Chapter 11

Feminist Phenomenology and the Films of Sally Potter

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Sally Potter’s place in British cinema is uncontested, as a recent retrospective organised by the British Film Institute shows. ¹ Since her debut with the half-hour Thriller in 1979, she has carved out a place for herself as one of our leading independent filmmakers, but success has often not come easily: the highly crafted experimentalism of Thriller met with acclaim, but her similarly styled first feature The Gold Diggers (1983) failed to find much appreciation, and she struggled for nine years to be able to complete Orlando (1992), her adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s 1928 Orlando: A Biography. ² With Orlando Potter was carried by the spirit of the shift in women’s filmmaking from experimentalism and explicitly political reflection on representation towards narrative pleasure, while still giving an undeniably feminist twist to Woolf’s story of time-travel and gender-bending from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. The feminist political drive that had marked all her films up to 1992 was maintained by Potter’s own performance in the allegory of gender relations built into her next film The Tango Lesson (1997), but has been much less evident subsequently, in The Man Who Cried (2000) and Yes (2005). Other kinds of politics have marked Potter’s filmmaking in the 2000s, although in her most recent production Rage (2009), anti-capitalism might be said to be just as evident as in The Gold Diggers. While feminism may have faded from view in Potter’s most recent work, however, it is indispensable to any discussion of her early and 1990s films.

In the context of this volume of essays, Simone de Beauvoir scarcely needs introduction, but it is in her work in feminist phenomenology rather than in existentialist philosophy that a convergence with Potter’s filmmaking can be seen. As is now widely accepted, the supporting role to Sartre’s philosophical work Beauvoir insistently adopted throughout her life began to be questioned and unpicked in her last years, and she was re-interpreted as a philosopher in her own right by a number of
commentators. In most of these books, Beauvoir’s identity as a phenomenologist is to the fore, and a key notion securing this for her is Edmund Husserl’s concept of the ‘lived body’. In France in the 1940s, the primary currency of the concept of the corps vécu was via the work of Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who had studied Husserl’s unpublished papers in Louvain in the late 1930s, and whose Phénoménologie de la perception had been published in 1945, just as Sartre and Beauvoir set up Les Temps modernes. The superiority of Beauvoir’s deployment of the notion of the lived body over Merleau-Ponty’s, though, as feminist commentators have repeatedly pointed out, is that it is always particularised in a concrete, historical situation: Beauvoir’s concept of the body as ‘situation’, developed in her philosophical writings of the 1940s and referred to throughout The Second Sex, is distinct from and distinctly more concrete than the parallel concept Sartre developed over the same period. Embodiment is always particular, always different, and the feminist philosophers undertaking the work of re-evaluating Beauvoir draw attention to the direct focus on embodied experience to be found in her novels, stories and autobiographical volumes, as well as in her philosophy. The strength of Beauvoir’s thought, they claim, lay in her method, whatever the genre she was writing in, and since the embodied experience described was very often that of women, she could be regarded as the founder of her own mode of political philosophy – feminist phenomenology. By adding sexual difference to the notions of the lived body proposed by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty and developed by Beauvoir in her concept of the (historical) body as situation, feminist phenomenology is born – though in fact it may be regarded as having had other precursors, such as Husserl’s student and assistant Edith Stein, and the political philosopher Hannah Arendt.
Amid the re-evaluation of Beauvoir’s importance to twentieth-century philosophy during the 1990s, polemic arose over which type of feminist philosophy, or theory, was more relevant to feminist politics. Frustrated by what she saw as the jargon-ridden abstraction of much of the poststructuralist feminist theory written in the 1980s and still influential in the 1990s, Toril Moi – whose 1994 book *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* made a vital contribution to the new wave of Beauvoir studies – inserted Beauvoir right back into mainstream feminist theoretical debate, with her 1999 essay ‘What is a Woman? Sex, Gender and the Body in Feminist Theory’. Her grounds for so doing were that the usefulness of the sex/gender distinction for feminism had foundered amid the abstruseness of contemporary gender theory, and that poststructuralist philosophy, often critiqued for its perceived remoteness from ‘real-life’ political situations, had offered feminist theory no usable account of embodied subjectivity:

