



Figure 1. Simon Abkarian as He and Joan Allen as She. *Yes*  
(dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

# Love's Cosmopolitan Promise in Sally Potter's *Yes*

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The morning after the events of 9/11, Sally Potter began writing a scene for a film about a violent argument between two lovers.<sup>1</sup> In her original script, a man and woman, both intent on ending their relationship, walk through the streets of Paris to meet each other; by the time they do so, each has decided to opt for reconciliation. Reworked in terms of both location and dramatic outcome, this scene becomes pivotal in Potter's film *Yes* (UK/US, 2004), a love story in which the couple's future depends on their capacity to be open to the other's cultural differences. In taking the heterosexual couple as its trope for geopolitical conflicts and in placing a cosmopolitan promise at their feet, *Yes* introduces a desire for the subject's capacity to compensate for historical violence and injustice while also revealing the barriers to this desire's fulfilment. In ways that have been insufficiently discussed, Potter's film creates a cosmopolitan imaginary that traces love's potential and its failure to heal conflicted political histories.<sup>2</sup>

Although *Yes* was made in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, its concerns seem increasingly relevant today, as intolerance and populism have become more explicit elements of mainstream

*Camera Obscura* 98, Volume 33, Number 2  
DOI 10.1215/02705346-6923094 © 2018 by *Camera Obscura*  
Published by Duke University Press

political discourse amid a raft of dizzying, unpredictable election results in the US, the UK, and elsewhere in Europe.<sup>3</sup> More widely, violent volatility characterizes the international geopolitical landscape.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, these trends create the intensifying sense that cultural and religious differences are widely perceived as threatening and that aggressive responses to what is regarded as foreign and thus undesirable are an increasingly familiar part of navigating everyday life.

With their long-standing focus on questions of desire and difference, feminist film theory and practice have been untapped resources for post-9/11 conceptualizations of a renewed cosmopolitanism. In the aftermath of the attacks, discussions of cosmopolitanism have been critiqued but have also brought visions of worldliness and openness to difference that have appealed to many inside and outside the academy.<sup>5</sup> Two key ideas have characterized the extensive discussions around the concept of cosmopolitanism: the wish to engender a sense of belonging (the feeling of being “at home in the world”) and an affirmation of living comfortably with cultural diversity, or what Paul Gilroy has called “convivial culture.”<sup>6</sup> This combination has been celebrated for its potential to generate social worlds in which “people could be different without fear,” be they citizens, migrant laborers, asylum seekers, or visitors.<sup>7</sup> The cosmos and the polis are at once in tension and mutually constitutive, and the ideal cosmopolitan subject looks both ways simultaneously. Cosmopolitan ideals demand more than just a disposition toward embracing difference; cosmopolitanism flourishes in the context of what I have called elsewhere “an ease of proximity to the unfamiliar” that emerges from a simultaneous attachment to immediate location and to new horizons of possibility.<sup>8</sup>

Cosmopolitanism and cinema share an aspirational drive. But as Robert Spencer argues, “cosmopolitanism cannot by definition be realised in works of art; it can only be pointed to as a possibility. . . . It is important that texts lend emphasis to their own failure in this respect.”<sup>9</sup> Instead of looking for examples of cosmopolitanism’s cinematic realization, we might pursue cosmopolitan questions by reading the ways that films address this paradox. Following Felicia Chan, who argues that “the power of cosmopolitan texts . . . can be said to lie not in their expression within the art

form but in their ability to acknowledge their own limits,” I offer two propositions about cosmopolitanism to which I shall return throughout this article.<sup>10</sup> First, cosmopolitanism is best defined by an absence of something undesirable (racism, violence, xenophobia); it is much harder to give a positive account of cosmopolitanism than it is to demonstrate the political need for it generated by its opposites. Secondly and relatedly, cosmopolitanism’s optimism is haunted by what its failures could reveal—the antagonisms that its worldly hospitality promises to overcome.

Potter’s film approaches cosmopolitanism not merely thematically but aesthetically, turning its demands into audiovisual textures that undercut the conventional temporal sequences and spatial scales of narrative cinema. With its elegant combination of scripted rhyming couplets, internal monologues, slow-motion montage sequences, exhilarating camera movement, and a delicate balance of silence and sound bleeding across scene transitions, *Yes* presents less a direct political vision and more an aesthetic wish fulfillment, leaving its audience with glimmers of hope in the face of barriers to intimate communication presented by prejudice and injustice. Echoing *Hiroshima mon amour* (dir. Alain Resnais, France/Japan, 1959), *Yes* stages heterosexual desire as the rescaled site of the representational limits of responding to spectacularized violence and political trauma. And like *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder, West Germany, 1974), Potter’s film makes the couple the focus of hope, even as it shows that sexual desire is necessarily constituted through the social, making the prejudices within and beyond the couple’s intimacy potential obstacles to their shared future.<sup>11</sup>

Moving us across the landscapes of England, Northern Ireland, Lebanon, and Cuba, *Yes* articulates a desire that has driven a critical return to the cosmopolitan project: the search for a language of affiliation across unequal histories of violence. Arising directly and indirectly from the events of 9/11, these histories also shaped the conditions of the film’s production. Working within a tight budget, the transnational crews encountered many of the problems addressed in the initial conception of the film: war made Beirut a difficult shooting location; movement through Belfast was paralyzed due to a meeting between Tony Blair and George W. Bush

regarding the Iraq War; American actress Joan Allen was denied access to Havana, requiring a montage to place her “in the film’s conclusive location” and requiring the final scene to be filmed on a Dominican beach instead.<sup>12</sup> The film’s production history thus enacts its diegetic concerns with the effects of military and civilian violence, with displacement and exile, and with the question of transnational mobility, even for relatively privileged Western professionals.

