavo and Fabian, the two dancers have to protect their privates “from the lethal-kicking high heels” (*ibid.*). It's her penis against theirs, apparently. Even though, upon entering the world of

tango, Sally has to accept the male lead, she is all set to push the envelope of her role as a female tango dancer. Her subversion of gender relations, however, does not lead her too far from the traditional script of tango.

As anthropologist Marta Savigliano (1995:48; 69) pointed out, at first sight, women in tango appear to be exclusively docile bodies: passive objects of men's embraces, and props to their disputes and reflections. At a deeper glance, however, the gendered practice of tango reveals a repertoire of kicks and steps that the female tango dancer can utilize to manifest her resistance to the male lead (Savigliano 1995:72). And yet, the outcome of the microcosmic gender struggle enacted in the tango embrace hardly deviates from the traditional script of female subordination. Hard though she may kick, Sally will not be able to break the rules of tango just by virtue of her new stiletto shoes: footwear to which, after all, Potter claims she is not used in her "sensible" everyday life as a professional woman. It is not without a reason that, after donning her high heels on a long night of dance in a Buenos Aires' tango bar, Sally ends up having to soak her swollen, sore feet in the tub of her hotel room. Eventually, she, too, can be weakened and wounded by playing the game of the fetish.

The bruises on her feet are a warning of things to come. Upon returning to Paris, Sally embarks in an affair with the male protagonist: the handsome tango dancer Pablo Verón. As Potter states in her script, this liaison will make her dangerously "vulnerable" (Potter 1997b:36). Sally's challenge is to experience and seize Pablo and all he stands for—the world of Latin passion as epitomized by tango, and as the antithesis of her sensible metropolitan life (Savigliano 2003)--but for a while the opposite seems to be happening. As Sally decides to shoot a film about tango featuring Pablo as the male lead,

Pablo reciprocates by inviting her to perform on a Parisian stage with him. Before she draws him into her world, she is dangerously sucked into his. The disempowerment that ensues is best described through Savigliano's (1995: 109) characterization of how tango entraps the female dancer both visually and kinetically:

She has no control over the exposure or concealment of her legs. Her hands are busy; she must firmly cling to her male partner. Her legs, permanently insinuated under her glossy, long, slit skirt, confront other legs: the legs of the fatal man who guides and traps her steps. This man, holding her tightly on stage, is far from playing childish games. His legs that lead and interfere are threatening. As Sally takes up a subordinated role as Pablo's tango partner, he becomes the one

who sets the limits and the pace of their relationship, both romantic and professional. She, instead, is the exposed body whose mobility and agency are limited by her partner. When they rehearse their tango, Pablo pushes her, criticizing her harshly for resisting his lead. He orders her to let go. Sally has to "stop thinking" (1997b:41) and surrender her force (1197b:42), thus renouncing the qualities that enabled her to achieve her success. Despite the obvious control Pablo has acquired over Sally, Potter claims that he is not "treating her as a pupil any more, but like a partner" (1997b:41). Hidden between the lines is the assumption that, rather than being equal to her male partner, a female tango dancer has to accept his dominant role.⁴ The inequality between Sally and Pablo is no longer based exclusively on his experience and her lack thereof, but rather on gender roles that are intrinsic to the practice of tango. This becomes all the more evident on the night of their performance. On the stage, Sally whips up a vortex of "steps, swivels, jumps, and turns" around Pablo (1997b:47). After the show, he reprimands her:

You should do *nothing* when you dance. Just *follow*. *Follow*. Otherwise you block my freedom to move. You destroy my liberty. And then I cannot dance. I *cannot* dance. I can do *nothing*. (1997b:49)

The struggle is at its apex—Sally’s agency is unacceptable to Pablo because it destroys his freedom, and her initiative opens deep cracks in the smooth surface of a perfect, because perfectly asymmetrical, tango performance. Humiliated, Sally walks off from the theater and Pablo. Later, she will call him on his cell phone to clarify their respective positions, and to invite him to a rendez vous after which Sally will be the one who calls the shots.