I have come to the conclusion that no amount of rethinking of the concepts of sex and gender will produce a good theory of the body or subjectivity. The distinction between sex and gender is simply irrelevant to the task of producing a concrete, historical understanding of what it means to be a woman (or a man) in a given society. No feminist has produced a better theory of the embodied, sexually different human being than Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Because contemporary English-language critics have read Beauvoir’s 1949 essay through the lens of the 1960s sex/gender distinction, they have failed to see that her essay provides exactly the kind of non-essentialist, concrete, historical and social understanding of the body that so many contemporary feminists are looking for. In short, Beauvoir’s claim that
‘one is not born, but rather becomes a woman’ has been sorely misunderstood by contemporary feminists. Lacan returned to Freud; it is time for feminist theorists to return to Beauvoir.

(Moi 1999: 4-5)

Moi’s argument here is highly convincing, and it is perhaps surprising that her essay was not more widely taken up by feminist critics and theorists of literature and film. Their failure to do so might, however, be explained by the divisiveness of her argument, which drives a wedge between Beauvoirian feminism and the poststructuralist critical approaches to gender and embodiment that held sway following the publication of Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990) and Bodies That Matter: the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’ (1993). But although the turn away from the sex/gender distinction called for by Moi may not have been explicitly signalled in literary and film studies, it has been felt, and will be one important element of my exploration of Sally Potter’s films. Potter’s filmmaking, I shall argue, is an excellent dramatization of the central ideas underpinning feminists’ turn toward the phenomenological notion of the ‘lived body’. A feminist phenomenological enquiry into film must start from and focus on screen women as embodied subjects of their own experience and desire. Little work linking phenomenology, film and feminism has been done, although one of the few articles to adopt such an approach, by Elena del Rio, focuses on Potter’s Thriller (del Rio 2004). 6 In my readings of Orlando and The Tango Lesson, I shall employ a similar blend of methodologies to the one adopted by del Rio, 7 detailing the pleasure women take in movement and bodily action in these films, while also considering the meanings offered by their living, acting bodies,
and the symbolic frameworks within which their agency and physical actions take place.

**Embodiment, Femininity and Becoming in Orlando**

In *Orlando*, history – a very selective and English history – is made a theme by the film’s structure: Potter treats her protagonist’s travels from the Elizabethan age to the twentieth century in six chapters, 1600 Death, 1610 Love, 1650 Poetry, 1750 Society, 1850 Sex and, finally, Birth (date unspecified). The death is that of Queen Elizabeth I, the love Orlando’s for Sasha, the daughter of the Muscovite ambassador to England, and the birth that of Orlando’s daughter, in one of Potter’s few significant changes to Woolf’s text, where Orlando’s child is a son. The historical moment of this childhood seems to be a mixture of 1928 (the date of Woolf’s book) and the ‘present day’ of the film (1992), in that Orlando rides a vintage 1928-style motorbike with a sidecar through a recognizable early-1990s London of Canary Wharf and Docklands. Orlando is thus always in a well-defined and dated historical situation, even if he/she inexplicably advances as an embodied and situated subject through over three centuries while ‘hardly ageing a day’, as both text and film state. That Orlando’s body is his/her situation is illustrated in at least two ways. First, there is his change of sexed body just before her entry into the society of 1750, upon which follow two scenes emphasising just how objectified and excluded women of the period were. In one, Orlando wanders idly through the sunny, silent long gallery of her country seat to the sole sound of peacocks calling on the lawns outside, adjusting her movement to prevent her voluminous hooped skirts from knocking over pieces of furniture draped in sunlit white dust-sheets. Since Orlando too is clad in brilliant white, the most striking element of this brief scene is her resemblance to the furniture and, hence, the
status of woman as property at this period – a prefiguring of how she will be stripped of her inheritance by a lawsuit that begins in the eighteenth century and concludes in the nineteenth. In the second scene, a literary gathering hosted by a countess at which Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and Joseph Addison hold court, ‘Orlando is immobilized like one elaborate frosted blue cake on a love seat. Complete with an unlikely sculpted headdress, she becomes a porcelain figurine, hampered equally by costume and convention from moving or responding to the routine snubs of the male “wits”’ (Pidduck 1997: 176).