### **Idealization and Its Others**

Cosmopolitan visions, as Jacqueline Rose has argued, risk “idealising the psyche” and offering the “flexibility of individual psychic processes . . . as the answer to the rigid identifications of political life.” Not unlike the film’s title, *Yes*, the concept of cosmopolitanism hovers somewhere between “an assertion . . . and a desire,” as Rose puts it, mobilizing “the individual—in a strikingly pre-Freudian incarnation . . . as a corrective to the perils of the group.”<sup>13</sup> Rather than as internally conflicted or divided against itself, the cosmopolitan subject is imagined to be fully aligned with conscious political aspirations and ethical intentions. Cosmopolitanism’s drive—toward a shared attachment to feeling part of, and responsible for, a connection to the world beyond the local—threatens to individualize the burden of social harmony, wishing away ambivalence and antagonism and taking for granted the neoliberal ideal of the self-made subject.

In bringing together cosmopolitanism and love, *Yes* stages the moments when idealization gives way to the acknowledgment of ambivalence. Significantly, cosmopolitan aspirations become most compelling between the lovers at the moments of their failure. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has argued that if “the fluency of ‘idealization’—usually a pejorative, and always a cover story in psychoanalysis—is replaced by the haltings of ambivalence,” then psychoanalysis might offer instead the “romance of disillusionment in which falling in love is the (sometimes necessary) prelude to a better but diminished—better because diminished—thing.” For Phillips, “frustration is the aura of the real” and leaves us with a “more realistic appreciation of oneself and the other person.”<sup>14</sup>



Figure 2. Simon Abkarian as He. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

This *better because diminished* formulation can be extended to the cosmopolitan vision of *Yes*, which invites us to imagine a social relationality premised not on idealized subjects void of antagonisms (subjects who are rational, intentional, coherent) but rather on the acknowledgment of ambivalence that will disrupt our best intentions when we least expect it.

*Yes* constitutes a yearning for the conditions of possibility that make politically transformative antagonistic encounters through love imaginable. It both instantiates and reflects on the cinema's capacity to imagine a future at moments of impasse following the trauma of political violence.<sup>15</sup> The film inscribes these ambitions of scale in its pronominal naming of the two protagonists who form the romantic couple: "He" (Simon Abkarian) is a dashing and seductive Lebanese surgeon, living in "voluntary exile" and working as a chef in London (fig. 2), and "She" (Joan



Figure 3. Joan Allen as She. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004).

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Allen) is a stylish, uptight, successful Irish-American microbiologist in a sterile marriage to a resentful, possibly philandering husband played by Sam Neill (fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> As Sophie Mayer has argued, the film’s “universal naming” of the couple as She and He recalls the “Elle” and “Il” of *Hiroshima mon amour*, in which a white woman and a non-Western man fall in love by “telling each other stories of the past.”<sup>17</sup> But even as such vocative designations refer us to the reach of the film’s political ambitions, these descriptors also draw attention to the limits of love’s universalizing claims: they disturb the alignment of the “text’s relation to its referent,” as Sharon Willis has argued of *Hiroshima mon amour*.<sup>18</sup> In both films, the problems of generic representability come to reveal the limits of the language of representation to address unequal violent histories.

This tension is most vividly staged in *Yes*’s pivotal and most



Figure 4. Simon Abkarian as He. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

compelling scene—the one that Potter began writing on the morning after 9/11. Initially imagined in the streets of Paris, where the couple individually talk themselves out of rage into reconciliation before they meet up, the filmed scene has the couple separate after a blazing row in an underground London car park (fig. 4). This passionate affair tests the capacity of sexual desire to withstand the psychic legacies of the conflicted political histories between East and West as embodied by the two protagonists. At this moment of emotional antagonism, “Yes” brings with it the possibility of “no,” showing itself to only ever have been the refusal of that “no” (fig. 5).

As Mayer argues, the setting of a car park offers a temporary or transitional place “where no one stays,” paradoxically both “dystopia and heterotopia, symbolic of movement and stagnation, of crime and protection, of entrapment and freedom.”<sup>19</sup> This anon-



ymous “non-place” affords sufficient privacy for the full force of their seismic row: their misrecognitions and mutual negation can be delivered to maximum effect.<sup>20</sup> The grim, gray concrete pillars and harsh neon lighting provide a *mise-en-scène* with a sense of bleak alienation, affording a suitably desolate emptiness that the couple quickly fill with their rage. The rest of the film is haunted by the misrecognitions and projections that drive their exchanges in this scene.