Ensnaring Pablo in the Web of Vision

As the underlying theme throughout the film, the power of vision is explicitly evoked during a pivotal phone conversation between Sally and Pablo. When he complains about what he perceives as her weakness, she exclaims: “You think I could direct films and be *weak*?” Pablo objects that he hasn’t seen her direct films. Even if he had, she rebuts, he wouldn’t know how to recognize it. “I have eyes, too” he contends, to which she responds:

You don’t know how to use your eyes. You are only interested in being looked *at*. Not at *looking*. That’s why you don’t *see*. And that’s why you know *nothing* about *cinema*. (1997b:52-53, emphasis in the original)

Sally has finally put her finger on Pablo’s most distinctive quality: his narcissism. Immature Pablo is stuck at the Lacanian mirror stage. Throughout the first half of the film, he constantly seeks his self-image—his own self--in the mirror. In his encounters with his specular I (Lacan 1977:5), Pablo fantasizes about achieving stardom. To paraphrase Lacan (1977: 84-85), the gaze Pablo encounters in the mirror is a gaze imagined by him in the field of the Other: one that is produced as a function of his desire. Time and again, he blows himself kisses in a mirror, dances with his own reflected image, looks at himself in a mirror as he daydreams about becoming an actor and as he basks in the admiration

bestowed upon him by an imaginary public. When he does not ogle his image reflected in a mirror, Pablo takes pleasure in observing his self-reflection in the mirror-like eyes of passive, faceless audiences, such as the dark mass acclaiming him as he performs in the spotlight of a Parisian stage.

As Sally points out, Pablo is incapable of looking, and he doesn't see. His self-absorption borders on the juvenile, and contrasts vividly with Sally's romantic/professional interest in him. If *Tango Lesson*, is (among others) a reflection on relationships, Sally's goal is to explore the possibilities of a romantic engagement with professional overtones (or is it the other way around?): an inquiry whose depth escapes immature Pablo altogether. When Sally immerses herself in the reading of *I and Thou*, Martin Buber's (1958) theorization of the possibility of a relationship between subjects, Pablo peruses Marlon Brandon's biography—and then, of course, dreamingly stares at himself in a mirror. The relationship he is looking for is not with other subjects (*Thous*), but rather with *Its*: docile eyes that passively reflect the image of stardom toward which he strives. This is why, throughout the first half of the film, Pablo is obviously not ready for a relationship on Sally's (allegedly more mature) terms. Caught in the mirror, he pays little attention to Sally's emotions and needs, and has no qualms about standing her up on New Year's Eve to go and mindlessly play videogames.

Right before Pablo rejects Sally, the spectators of *Tango Lesson* see her prepare for her date with him in front of a mirror. This glimpse suggests Sally's temporarily alienation as she internalizes a Lacanian *imago* (1977:4) that is liable to be defined by the outside, and implicitly male, gaze. As Potter puts it in her published script, Sally “scrutiniz[es] herself like a stranger” in order to look “fresh, eager, and female” (1997b:37). Just like

spindly fetishes hardly fit her sensible feet, mirrors do not suit Sally, because by allowing herself to be defined through an external *imago* she becomes vulnerable.⁵ Sally's purpose in the film is not to be *looked at*—even though she is out to prove that she can play that game, too—but it is to *look*. This is her strength as a filmmaker, and this is the tool she will use to tame Pablo.

Sally *sees* Pablo, she informs him later, as a woman *and* as a film director. At first, Pablo does not see Sally's gaze on him. In his delusion, he interprets her interest in him as the image of his "specular I" as he would see it reflected in one of his mirrors. Yet Sally's gaze is hardly as innocuous as Pablo's mirror. Sally's gaze is that of the camera: by seducing Pablo with the dream of stardom, her gaze weans him of his relationship with the mirror, and takes charge of shaping his "social I" (Lacan 1977:5). Pablo samples this powerful gaze for the first time when, in the Sixth Lesson, Sally suggests that he be the star in her film. The very idea of becoming a cinematographic actor has Pablo improvise a merry *danse de cuisine* (1997b:35): a kitchen dance during which, wearing an apron, he whips up a rhythm by chopping and tapping lettuce. As he performs his show, she "looks at him...with the eyes of a camera. The more Pablo feels her gaze, the more inventive he becomes" (1997b:36).⁶ Sustained by her desire as both a woman and a filmmaker, the power of Sally's gaze becomes even more evident starting with the Tenth Lesson. Through it, Sally quietly directs the steps of not Pablo alone, but also his second fiddles Fabian and Gustavo.