The second manner in which Orlando envisions history, already anticipated in the scenes described above, is the continuously glorious use it makes of lavish costume. But although the film is often included alongside Jane Campion’s The Piano (Australia/New Zealand/France 1993) and Julie Dash’s Daughters of the Dust (U.S. 1991) in a list of what was in 2003 called ‘the emerging global feminist reappropriation of costume drama’ (Imre 2003: 188), the genre category ‘costume drama’ suggests a realist treatment of a particular era and set of characters never allowed to develop by the film’s restless progress. Rather, as Patricia Mellencamp argues, ‘the performative elements (of gesture, glance, pose, costume) are more telling than the narrative. History becomes something to learn from, move through, and get beyond’ (Mellencamp 1995: 283). Orlando the character and Orlando the film skip energetically through history, or perhaps fly in the manner characteristic of Hélène Cixous’s écriture féminine,8 defying history’s gravity and territorializing forces. This brings me to the core of the convergence between Potter’s envisioning of womanhood and Beauvoir’s theorizing of femininity, which I see in the type of energy driving their filmic and philosophical narratives – the positive desire of becoming, and becoming-woman.
In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir sums up the importance of becoming to her enquiry into womanhood as follows:

But the definition of man is that he is a being who is not given, who makes himself what he is. As Merleau-Ponty rightly said, man is not a natural species: he is an historical idea. Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming; she has to be compared to man in her becoming, that is, her possibilities have to be defined.

([DSI 73] SS 46)

This statement, which is both existentialist and feminist, is in no way at odds with the ‘sex/gender’ feminist theorizing dominant in the humanities and social sciences from the 1960s till the end of the twentieth century: biological sex gives way to cultural/social gender, of which a feminine gender identity is one possible outcome. But Beauvoir’s emphasis in her description of woman as a becoming is clearly on history and process rather than identity, and on an unbounded, infinite mode of historical desire and energy. The quotation continues

what skews the issues so much is that she is being reduced to what she was, to what she is today, while the question concerns her capacities; the fact is that her capacities manifest themselves clearly only when they have been realised: but the fact is also that when one considers a being who is transcendence and surpassing, it is never possible to close the books.

([DSI 73] SS 46)
Women’s historical possibilities are unlimited, just as men’s are. By virtue of its transgendering narrative and passage through nearly four centuries, Orlando allows – or, perhaps we should say, gloriously stages – the comparison of woman’s becoming to man’s Beauvoir speaks of in The Second Sex, a narrative drive picked up on by many critics. One aspect of the film on which much critical commentary has focused is the contrast between the universalist androgyny of Woolf’s text and the queer postmodern reconstruction of a female genealogy in Potter’s film: as Roberta Garrett summarises, ‘Woolf’s “modernist” project aims to undermine the stability of forms of gender identification, whereas Potter’s “postmodern” interpretation posits a “reconstructed” notion of female subjectivity which acts as a locus of resistance to the “master narrative” of British history’ (Garrett 1995: 96). The birth of Orlando’s daughter and her happiness as a mother despite having been dispossessed of her inheritance would seem to make this digression of film from book unambiguous, and yet Potter has stated that where Orlando’s change of sex is concerned, she thought that using the same actor for the male and female character would help ‘the idea of individuality’ to prevail, and what she has called ‘the seamless individuality across the genders’ would not be lost (Potter in Degli-Esposti 1996: 88). She may have been wary of making a feminist film – ““feminist” has become a sort of trigger word that closes down thinking rather than opening it up’ (Potter in Degli-Esposti 1996: 89) – but ended up with one nonetheless, perhaps because of the thoroughly postmodern sensibility of Orlando’s queer, flighty, disrespectful treatment of identity, history and the genre of costume drama. The affirmative energy of becoming-woman spills out of almost every scene of Orlando, from its clipped, witty dialogue and protagonist’s meaningful looks to camera.
Amid many meticulously performed such looks from Tilda Swinton, in fact, one scene in *Orlando* strikingly stages vision as female, and as embodied. After Orlando tends to Shelmerdine’s injured ankle at her country seat, and confesses to the camera that although she feels she is about to faint, she has never felt better in her life, the action cuts to their love-making. Stereotypically gendered bodily postures are reversed here, as Shelmerdine (with his flowing hair and sensuous mouth) lies back to be stroked by Orlando and the camera, in several close-ups on his face. So intense is Orlando’s/the camera’s gaze upon him that at one moment, he registers embarrassment and perhaps a wish that she relax the attention she is directing at him. The camera then cuts to a tracking shot along a human torso, which is revealed by its curves to be a woman’s rather than a man’s – but this gentle caress of Swinton’s torso is no display of female nudity or objectification of the feminine, and ends instead on a long close-up on Orlando’s eye. In addition to privileging the woman’s look at this point in the action, the shot reminds us insistently that the look itself is embodied, rather than transcendent and immaterial. Speculatively distinct modes of feminine and masculine desire are undermined by the blurring of gender identities evident throughout Orlando and Shelmerdine’s encounter, but there is no confusing their female and male bodies, or disputing that her woman’s look is privileged over his.