Consisting mostly of iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets, the poetic script holds us in a pattern of rhyme and rhythm that gives the couple structural continuity in the face of unpredictable adversity. It is, as Potter puts it, “a kind of holding structure, that was really strict.”<sup>21</sup> But as Mayer argues, this scene is more than just a “he said/she said.” Instead, the argument becomes a “profound . . . political engagement” that makes the “narrative lyric and history anachronic (non-linear).” The formal choices that govern the scene bring us up close to the protagonists as the *vérité* camera “stays with the faces that speak passionately,” and the combination of “handheld shots, tight framing, medium close-up scale and argumentative dialogue in split-verse lines” produces an intensity of presence that generates, but cannot contain, the enormity of the shared historical burdens that their love promised to heal.<sup>22</sup>

Here the romantic couple, who had confirmed their love through their shared cosmopolitan openness to the world, cannot find their echo in the two-in-one structure of the heroic couplet used for most of the film’s dialogue. This mismatch becomes more strained as the language in this scene becomes more viciously wounding, the protagonists appearing increasingly flawed and unheroic as it proceeds. The heroic couplet is known as the “closed couplet” because of its structural self-sufficiency: the terminal word of its first line reaches for its rhyming mate in the second, completing and confirming the pair as a unit. The form brings with it predictability, a reassuring (though potentially dominating and stifling) sense of order. The rhyming couplet gestures outward to long-standing, universal questions of human experience: love, hate, war, and redemption. Yet the resentment expressed here is of the particulars of history that produce injustice and exclusion.



Figure 5. Joan Allen as She and Simon Abkarian as He. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

As cosmopolitan aspirations are overcome by bitterness and recrimination, the couple as the two-in-one unit is no longer contained by the film's formal structures. Having remembered "who he really is," He asks She to relinquish possession of his body and "return it" as sign of her recognition of his demand for separation. He consoles his masculine pride, wounded by the humiliation of cultural invisibility and professional demotion, by claiming her beauty as all his own invention: "I named you goddess and queen! I crowned you!" he declares, condemning her body as a "temptation" that has led to his "fall from grace."<sup>23</sup> Here He channels (or returns) the racism thrown at him by his white colleagues in the previous scene. Now She must take responsibility for white racism, and her mind is condemned as impure and dirty—the other side of idealization is denigration and abjection. The transformation of

her body from idealized goddess to contemptible and dirty temptation aligns with the film's more general association of dirt and its disposal with psychic boundary-making: object others are expelled to the margins to secure the "clean and proper body" of the symbolic subject.<sup>24</sup> As He speaks, dirt becomes a metaphor for political disavowal. It belongs to the Other and must be cleansed to establish the masculine subject's mastery of the woman's body: "What can I do to purify your mind? / I need to . . . wash you—Yes—from head to toe."<sup>25</sup> Her body is articulated through an ambivalence that confirms the inextricability of idealization and abjection. Dirt "offends against order," as Mary Douglas argued, and thus its elimination functions to establish boundaries that defend against disorder.<sup>26</sup> As He leaves She, he claims agency over her purification. As the one who once made her body glorious but now sees her impurity, he imagines he knows how to cleanse it: he postures as "the self-grounding masculine subject" who can take his leave by casting her as unclean, a revengeful reversal of humiliation from the West's inhospitality.<sup>27</sup> By abjecting her body, He separates from her and condemns the West's claims to possess the superior form of civilization.

Here the misogyny that makes a man believe the woman he worships is *of his making* meets the white guilt that makes a woman claim ancestral marginality (*Irish American*) to evade responsibility for colonial history, disidentifying with US policies in the Middle East. The power of their mutual desire had promised to displace such hatred (or to hold them safe in its distracting and unifying pleasures). Instead, their desire has generated its opposite: rejection, blame, and repudiation. Battered by his indictments of the brutality of Western inhospitality, She is finally willing to hear the "pain and the pathos of his diminishment in an alien country" and to recognize his woundedness, his need to depart.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, She hears him out as He explains that he has been denied visibility and masculine subjectivity:

From Elvis to Eminem, Warhol's art  
I know your stories, know your songs by heart  
But do you know mine? . . .

Where's my place  
Of pride and honor in this game?  
Where even to pronounce my name  
Is an impossibility? . . .  
In your land . . .  
I am not seen. I am . . . un-manned.<sup>29</sup>

This fleeting moment of recognition is interrupted by bad news when She receives a cell phone call that the aunt who raised her is dying in Belfast. She departs immediately without explanation. The rupture is overdetermined.

This pivotal scene, as Mayer argues, combines impassioned “poetic speech, proliferation of canted angles, overhead shots, and eccentric framing” to blend *vérité* with a sense of discordant temporality.<sup>30</sup> As geopolitical histories drown out the particularities of the couple, the urgency of her aunt's condition returns us to the immediate fragility of life itself. The couple's embodiment of the conflicted political histories that emerge from lives lived between London, Beirut, Belfast, and New York condenses a set of dynamics that speak directly to cosmopolitan aspirations in a globalized world. Following the violence of the racist abuse by his colleagues in the kitchen scene, He takes revenge on white privilege by turning on She and bringing the “no” into their frame of affirmation. He has decided to leave, demonstrating how their private “erotic world” has been “broken into by larger events,” as it was always likely to be.<sup>31</sup>