In the Tenth Lesson, Sally enlists the three *tangueros* to play in her film, and, through her gaze, she exerts her control on all of them—though Pablo seems to be the most sensitive to it. When the three men perform for Sally's eyes (and against their own wishes)

in an abandoned department store, Pablo is once again galvanized by her gaze into improvising a skilful dance:⁷

FABIAN

Well, Sally, I think I'm gonna go home now.

GUSTAVO

Me too.

SP (*suddenly and quietly decisive*)

No.

The men look at her and then at each other.

SP

Pablo, set up a rhythm, and teach it to the others.

GUSTAVO

Right now?

FABIAN

Here?

Pablo smiles at SP.

His face suddenly comes alive.

And then there he is tapping out a phrase.

Gustavo and Fabian follow, tentatively at first, and then more confidently. The three of them pound rhythmically backwards and forwards across the room.

SP watches, smiling.

SP

Now, Pablo. Solo.

Pablo catches her eye, and then he's off. (1997b:73)

Even after agreeing to be cast in Sally's film, the three men occasionally manifest some of the playful homosocial rivalry that is latent among them. On one occasion, as they show each other complex steps and turns, Sally's attention drifts away. Immediately, the harmony of the men's dance breaks apart: "without her gaze something is missing. The men start to lose control without her appreciative attention" (1997b:61). As Sally's

defining gaze becomes absent, Pablo crashes Fabian in a mirror. The narrow mirror-stage relationship between the narcissistic dancer and his specular I is broken. Pablo shatters the mirror because he does not need it any more, and because he has become incapable of imagining a docile self-image in it: his self now has to be mediated, even shaped, by Sally's gaze. Without her look, his tangos are bound to become disarticulated brawls.

Yet, it is not only by defining Pablo's visibility through her gaze that Sally acquires an ascendant on him, but it is also by teaching him how to see her, and by showing him what to look at. After complaining to Sally that he has not seen her direct films, therefore he does not understand what she does, Pablo is summoned by her in the St. Sulpice church. There, Sally shows him Delacroix's painting of Jacob's struggle with the angel. His head pressed into the angelic chest, Jacob is desperately pushing against his opponent, who resists him effortlessly.⁸ Almost instinctively, Pablo emulates the pose of the angel. For the first time, he has *seen* Sally's message. Sally presses herself against Pablo, then disentangles herself and looks him in his face: "I've been following you in the tango, Pablo. But to make a film, you have to follow me. Are you ready?" A baptism follows, in which both Pablo and his relationship to Sally are regenerated and transformed. The scene marks the midpoint in *Tango Lesson*, as well as a shift in power: from now on, Sally will lead the tango by directing her film, and Pablo in it.

As he becomes increasingly bound by the spell of Sally's gaze, Pablo grows out of his mirror stage. He starts moving out of his previous self-absorption to show a sometime jealous concern about her attention. Not only is he eager to be looked at by her, but, as he looks in her eyes, he no longer expects to see the passively reflected image of his ideal self. He does not see *Sally*, either, but rather only what she allows him to see about herself.

Rather than giving Pablo complete visual access to herself, Sally chooses to *tell* him about her own vulnerabilities and weaknesses (for example, the fact that she has not found a producer for her film, yet). She is not the object of his gaze, because Pablo does not wield a gaze. As speech becomes the communication mode through which she posits herself as a subject vis-à-vis Pablo, Sally achieves the role of his Buberian *Thou*. Yet the relationship is hardly symmetrical, in that it still casts Pablo as Sally's visual object.

Pablo also becomes increasingly aware that he has little control over what she sees as she looks at him—or other men, for that sake. In the Twelfth Lesson, Pablo stares at Sally in a mirror as she watches Gustavo and Fabian dancing together. She then “looks at him looking at her looking at the other men” (1997b: 76). He wonders what she sees: “Are you looking at me?” he asks. “What do you see?” “I see you on the screen” Sally replies. “Then you are not here with me. You have become a camera” he objects. “But that’s how I love you, Pablo. With my eyes. With my work” she responds. Instead of drowning in the field of visibility like female Hollywood characters, Sally/Potter rules over it. Yet, even though Potter makes herself visible through her alter ego Sally, at no time during the film do we see her with a camera in her hands: she does not need one, because she *is* one. Through Sally, the gaze is both disembodied and incarnated, invisible as the mechanical camera stare and visibly expressed through the eyes of a professional woman who declares her desire for her male employee/partner. As it addresses the question whether female voyeurism is possible regardless of the traditional powerlessness of female desire (Kaplan 1983:330), *Tango Lesson* suggests that it is by literally becoming the camera that Sally exerts her power on Pablo, thus inextricably connecting her desire to her professional role

as the director of the film. The result is a *powerful* voyeur: one whose gaze defines and controls its male object.