Perhaps the principal way in which Potter dramatizes the affirmative energy of becoming-woman in *Orlando*, though, is through bodily action. As man and as woman (when she is not constrained by her clothes), Orlando engages in an enormous range of physical activity, from the straightforward (running back to and through Queen Elizabeth’s court in ‘1600 Death’, hastening through the maze until she breaks into a run after indignantly refusing the Archduke Harry’s offer of marriage) to the sporting – skating on the frozen river Thames, horse riding with Shelmerdine,
motorcycling through London with her daughter. On the one hand, this reinforces how Potter’s experience as a choreographer is to the fore in her adaptation, whose credited choreographer is Jacky Lansley, the dancer with whom Potter cofounded The Limited Dance Company in 1974 (Fowler 2009: 21), and who performed in *Thriller, The Gold Diggers* and *The London Story*. Dance and choreography are drawn on just as extensively in *Orlando* as in *The Tango Lesson*, though displayed more subtly. On the other hand, body comportment, motility and spatiality are the chief concerns of feminist phenomenology, which takes differences between male and female modes of moving and relating to space as the starting point for its enquiry into differentiated embodiment. Beauvoir discusses these issues repeatedly in *The Second Sex*: in Volume I, towards the end of the first, ‘Biological Data’ chapter, in the second chapter on ‘The Psychoanalytical Point of View’, and in the first chapter of Part Three on ‘Myths’; in Volume II, in the first three chapters of Part One ‘Formation’ and in the chapter in Part Two on ‘The Mother’. In each instance, her framework is the opposition of free, transcendent, unrestricted movement enjoyed by men to the inhibitions of immanence, which can be viewed as thwarting women’s motility through menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and a variety of other phenomena specific to women. Beauvoir rejects the logic of castration intrinsic to psychoanalysis, maintaining that the girl/woman does not experience the absence of a penis as a lack – ‘her body is evidently a plentitude for her’ (Beauvoir 2009: 297) – but her assessment of women’s motility up to 1949 is in other respects famously negative. In *Orlando*, by contrast, Tilda Swinton’s lithe, muscular physique is given every opportunity to run, jump and indulge in the sporting activities I have already mentioned: Orlando courts Sasha as they skate elegantly on the Thames, in contrast to Orlando’s clumsy fiancée and the self-important English nobleman who insists on having a cloth laid on the ice.
for him to walk over, and when Shelmerdine is thrown by his horse and twists his ankle after riding out of the mist, she rides them both to safety. In the brief scene of Orlando’s pregnancy, she runs frantically across a twentieth-century battlefield at night, stumbles, and falls, but the image cuts to her standing again, and as she moves on, the shelling ebbs away, she rubs her rounded belly, day breaks, and she disappears into the quiet mist, communicating a sense of tranquillity and hope. We do not see her give birth, and generally, as a woman, Orlando appears strong, healthy, and active rather than passive in her love-making and encounters with other bodies, such as her daughter’s.