In this convergence of displacement and exile—of his migrant labor and her elite transnational mobility—*Yes* draws us into debates at the heart of the cosmopolitan project.<sup>32</sup> How might such political wounds be healed by the power of love? According to Mayer, the “love” in *Yes* echoes what Kaja Silverman identifies as “the cure by love” in *Hiroshima mon amour*. This love is “[n]either of the aggrandizement [n]or rapture of the one who loves,” but rather is conceptualized as a “form of care for the world” without which all suffer from the “most serious of maladies: invisibility.”<sup>33</sup> In Potter's film, She is neglected by her husband but He recognizes

her beauty, and She eventually listens to his account of the painful invisibility of being a Middle Eastern exile. But whereas the couple in *Hiroshima mon amour* share trauma and healing through mutual narration, the “self-realization” of She in *Yes* is nowhere matched by a working through of his displacement to suggest a symmetry in love’s healing power. Building on Silverman’s notion of the cure by love, Mayer suggests that *Yes* is a film that “incorporates the events of 9/11 not only through the lovers’ bodies and relationship, but also by incorporating the immediate events within a longer history of relations between Islam and the West.”<sup>34</sup>

*Yes* mobilizes the feminist maxim “the personal is political” in order to explore how love might become the ground of cosmopolitan possibility. The central love affair takes place against the wider diegetic contexts of both the London restaurant kitchen where He navigates the racist resentments of his colleagues and the spotless bourgeois home where She endures the awkward silences of a failed marriage. The illness and eventual death of her beloved Irish aunt (Sheila Hancock) in Belfast provides the structural competition for her availability and loyalty in the affair. Her grief brings some relief from the veneer of her clichéd white, middle-class emotional repression, confirmed in how She ignores the “Cleaner” (Shirley Henderson) who obsessively maintains the impeccable appearance of her spacious and spotless home.

The eccentric Cleaner, who directly addresses the camera as she dusts around door frames, is the film’s wise and witty counterpoint to the childish self-centeredness of her oblivious employers (fig. 6). We are invited to share the universalizing wisdoms she imparts from the bedroom and the bathtub (fig. 7). In contrast, the film discourages easy identification with the female protagonist, who has little perspective on her privilege. In the love affair, the couple enacts the disorganizing power of love’s intensities—moving from the ecstasy of “ravishment” to the “horrors of spoiling,” to use Roland Barthes’s vocabulary for the scenarios that compose the amorous subject—while the Cleaner anchors us in the domestic routines that she transforms into surreal opportunities for philosophy.<sup>35</sup> Like the chorus in Greek tragedy or the fool in Shakespeare,



Figure 6. Sam Neill as Anthony, Stephanie Leonidas as Grace, and Shirley Henderson as the Cleaner. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

the Cleaner provides an omniscient view on the diegetic world as though from the vantage point of the cosmos.

### **Love's Cosmopolitan Ground**

Writing of love's promise, Phillips quotes Freud, who argues that "childhood love is boundless . . . it demands exclusive possession, it is not content with less than all . . . but it has no aim and is incapable of obtaining complete satisfaction; [thus] it is doomed to end in disappointment."<sup>36</sup> For Phillips, adult love is never free of these earlier foundations: "This story of insatiability, of infinite lack is parodied by Lacan's remark that love is giving something



Figure 7. Shirley Henderson as the Cleaner. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

you haven't got to someone who doesn't exist."<sup>37</sup> In short, love is always bound up with an impossible fantasy.

Taking this assumption as her starting point, Lauren Berlant argues that love is "the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated . . . [providing] an image of an expanded self," whereas desire "describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it."<sup>38</sup> In *Yes*, love becomes an allegory for the dream of shared ground in an imagined political future. The couple's delight in the differences they discover—or, in Phillips's words, the "enthraling illusions" they invent "about each other"—unravels under pressure, confirming the psychoanalytic claim that "falling

in love is not a good way of getting to know someone.”<sup>39</sup> This violent rupture of early idealizations structures what Barthes calls “a lover’s discourse.” For him, the amorous subject has to tolerate the “abrupt production . . . of a counter image of the loved object. . . . The subject suddenly sees the good Image alter and capsize . . . [as when] *I am ashamed for the other*.”<sup>40</sup> Idealization inevitably brings the “horror of spoiling,” which is even stronger than the “anxiety of losing.”<sup>41</sup> A shifting sense of the incompatible demands on *Yes*’s romantic couple becomes the central narrative drive, as sexual passion’s power to make dialogue possible even after the “horror of spoiling” is navigated through the aesthetic contrasts between their very different diegetic worlds: the clinical and icy formalities of her loveless house or the rich, colorful warmth of his flat where their intimacy takes place. *Yes* presents an alternative cosmopolitan subject constituted through relational intersubjectivity, which troubles both the notion of predictable social and intimate encounters and the romantic wish for love to provide a space of guaranteed recognition. Potter’s film opens up the imaginative space for a cosmopolitan subject who is grounded in, but can withstand, conflict and antagonism. Yet the film’s cosmopolitan promise also pushes against the limits of certainty in this framing.

*Yes* explores a passion that moves us beyond generic heterosexual desire and into an affective encounter with cosmopolitan optimism in the face of violent political histories. To approach love’s cosmopolitan promise is to bring together two possibilities that are bound to disappoint and fail: love demands a forgiving and forgetting of its disappointments, while cosmopolitanism requires a mode of hospitality to strangers that may not be constant or predictable.<sup>42</sup> Premised on idealizing impulses, both possibilities bring to the fore the inevitable wounds that accompany desire.<sup>43</sup> Both wish away ambivalence in favor of the most expansive realization of their potentiality.