What Potter Shows, and What She Hides

Part of Mulvey's critique of Hollywood fetishism is her argument that the "Detroit of cinema" conceals its mechanisms of production of the spectacular commodity by erasing "any visible sign of directorial signature" (1996:13). In *Tango Lesson*, Potter attempts to reverse this disavowal, though with contradictory results. Even though, through Sally, she appears to show herself in the process of producing her movie, Potter the director is hardly as visible as Sally the character—or, for that sake, Pablo the dancer. In the introduction to her published script, Potter purports to work with the "notion of exposure, vulnerability, seeing and being seen" (1997b:x). Indeed, Potter plays with transparency and exposure at several levels. For example, in the introduction to her script she alleges she does not want to convey the impression that she is hiding something. Hence, she chooses to use her own, as well as Pablo's, real names. Yet, she simultaneously belies this strategy by calling it a "double cover" (*ibid.*). The exposure and vulnerability Potter claims to pursue in *Tango Lesson* is, obviously, a fictional one: one that affects Pablo more than Sally, and Sally more than Potter. Potter, Pablo, and Sally's "being seen" by the film spectators--Potter's incarnation in Sally, Sally's initial vulnerability and her subsequent empowerment, Pablo's arrogant narcissism and his gradual mellowing--are all products of Potter's "showing." The "seeing and being seen" Potter pursues is a manipulative magic that acts at many levels. Hidden behind her on-screen alter ego, Potter defines what the spectator gets to observe and what she cannot see, bedazzling her with a

story where the boundaries between autobiography and allegory, between reality and fiction are artfully blurred. Yet her distribution of in/visibility among her characters is conspicuously discontinuous.

Even though Pablo Verón is allegedly impersonating himself, in the published script his character is granted little existence outside the boundaries of the film. In the anecdotes and descriptions that frame the published script, Pablo is briefly referred to on page ix as somebody with whom Potter fell in love both professionally and romantically. After filling up Potter's film with his larger-than-life presence (the quality for which Potter declaredly selects him as her protagonist), Pablo is conspicuously absent from Potter's "postscripts behind the scene": a series of reflections and vignettes in which Potter provides a semi-autobiographic background for her film--one that reminds the reader of *Tango Lesson*'s allegorical nature and its simultaneous situatedness in Potter's lived experience. Unlike other characters in the film (such as Sally/Potter herself), Pablo is not to be found "behind" the scene, but rather only "inside" it. The visual field conjured by Potter is the only dimension in which he can exist as an object of Potter, Sally, and their spectators' gaze.

While throughout *Tango Lesson* Pablo remains ensnared by an outside gaze that escapes his control, the challenge Sally faces is Potter's own flirt with visibility as the actress in her own film. By choosing to become a tango dancer, Sally/Potter steps outside her usual invisibility as a film director. Yet, as I argued earlier, through Sally, Potter takes on a polemical stance against the traditional to-be-looked-at-ness of female characters, and the traditional male dominance in mainstream films. As she wades through the Lacanian visual field posited by Potter's film, however, Sally does not become invisible. On the

contrary, she eventually becomes very much in control of her own visibility, just like she is in control of Pablo, Gustavo, and Fabian's. Her presence on the screen is not a passive to-be-looked-at-ness, but rather an agentive, volitional condition that unfolds as she teaches Pablo how to see her: specifically, how to see her looking at him without teaching him how to read her. As she entangles the men in her scopic field, Sally can afford to keep dancing tango with them—thus defying the further intensification of objectifying visibility and kinetic containment that this dance form posits for women--without fear of being led. By the end of the film, Pablo, Fabian, and Gustavo have been tamed: suddenly sensitive to her wishes and mood changes, in the Eleventh Lesson they dance around her, whom they call their “queen”. The reversal of Sally's previous relationship to Pablo is evident: now *she* has become the center of a vortex of steps and leaps the three docile *tangueros* weave around her. The traditional pattern of male dominance and female submission (Kaplan 1983:331) has been overturned into one of female authority and male acquiescence.