Critics have admired the dynamism and energy of Orlando, as I have already indicated, but its sexuate character – how and to what extent the ‘voyage of “becoming”’ (Pidduck 1997: 172) Potter screens is female, feminine or feminist – has only really been touched on by Julianne Pidduck. Drawing on Teresa de Lauretis’s essay ‘Desire in Narrative’ and Mary Ann Doane’s extension of a gendered economy of stasis and movement to spatiotemporal patterns of genre, Pidduck proposes that there is ‘an explicit play (in both Virginia Woolf’s source novel and Potter’s film adaptation) upon gendered conventions of movement’ (ibid.: 173). By observing that during Orlando’s ‘utopian feminist voyage of “becoming”’, ‘the dry theoretical problem of gendered narrative movement becomes an explicitly collective project of social critique’ (ibid.), Pidduck opens the door to feminist accounts of embodied subjectivity and motility, but quickly shuts it again by turning to Mikhail Bakhtin (whose ‘Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel’ takes no account of sexual difference) for her account of articulations of time and space within historical literary genres. Although she returns to de Lauretis’s ‘Desire in Narrative’ later in her article, she refers to de Lauretis citing a structuralist narrative theorist called Lotman whose
fundamental binary opposition is into mobile and immobile character types, again without reference to differentiated embodiment (although de Lauretis herself adds male and female to the theoretical mix). For Pidduck, finding in Orlando the unadulterated dynamism that might seem necessary ‘to a feminist journey of becoming’ – ‘would be manipulating the text to my own ends’ (ibid.: 185): she points out that Orlando ends his/her historical peregrinations in the same places he/she began them, and there are all kinds of ways in which his/her actions are not effective and purposeful. In my view these instances of inefficacy pertain mostly to his 150+ years as a man, when as England’s Ambassador to an unspecified Eastern country, he fails to match the Khan at drinking and to take up arms in battle. If Pidduck is right to point out that Orlando does not achieve much for a narrative that extends over more than 450 years (though I am inclined to argue that independence, motherhood, and success as a writer adds up to a lot), then it should probably be remembered that when assessing the gendered qualities of movement and achievement in Orlando or any film, different levels of action must be distinguished, at least analytically. My descriptions of the positivity and dynamism of Swinton’s movements remain at the level of performance, whereas for Beauvoirian feminist phenomenology, different analytically separable levels of action are fused: the body is ‘our grasp on the world and the outline of our projects’ (Beauvoir 2009: 46). It is precisely to counter the deterministic tendencies that arise from building sexual difference into this philosophy of free, transcendent action – as Beauvoir does in The Second Sex by emphasising women’s historical desire and capacities – that it is worth dwelling on the detail of particular visions and narratives of female embodiment. I shall return to Orlando in my conclusion to this chapter, but first, turn to Potter’s treatment of female movement and action in The Tango Lesson.
Two films compete with one another to produce *The Tango Lesson*: the first is a sumptuously costumed drama about the Paris fashion industry the character Sally (played, of course, by Potter) struggles to write in the opening scenes, the second a ‘more personal’ project about the Argentinian tango. The first, which proves to have been a real project of Potter’s by becoming *Rage* (2009), although it has been transposed to New York as the Hollywood producers Sally meets in *The Tango Lesson* suggested it should be, is in glorious colour, the second in black and white. A step back from the resplendent colour Potter screens so magnificently for the first time in *Orlando*, *The Tango Lesson* nevertheless substitutes for it alternative visual and aural pleasures – memorably melancholy music, a romantic narrative, and many scenes of expert tango dancing by Pablo Veron, Potter herself, and diverse practitioners from the tango halls of Buenos Aires. Although men are seen dancing as much as Potter and the one other woman dancer (Pablo’s other partner), the film is, through Sally, just as complex a visualisation of female embodiment as *Orlando*.