For Mica Nava, however, too much stress on such ambivalence results in the critical neglect of our pleasure in the affective pull toward otherness, of the positive political transformations enacted through a “vernacular cosmopolitan” engagement with cultural and racialized difference.<sup>44</sup> Instead, Nava advocates for



the notion that a “visceral cosmopolitanism” might accompany the “normalisation of difference” that has gradually transformed everyday interactions in multicultural urban contexts such as London. Inspired by Nava, Tim Bergfelder also welcomes an exploration of cosmopolitan love as a space of transnational possibility in the cinema.<sup>45</sup> With its conceptual focus on the connection between the affective and the ethical, visceral cosmopolitanism brings to the study of love in cinema, he argues, a vital engagement with “the necessity of the encounter, dialogue, and libidinous engagement with the Other.”<sup>46</sup> The cosmopolitan subject needs to be conceptualized within the field of the Other if we are to address the forms of social othering that haunt such liberal political projects. But idealizations carry forms of antagonism and resentment, and both social and psychic idealizations require antipathies to be repressed. Nava and Bergfelder are right to claim the cosmopolitan project as a visceral one. But can we separate the affective pull toward difference from our potential also to feel threatened by it? As Potter’s film makes apparent, this challenge lies at the heart of both love and cosmopolitanism. Love offers the conditions for becoming the best possible version of oneself through the other’s idealizing desires, a dynamic that is reciprocal. Cosmopolitanism demands an equivalent political transformation—that we be our most hospitable selves in responding to the stranger with unhesitating generosity.

### **Saying Yes to Cosmopolitanism**

These shifting and multiple attachments in *Yes* are integral to what Giuliana Bruno calls its “‘textural’ weave.”<sup>47</sup> She writes: “Its cinematic form of writing carries several viewpoints, threads of meaning, and forms of address. As . . . [it] aspires to negotiate gender, cultural, political, and religious difference, it attempts to find a common language within that divergence” (29). The romantic narrative drive propelling the couple toward resolution is in constant tension with competing points of view, tilted camera angles, and the philosophical metacommentaries of the Cleaner. *Yes* shows “an overall impulse to map a grand panorama of the

state of the world,” but, as Bruno argues, “the actual canvas of the work is made up of many segments and various angles of perspectival views. The composition reveals overlapping visual layers and moves across different types of registers, even linguistic ones” (29). As Catherine Fowler suggests, “the most consistent play with perspective comes through the startling framing, as foreground and background constantly interfere with each other. Our impression of what is important is confused . . . in a bid to instate the cleaner’s view that ‘everything is connected.’”<sup>48</sup> *Yes* blends these theoretical and political drives into its aesthetic textures, spiraling inward and outward to generate an expansive sense of the film’s cosmopolitan ambitions.

The film’s contrasting locations trace the interconnected local-global dynamics of different geographic mobilities. The soundtrack shifts mood accordingly as we encounter and loop back to styles of music from East and West and from popular to classical. The script returns repeatedly to universalizing questions: the nature of humanity; the meaning of life and death; the desire for redemption and forgiveness; the social place of religion and science; the brutal legacies of Western colonialism; the healing power of love. Alongside these are staged a particular set of political conflicts out of which the film’s interpersonal dynamics take shape: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its effects on surrounding countries; the religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Belfast; hostility toward Muslims in London after 9/11. This “creative narrative geography,” in Bruno’s words, pushes simultaneously in the paradoxical directions of the cosmopolitan impulse—it tracks diverse contexts of the polis in its search for meaning in the wider cosmos.

*Yes* offers less a cinematic vision of the “cosmopolitical” than it does the staging of intersubjective ambivalence and relational contradictions.<sup>49</sup> As John Berger writes in a letter to Potter, published with the film’s screenplay, *Yes* is about the way “contradictions rhyme,” the way disappointments become “affirmative” and “let-downs inspire people to fly.”<sup>50</sup> As an affirmative that contradicts its opposite, the title *Yes* offers an imagined embrace despite the risks of rejection. For Berger, “desire . . . is the offer—from

one body to another—of a reprieve from the persistent pain of life. When the offer is accepted and reciprocated, the reprieve and its promise covers both parties for a while” (xiii). Desire thus has as much to do with “the taking away of the other’s pain as with the mutual pursuit of pleasure.” But, he argues, “this doesn’t mean desire is a narcotic or a painkiller. Rather, it is an alternative, shared use of physical energy and the special lucidity of the body, to bestow, if only for a brief moment, an exemption” (xiii). The couple in *Yes* carry this promise of exemption and the wounds that reopen after its necessarily temporary relief. Love becomes “exemptive,” and so “rhymes” (xii) with the contradictions at the heart of contemporary political aspirations.