Sally's challenge is germane to the one Potter faces, though with an interesting spin. Both Sally and Potter are much better at leading than they are at following. In fact, they are so good at it that they can both lead others *and* themselves at the same time. Whereas Sally has to learn this the hard way, Potter could hardly have anybody else lead her. Like Sally, however, Potter briefly toys with her nostalgia for what it means to be led before she transcends it. “As a performer—she writes—I lacked a director, and often felt very alone. And as a director I lacked my eyes, because I was in front of the camera” (1997b:xii). How antithetical is performing to directing, looking at to being looked at? Apparently, the two opposite motions can be reconciled: “I had to learn to work with the essential drive of the story from the inside looking out, rather from the outside looking in,”

Potter explains (*ibid.*). Somebody else has to hold the camera for her as she directs herself and the other actors. Nonetheless, both Sally and Potter manage to *embody* the camera while acting. Potter shoots Pablo and herself as Sally in *Tango Lesson* without ever showing a camera, and so does Sally as she directs Pablo and herself. As Sally/Potter looks at the film from the inside out, even as she is being looked at, she takes risks, but remains in full control. Hers is the power of the Lacanian gaze that both sees and shows “from all sides”, thus transcending the eye that “sees only from one point” (Lacan 1978:72). And yet, after installing herself at the center of her totalizing visual web, in her published script Potter teases her readers (who, possibly, have already been the spectators of her film): “Never attempt to ‘show’ something,” is her lesson to them (1997b:xii). If “film-making (and writing) seems to be really about looking” (1997b:x) dance is about feeling, she claims, not about showing (1997b:ix). Her purpose in the film, Potter contends, is “to show, somehow, what dancing *feels* like, rather than what it *looks* like” (1997:ix).

Sally’s Visual Mission in the Exotic Field of Feeling

Throughout the Tenth and the Eleventh Lessons, Sally takes charge of Pablo’s sentimental and professional education. Her pedagogy relies on her seeing, which, as Potter explicitly states, is the essence of filmmaking. After weaning Pablo from the mirror stage, Sally mesmerizes (or, in Lacanian terms, alienates) him with a promise of stardom that offers him an even more ambitious Ideal-I, which she controls. In addition, Sally can enter Pablo’s world of feeling and even dance with him on a stage, but Pablo can’t direct films, let alone *her* film. He can only be a character in it, provided she leads him. Even

though she teaches him how to see, by no means can Pablo use his eyesight as powerfully as Sally does.

How innocent is Sally's love, really? Due to its theme, and due to the politics of identity enacted through its protagonists, the film obviously perpetuates Orientalist representations. Perplexed by Potter's unreflexive reproduction of colonial tropes, Savigliano points to Potter's juxtaposition of her own sensibility to Pablo's stereotypically "Latin American" machista, childish, self-absorbed passion. By describing Potter as a postfeminist professional woman who, at the apex of her career, suddenly feels nostalgia for passion, Savigliano argues that the British filmmaker uses tango to live out her yearning for exotic, multicultural diversions (Savigliano 2003).

Savigliano's critique calls for a closer look at the strategies through which Potter reproduces old hierarchies of seeing and feeling, of self and alterity. In her previous work, Savigliano had pointed out how the colonial gaze of nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe generated and displayed its own colonial object as a part of a growing culture of exotic consumptions (1995). A similar dynamic seems to take place in Potter's *Tango Lesson* as well. As, despite her claims, she evokes deep-seated Enlightenment notions of the superiority of eyesight over the other senses (Jay 1993), Potter's self-identification with vision, and her ascription of Pablo to the unreflexive world of feelings, echo colonial discourse by reaffirming the self-defined "rational" European gaze' position vis-à-vis what it constructs and consumes as its sensual Latin American Other (Pratt 1992). Once more, the pedagogic and erotic "mission" of the colonizing subject becomes justified as a result of the colonized object's "deficit" (Salvatore 1998:71). Potter's desiring look firmly cast on Pablo's body and her construction and flaunting of his stereotypical Latin-ness are