By directing and starring in *The Tango Lesson*, as Lucy Fischer points out, Potter joins a distinguished list of other women artists – Maya Deren and Yvonne Rainer among them – who have made experimental films highlighting their status as dancers and filmmakers (Fischer 2004: 46). Fischer’s claim that Potter’s focus on dance ‘links her to the mainstream cinema’ is in my view arguable, but she also makes two points wholly supportive of the vision of female embodiment and its capacities I see in *The Tango Lesson*. The first, actually articulated by Beatrice Humbert, is that although tango gives the more spectacular role to the man (vividly illustrated by Pablo’s display of wounded narcissism after Sally fails to follow his every move in their one
public stage performance), its popularity in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century was in part because it ‘opened a venue for women to exhibit sensuality in public ... Tango showed and performed the strong changes in gender roles that were under way at the time’ (Fischer 2004: 50). The second is the ambivalent status of dance on film as both visual spectacle and athletic physical performance. Potter trained as a dancer as well as a choreographer in the 1970s, in her twenties, but for The Tango Lesson had not only to master an entirely new dance form (albeit one she was obviously passionate about), but regain comparable strength, suppleness and technique in her mid-forties, all while directing herself, other actors, and the entire film. Her physical achievement alone in The Tango Lesson is remarkable, though not without obvious effort and fatigue – in a scene where she returns to her Buenos Aires hotel after a night’s dancing to find a sheaf of faxes from producers, Sally is seen soaking her aching feet in a hot bath while she starts to phone replies – and if her dancing is not as spectacular as Pablo Veron’s, she nonetheless fulfils her intention ‘to show, somehow, what dancing feels like, rather than what it looks like’ (Potter, quoted in Guano 2004: 471). The aim of the very physical project she undertook in making this personal, clearly partly autobiographical, film was not to produce visual spectacle her audience could marvel at from a distance, but to communicate the intensely bodily experience of dancing, from her woman’s point of view.

It is not only in dance that the type of bodily agency proposed by phenomenology’s concept of the ‘lived body’ is dramatised in The Tango Lesson. Vitally for feminist film theory, looking is also seen to be agentic and what defines Sally as a film director – when she tells Pablo, enraged by her lack of compliance during their public tango performance, that he only knows how to be looked at, not how to look, and again later, when the film that is The Tango Lesson is under way,
that it is ‘With my eyes. With my work’ that she loves him.\textsuperscript{11} Looking is every bit as embodied as dancing, a honed, perfected technique. One early scene dramatises this better than any other: as she location-scouts for the abandoned version of \textit{Rage} in the Parc de St Cloud, outside Paris, Sally runs around pacing out the dollies and levels that her camera will need to film the Red Model. As Potter explains in her commentary on the shoot:

This scene was snatched as the sun went down at the end of a shooting day ... We had more or less an hour to do about six set-ups, so we ran from location to location as the shadows got longer. My job as a performer was to look – really look – at the locations in the strange (but to me, natural) way that a director looks at a place: seeing it as it is, and, simultaneously, superimposed, seeing it as it could be onscreen. When I saw the rushes I realised, with a shock, that one rarely sees a woman looking out like that on screen. Normally she is dragging the look towards her, as an invitation.

(Potter 1997: 4)

The sharp, acquisitive look of a woman prospecting for her film is caught on camera in this scene, and shown to be a thoroughly embodied, physical activity. This type of look by a woman is rarely screened, as Potter notes, and it seems to me that a woman director imitating her camera is just as rare a sight. The camera is a cyborg rather than a human body (Sobchack 1992: 163), so by including this scene in \textit{The Tango Lesson} Potter raises many of the same film-philosophical questions about the interrelationship of gender, embodiment and vision as phenomenologically-oriented film theorists of the 2000s.
Running against the grain of most film theory written between the 1970s and the early 1990s, phenomenology affirms this bodily gaze both within the filmic frame (and in both *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson*, in the woman within the frame) and in the spectator, creating the possibility of a meeting or exchange of looks across what Laura Marks so memorably calls ‘the skin of the film’. Potter’s *Orlando* and *The Tango Lesson* convey women’s embodied looking as stylishly and affirmatively as they stage female physicality and historical becoming, envisioning dramas both echoed and elucidated by the feminist existential phenomenology pioneered by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*.

**Endnotes**

1. The first full career retrospective granted to a British woman filmmaker by the BFI, this series of screenings and events ran from 2 to 28 December 2009.