Cosmopolitanism and its failures in *Yes* are articulated partly within the conventional sequence of the romance narrative: attraction, flirtation, seduction, sexual intimacy, disappointment, blame, abandonment, loneliness, return, forgiveness, and reconciliation.<sup>51</sup> The generic question of whether or not the couple can survive proximity to each other’s disappointing failures becomes more than just the question of surviving the lover’s worst version of the newly beloved. In *Yes*, the pain to be endured is heavier: each must face an account of the other articulated through a discourse whose abjecting capacities reach deep into the violent legacies of British colonial history and the wounding projections of patriarchal misogyny. The film’s desire to imagine another way of belonging to the world through intimate cosmopolitanism contains the expression of its opposite: that aversion to difference so often projected elsewhere in the process of claiming cosmopolitanism’s political promise. At the very moment we begin to imagine that the idealizations of this romance might be sustained precisely by the intensity of “the libidinous engagement with the Other,” the scene in the car park threatens to destroy the couple’s futurity, leaving us with only a sense of optimism’s cruelty.<sup>52</sup>

In *Yes*, an uneasy cosmopolitanism struggles with its own limits and houses the seeds of its own dissolution. We might extend Berlant’s claim that “love is the enemy of memory” to consider the kind of forgetting this romance requires in the face of the antagonisms brutally voiced from both sides. Berlant complicates her bold

assertion by immediately acknowledging the paradox that love is also “a much memorialized, mourned, and fetishized feeling that invests institutions of intimacy, such as the couple and the family, with the power to organize life and the memory of life across generations and millennia, nations and worlds.”<sup>53</sup> But, as she goes on to argue, “in order to twist its public and world-ordering function into a matter of personal and private agency, love’s conventional practice is antimemorial” (169). Berlant’s concern is with the generic conventions through which love is enabled to masquerade as deeply personalized only if the lovers are willing to forget the “self-amputation, vulnerability and social coercions” that so frequently make up the highly public histories and representations of love’s promise of “mature happiness” (169). What are the kinds of forgetting in *Yes* that are necessary for the couple’s love to withstand the pressures of their respective positions? She embodies the West’s disavowal of the consequences of British colonialism; He enacts the narcissistic contempt of misogynistic masculinity. These emerge most forcefully after they articulate their disappointments with their respective social worlds as animosity toward each other. Love becomes the “enemy of memory” in Berlant’s sense of the denial of the feeling’s public dimension and its struggle to sustain itself as an affect with no past (uniquely invented for this person in this moment). But in *Yes*, the public dimension is extended to a global scale, as the generic barrier facing the couple’s love demands no less than a forgetting of the worlds that formed them. The lovers try and fail to see their beloveds as individuals unencumbered by history and geography. As the film develops, these repressions become impossible; their pleasures in each other’s “differences” succumb to all-too-familiar clichés: “terrorist,” “imperialist,” “bigot,” “bitch.”

The film appears to narrate the love affair from first flirtation to final reunion, but “time does not run straight” here, as Mayer argues: *Yes* “mingles Resnais’s cyclical intercutting between Elle’s gaze and her memories with the spiral time signature of Potter’s earlier films.”<sup>54</sup> For example, the “spiral time” of the voice-over interior monologues not only brings the past into the present (as when He narrates his political and professional conflicts) but also divides the time of the present by separating sound from image.

Spectatorship moves into discordant temporal registers. The narrative convention of overcoming a series of obstacles to romantic union is reweven into a more fractured and interrupted time frame that allows regret and unresolved loss to linger.

*Yes* cinematically secures love by slowing time down. The healing of past wounds is possible only if the illusion of progressive linear temporality is contradicted by a diegesis that clearly embeds the past in the present. Mayer details the intricacies of the film's temporal weave: "While few scenes in *Yes* are shorter than a minute, few are longer than five, and almost none consist of sequences shot in more than one space. They are self-contained, with none of the usual editing ligatures such as match-cuts that structure the seamlessness of classical narrative cinema" (193). By undermining these conventional temporal flows, *Yes* displaces modern progress narratives that announce the West's arrival in the future by attributing all things traditional to an Eastern world belonging to the past.

The promise of cosmopolitanism lies not in a celebration of Western liberal tolerance but rather in the East's presence in the West as it makes absurd the progress narratives framing Western secular or Christian democracies as more developed and civilized than their Eastern, Arabic, or Islamic counterparts. *Yes* gestures toward the way in which "European culture emerges from an Islamic framework" (191), suggesting transposition by referencing histories of art, literature, and science. In its reworking of conventional temporal flows, love and politics are linked through cinematic incorporation that offers a cosmopolitan vision of culture as already blended.

The title of the film also cites "the most famous 'Yes' in English literature" which ends the final chapter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and its "unpunctuated, breathless, bravura monologue by Molly Bloom, the wife of the book's protagonist" (190). As Mayer argues, Stephen Masters's red "Yes" of the film's title and publicity materials—shown in the same sans serif font as all Potter's credits designed since *Orlando* (UK/Russian/Italy/France/Netherlands, 1992)—extends Joyce's "turning of the word 'Yes' into a verb that stands for orgasm as an ecstatic acceptance of memory, the Other and the world" into an affirmative "self-determined

opening out to the world” (190–91) in Potter’s film. The red “Yes” as an opening out to the world might be read as a kind of cosmopolitan performance, a citational gesture that seeks to reorient us in a more relational, and potentially world-making, direction. Love in this sense is the political cure that might enable us to embrace a more cosmopolitan future. Calming the psychic damage caused by the violence of invisibility, love’s recognition generates a subject “opened out to the world” as the expansiveness of psychic dimensions reaches toward a more public generosity. In putting such a subject in motion, it’s hard to resist the seductive promise of its cosmopolitan capacities.