hardly defensible—not any more than the visual strategies of exploring, representing, and displaying that sustained the colonial project (Salvatore 1998:74; see also Alloula 1986 and Mirzoeff 1999). In fact, Pablo’s entrapment in the meshes of visibility, as well as Potter’s disavowal of the process of exoticization through which she constitutes Pablo’s character, are very much akin to what, in her discussion of Wild West imageries and “frontier entertainment”, Mulvey described as the exotic “fetishistic image [that] attempts to hold the eye,” and whose “actual spectacular properties hint at and almost advertise its hidden secret” (Mulvey 1996:171). Throughout *Tango Lesson*, Pablo’s stereotypical machismo and immaturity are manufactured through the hidden craft of ideology, and then displayed as a given that resonates with the exoticist imaginary of European and North American audiences.

Conclusion

As she purports to subvert the dominant male gaze, Potter takes up the exhortation to create a new frame of reference: “one in which the measure of desire is no longer just the male subject” (De Lauretis 1995:8), and where the conditions of visibility establish a new, namely female, social subject. The principle underlying *Tango Lesson* is provided by Mulvey’s critique of fetishism, which Potter integrates with Lacan’s visual theory—especially his theorization of the mirror stage, and his notion of the gaze as what establishes a visual field where one “see[s] only from one point, but [is] looked at from all sides” (Lacan 1978:72). In Lacan’s visual field, the individual is both image and screen, or, as de Bolla (1996) put it, subject-seeing and subject-in-sight. Sally’s own look as a subject-seeing is the embodied reverberation of Potter’s disembodied, all-pervasive gaze as the

film director who does not only see, but also shows (Lacan 1978:75). Upon creating the visual field of *Tango Lesson*—i.e., the film--Potter has Sally-subject-in-sight inhabit it.⁹ Once established her visual power as the iconic embodiment of the film director and her gaze, Sally can scurry through the film's visual field without falling prey to the to-be-looked-at-ness to which Hollywood films usually confine female characters: this is the role that Sally and Potter reserve instead for Pablo, the male lead.

Pablo's character is sculpted out of an immature, and short-sighted, narcissism. Under Sally's lead, Pablo eventually moves out of the narrow visual circuit provided by his love affair with his specular I. Specifically, what Sally teaches Pablo to see is herself as the bearer of both a commanding gaze and an authoritative desire: it is only through Sally's camera-eyes, Pablo realizes, that he will be able to achieve the stardom he dreams of. Rather than functioning as a passive reflection of his own fantasies, Sally's gaze provides Pablo with an alienated "Ideal I" towards which to aspire.

Despite Potter's attempt to dispel scopophilic fetishism and sadistic voyeurism, the structure of dominance and subordination established by her (and Sally's) gaze resembles the one perpetuated by the male gaze identified and critiqued by feminist film theorists. The split between Sally the character and Potter the director both reminds of, and subverts, Mulvey's description of the split between the spectator and the male star as his Ideal I (Mulvey 1975). In *Tango Lesson*, the female protagonist is not just the spectator's surrogate, but also and in the first place the *director's* proxy—one that is so closely related to Potter as to be literally personified by her. By doubling the female gaze cast on Pablo's all-too-visible body, Potter reverses the dynamics through which Hollywood films push their spectators into a male subject-position,¹⁰ while making sure that the gaze she is

generating in and through her film is clearly a heterosexual female one. In doing so, Potter provides a response to the argument that, even when a female gaze is constituted, female voyeurism is impossible because the desiring look women cast on male bodies carries neither power nor action (Kaplan 1983:330). In fact, Sally/Potter's desire carries so much power and action that, in the attempt to conceal the inequality it creates, Potter turns to a Buberian love rhetoric that barely hides Sally's growing control over her reluctant Latin macho.