2. As commentators have pointed out, the dispersal of *Orlando*’s action over more than three centuries makes it better described as an ‘elegy’ than as a fictional biography or a novel: Woolf wrote it above all as a satire on the very grounded and chronological conventions of the literary biography.

3. Sonia Kruks in *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* (Kruks 1990), Kate and Edward Fullbrook in *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: the Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend* (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 1993), Karen Vitges in *Philosophy as Passion: The Thinking of Simone de Beauvoir* (Vitges 1996), Debra Bergoffen in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities* (Bergoffen 1998), and Margaret Simons in various essays collected in *Beauvoir and the Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of*
Existentialism (Simons 1999). This series of studies emphasising Beauvoir’s continuing importance for feminist thought continued into the 2000s, with Nancy Bauer’s Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism (Bauer 2001), Sara Heinamaa’s Towards a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference (Heinamaa 2003) and Penelope Deutscher’s The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance (Deutscher 2008).

In French, the corps vécu: the (mis)translation of the subtitle of the second volume of Le deuxième Sexe, ‘L’expérience vécue’ as ‘Woman’s Life Today’, is one of H.M. Parshley’s most notorious failures to recognize the importance of Beauvoir’s phenomenological vocabulary.

The first book in English on this new branch of political philosophy was Linda Fisher and Lester Embree’s co-edited Feminist Phenomenology (2000), which was based on a symposium held in 1994. Perhaps the principal initiator of its contemporary origins was philosopher Iris Marion Young in her essay ‘Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility and Spatiality’ (Young 1989).

Other articles to broach these cross-disciplinary connections are Gaylyn Studlar’s ‘Reconciling Feminism and Phenomenology: Notes on Problems and Possibilities, Texts and Contexts’ (Studlar 1990) and Elizabeth Newton’s ‘The Phenomenology of Desire: Claire Denis’s Vendredi soir (2002)’ (Newton 2008).

While making it clear she is seeking to redress the imbalance created by the semiotic and psychoanalytic preference for a fetishized over a lived female body, del Rio states that she is not entirely rejecting semiotic and psychoanalytic perspectives, but ‘combin[ing] these with a phenomenological
approach that identifies bodily action as not only inherently significant, but also indivisible from symbolic and discursive structures’ (del Rio 2004: 12).

The stress on the body as ‘a written and a spoken sign’ rather than a ‘material entity’ in feminist film theory of the 1970s to early 1990s, she states, was ‘[b]orn of urgent necessity’, and did not foresee how it ‘would relegate the sensual and bodily aspects of female subjectivity to a practically irrelevant status’ (Del Rio 2004: 11).

8 ___ ‘For us the point is not to take possession in order to internalize or manipulate, but rather to dash through and to “fly” (voler)’ (Cixous 1981: 258). A translator’s note to ‘fly’ on this page explains how in French, Cixous puns on voler’s double meaning of ‘to fly’ and ‘to steal’ in this and subsequent sentences.

9 ___ ‘Orlando promises the fulfilment of a metaphysical quest where the question concerns what every being is in potentia of becoming’ (Degli-Esposti 1996: 82); ‘I would even go so far as to say that Orlando develops a utopian feminist voyage of “becoming” which can delicately “move”, inspire or amuse [its dispersed feminist] audience’ (Pidduck 1997: 172).

10 ___ ‘Bruises and Blisters’ is the title of Potter’s commentary on the film in Sight and Sound’s supplement to the 1997 London Film Festival, where she explains that after rehearsing the ‘tango for four’ she dances with Pablo and her two Buenos Airean teachers towards the end of the film, ‘it took two hours to be eased out of my shoes at the end of the day – a doctor in attendance to lance the blisters’ (Potter 1997: 7).

11 ___ See also Guano (2004: 468-70).
Bibliography


__________. 1986. *The London Story*. Sally Potter, the British Film Institute and Channel Four.


Sigma Films, British Screen, European Co-Production Fund (U.K.). European Script Fund, National Film Development Fund.


Nippon Film Development and Finance, Imagica, Pandora Filmproduktion.


Adventure Pictures, Studio Canal, Universal Pictures.


Studio Fierberg, National Lottery.