*Yes* traces the contours of this always generic, yet seemingly personalized, intimacy to draw us in and out of its conditions of possibility. But what kind of dynamic is ascribed to love in this reimagined cosmopolitan landscape? As the personal is located uncomfortably within the geopolitical, She and He come up against the barriers to realizing what Berlant calls “the normative version of . . . [the] two-as-one intimacy of the couple form.”<sup>55</sup> The optimism of love and romance is exposed to reveal the idealizations that found it. When Berlant argues that in “the idealized image of their relation, desire will lead to love, which will make a world for desire’s endurance,” she points to the power of romance as fantasy in which saying Yes to love requires the pleasurable surrender to the two-as-one world.<sup>56</sup> In *Yes*, the failure of love’s cure reveals the repressions required by this normative model. Two-as-one world-building gives way to the inhospitable context that necessarily intrudes, refusing to be banished to the margins of the couple’s intimacy.

### **Rescaling Love**

*Yes* presents its political aspirations through a cinematic rescaling of intimate relations. Blending the micro and macro, the film constitutes cosmopolitan modes of address, moving us from the detail of the local polis to an expansive sense of entanglements between people, places, and cultures through the wider cosmos. The film creates spatial connections between the textures of the microscopic (the fertilized egg cell, the particle of dust) and the

visions of the macropolitical (the war in Lebanon, Irish socialism). These shifts in scale produce the film's political ambition to speak to universal political concerns and especially to threats to future understanding between East and West.

Potter's film provides a feminist rescaling of the world-making imagined by a cosmopolitan politics. One of the touchstones of theories of cosmopolitanism has been the notion of being a "citizen of the world," reworked, for example, by Gilroy in terms of "planetary humanism."<sup>57</sup> The idea of world citizenship extends into claims that particular cultural forms generate worlding effects—a scaling up of our sense of belonging and place. The blue planet has become the icon of global identification based on a desire to see something from the outside of which we are also a part.<sup>58</sup> This icon offers a compelling fantasy of unified totality that has become a familiar sentimental gesture, speaking to our fascination with it because of its ungraspability. But planetary identification is illusory—it is an imaginary misrecognition not unlike the Lacanian mirror stage in which the young infant sees reflected back an idealized version of itself (the *imago*) and thereby feels more physically integrated and capable than is actually the case.<sup>59</sup> Apprehending the Earth as an entirety, as a cosmos, is a fantasy of having an omniscient God's-eye perspective on the world from the outside. For Lacan, our love affair with the image of completion and integrity as viewed from outside begins in childhood but continues to inform desires and identifications throughout adulthood. To constitute oneself as a citizen of the world is to produce and identify with an illusory unity.

Giving a cinematic language to scale-shifting as a marker of political urgency, *Yes* reaches for the universal by returning us to the local and to the microscopic evidence of the materiality of life itself. The film draws us into the spaces of particles and microbes precisely to establish their universalizing connections: dirt and cleaning become the central trope for humanity's futile attempts to displace its undesirable objects and people into its margins. The opening close-ups of abstract particles floating in the air could be debris from an explosion or simply household dust circulating in sunlight. The indecipherable here signals the possibility of some-

thing horrifying, something beautiful, or something mundane. As the particles “become dots and lines, electronic lines . . . that become . . . cells,” a shot of the shaken sheet leads us into a scene of bourgeois cleanliness which leaves the removal of detritus to the labors of others.<sup>60</sup> The Cleaner is the pivotal scale-shifter, guiding our spatial orientation. In this bid to connect people through the shared physicality of mortal human bodies (ashes to ashes, dust to dust), the Cleaner’s words open the film:

Those of us who clean  
As a profession know the deeper source  
Of dirt is always there. You can't get rid  
Of it. You cannot hide or put a lid  
On it, as long as human life is there.  
It's us. The skin we shed, and then the hair.<sup>61</sup>

The Cleaner provides us with an intimate perspective on the failure of human relationships—especially the sterile marriage between She and her husband, Anthony, apparent here through the cold minimalist style of their bourgeois home (fig. 8). The emotional poverty of the wealthy couple for whom she labors provides the background for the Cleaner’s wisdoms. Offering insider knowledge of the pretensions of the “clean and proper” bourgeois marriage, the Cleaner establishes the married couple’s limited visions: She overlooks how the Cleaner’s labors smooth the transitions of her speedy life; Anthony lives in a fantasy world, playing air guitar like an animated teenage boy while his wife is absent (fig. 9).

The film’s “worlding” gestures include both swift shifts in location (London to Beirut, Belfast to Cuba) and fluid transitions between the microparticles that make up the materiality of life: magnified cells seen through a microscope and particles of dirt viewed in close-up in the kitchen sink. The film’s humanism is thus located in the very materiality of existence. From the beginning, voice, perspective, belief, knowledge, and attachment all exceed their conventional containment in character, plot, or point of view. When the Cleaner says, “It all depends upon your





Figure 8. Joan Allen as She and Sam Neill as Anthony. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

point of view,” she implicates spectatorship in her contingent philosophy. Refusing the distancing structures of looking, hearing, and identification in favor of the aesthetics of fleeting possibilities, the film proceeds through “glances, hints, and innuendos.”<sup>62</sup> *Yes* thus attempts to blend the affective and the ethical by moving us into and out of the transformative spaces of intimate encounters with love’s promise.