By the end of *Tango Lesson*, a triumphant Sally/Potter has simultaneously demonstrated her own mastery of the seeing, showing, and hiding that constitutes the cinematic field of vision, and conquered all of her Argentine Orient: the tango as an everyday practice, the tango as a stage performance, the tango dancer himself as the arrogant and immature Latin man, and, eventually, even its lyrics as the last bulwark of the deeply masculine subjectivity posited by this genre.¹¹ The film ends with the sight of Sally and Pablo kissing to the notes of a tango song written and sung by Potter. The lines that celebrate the new beginning of their relationship elaborate on Sally's "Traveling man/Man in my heart/Man on stage,/Man of his art". By explicitly quoting Buber (1958:85), Potter's lyrics concludes "One is one/and one are two/ You are me/ I am you" (1997b:79-80). As Pablo and Sally kiss in this last scene, it becomes clear that Sally has accomplished her mission of educating Pablo to the romantic and professional relationship she had in mind for him. As he eventually acquiesces to Sally's seduction, Pablo meets a destiny that is not only akin to that of the female Hollywood star who, after being investigated by the male gaze, is "rescued" through marriage (Mulvey 1989), but also somewhat resembles the fate

of the exotic character that, in Orientalist cinema, needs to undergo a redemption for the happy end to take place (Eisele 2002).

Optimistic though it claims to be, the mystique of love soaking the conclusion of *Tango Lesson* hardly conceals the representational politics implicit in Potter's description of the pedagogical and containing effect of European vision on Latin American feeling. In shooting *Tango Lesson*, Potter had originally set out to dispel the fetishism of the patriarchal gaze on a subaltern group, namely women. It is only too unfortunate that, while engaging in her polemic, Potter upholds female visual pleasures by reproducing yet another voyeuristic fetishism: that of the Orientalist gaze cast on its exotic Other.

Endnotes

¹ The three models in *Rage* are identified only through the color of their clothes: they are respectively the woman in red, blue, and yellow.

² On a similar depiction of the act of taking pictures as intrinsically violent and the association between the male photographer's gaze and the murder of the woman, see Smelik's (1998) analysis of *Broken Mirrors*.

³ As Teresa de Lauretis (1984:82) argues, the feminization of the male characters that are being "looked at" reproduces the gendering of the object of the gaze.

⁴ This accounts for the almost complete invisibility, in *Tango Lesson*, of Argentine women: in their doubly subaltern role, they provide no match for the British director, as Savigliano suggests in *Angora Matta* (2003).

⁵ The only other occasion when Sally's image is reflected in a mirror is during a taxi ride in Buenos Aires: the driver makes a pass at her, and, smiling sarcastically, she looks away and abstracts herself from the conversation.

⁶ The feminizing spell cast on Pablo by Sally's gaze comes to an abrupt end when Pablo suggests that she be his partner in a stage performance—a move that turns the table on her.

⁷ Pablo's obvious feminization under Sally's eyes seems to be a challenge to the traditional gendering of female to-be-looked-at film characters, but it also reproduces the argument that the gendering of the image depends on the phallic thrust of the gaze. In this sequence, Potter seems to explore whether it is true that, as E. Ann Kaplan (1983:330) put it, "to own and activate the gaze... is to be in the masculine position". Even though she retains the dominance/submission structure identified by Kaplan, later in the film Potter will not hint again to a possible feminization of Pablo.

⁸ The struggle between Jacob and the Angel resembles the leap Sally rehearses with Pablo for their stage show. Yet, in the leap, Pablo tries to suspend Sally in midair by supporting her with an arm—a position Sally has a difficult time in taking up. Jacob's struggle against the angel (which is also reproduced on the cover of her script) instead, is much more congenial to Sally. Rather than turning her into a weightless prop in Pablo's hands, Jacob's struggle as painted by Delacroix reflects her own thwarted efforts to lead the tango through the tango itself—i.e., by immersing herself in the sphere of feeling she associates with the dance.

⁹ One could also argue that, in Lacanian terms, Sally is part of the artwork through which Potter exerts her *dompte-regard* on the spectatorial gaze (the film viewers), thus taming it.

¹⁰ As both Mulvey (1975, 1989) and Kaplan (1983) suggest, the eroticization of the female protagonist takes place through a triple male look on her body: that of the camera, that of the male protagonist, and, as a result of the previous two, that of the spectator.

¹¹ Most tango lyrics are written from a male point of view, and, even when sung by women, they posit woman as the object of male passion and disenchantment. On this topic, see Savigliano (1995) and Castro (1991).

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