Transforming both cinematic and political conventions, the film produces its “textural aesthetic” by shifting the scale of our modes of intimate engagement. For Bruno, the “material fabric of the film flows in an elaborate formal structure . . . [and it] weaves a tangible desire for getting closer and connecting, for putting us in touch with ourselves, the objects in the world, and other subjects.”<sup>63</sup> This desire for intimacy and connection is generated through this



Figure 9. Sam Neill as Anthony. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

fabric's "transformative touch" which can "turn things inside out." Bruno continues: as a "moving force [that] puts interior and exterior, us and the environment, both in contact and in motion, this stylized beauty *is* a moving texture . . . its fashioning puts in motion the energy that creates emotion" (36). Bruno identifies how the film's "elaborate visual texture" and "dense sensory fabric, as well as the rhythm of its language," engage us in an affective encounter with the microscopic and the macroscopic (27). Blurring the boundaries between inner and outer, *Yes* disturbs the conventional spatial organization of spectatorship. The film's rescaling of cinematic space combines with what Mayer calls "spiral time" to explore through form the universality of the human condition (death, love, poetry, politics, society, sex, and birth, as given by the intertitles that introduce the sections of *Orlando*). We are returned to the lev-

eler of our own mortality without the guarantee of an even playing field for either the personal or the political.

If there is any sign of intimacy in the *mise-en-scène* of “the icy perfection of the white house,” it is to be found in the Cleaner’s proximity to the married couple’s *detritus*.<sup>64</sup> Shot in close-up, she touches the surfaces she scours and polishes, crouching by the cooker, lying facedown on the carpet, and climbing into the empty bath. She speaks urgently and wisely of the endless labor of ridding ourselves of dirt:

We’d never want to touch  
A bed again, a sofa, or a chair  
If we could see the things that live in there . . .  
They think our dirt is lovely; they survive  
By eating what we shed. They are alive  
'Cause bits of us are dead.<sup>65</sup>

As Pankaj Mishra writes, Potter’s use of the “usually obscure figure of the house-cleaner . . . [reminds] us of this karmic truth of our interconnected world: of the cleanliness and purity that is an ‘illusion’ and the dirt that is shuffled around but ‘is always there.’”<sup>66</sup> For Potter (as for Julia Kristeva and Douglas), dirt and filth are not qualities in themselves, but rather they apply to what relates “to a *boundary*, and, more particularly, [they represent] the object[s] jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin.”<sup>67</sup> Douglas stresses the importance of avoiding the mistake of treating the “bodily margins in isolation from all other margins.”<sup>68</sup> Assigning dirt and filth to the category of the abject requires its (often ritualized) expulsion; but the dirt and filth always return, as our bodies issue forth more *detritus* until we bite the dust. Any desire to fix boundaries through rituals of cleaning and purification is thus thwarted.

As the Cleaner reminds us, the flip side of idealization is devaluation, and, like surface perfection, it is always haunted by the *detritus* that will necessarily reappear. The idealizations of cosmopolitanism and love can be sustained only by sublimation: undesirable aspects of the human body and psyche must be projected

onto others, located elsewhere. The film draws parallels between the Cleaner's fastidious activities in the house—as she tells us, “Dirt doesn't go, it just gets moved around . . . There's no such thing as spotless, you just send / the dirt somewhere else, push it around”—and the experience of social abjection as He encounters increasing inhospitality and xenophobia (and eventually returns to Lebanon).<sup>69</sup> The Cleaner's intimacy with dirt and her elaborate techniques for its expulsion connect the micro and macro scales of her metacommentary as she offers a quasi-religious caution: “Everything you do or say is there, forever” (73). A view of humanity from the outside is ultimately presented—if at all—by the one who keeps closest to the debris of its interiors: “Maybe this earth is just a ball of fluff. / Some great big cleaner out there said: enough . . . / We're just the parasites that God forgot” (66). Unlike She, who travels between many different countries, the Cleaner stays in one place. Like other “invisible” domestic workers whom She fails to see at the swimming pool, the laboratory, and the hospital, the Cleaner looks directly at camera, as if to say, “See what I mean?” Getting inside someone else's skin becomes a question of domestic labor (fig. 10).

The invisibility of the labors of others that ease transitions for She through the “non-places” of her life—from the laboratory to the gym to the airport—works as a metacommentary on the dehumanizing effects of bourgeois privilege. As her aunt in Belfast says in a posthumous voice-over monologue: “Communism died, / But what came in its place? A lot of greed. / A life spent longing for things you don't need” (60). In *Yes*, wisdom is located with those who do not move, whose lives could not be called cosmopolitan in terms of their mobility. But like the dying aunt, the Cleaner halts the action, pauses the romantic narrative, and delivers universalizing monologues whose beauty and wit belong somewhere between philosophy and poetry.

The Cleaner's monologues echo the film's visual shifts in scale, proportion, and perspective. As its slow-motion montage sequences confer intimacy to the image—to the materiality of film itself—the mapping of new flows of affective connection blends geographic expanse with emotional intensity. The modes of spectatorship here might be called cosmopolitan in how they demand



Figure 10. Shirley Henderson as the Cleaner. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

connections between such different scales; above all, the spectator is put *in motion* in a way that both unsettles affiliations and loyalties and invites recognition of shared materialities.<sup>70</sup>

### **Uncertain Relationalities**

The film's poetic registers refuse the usual structures of identification, loosening our connection to the desires of the protagonists and dispersing the cosmopolitan aspirations of their romance into our spectatorial relationship to their diegetic world. While the couple continues to be the narrative focus, their failure to contain the legacies of their respective histories becomes the dramatic condensation of the film's aesthetic emphasis on uncertain

relationality. Decentering the agency of the protagonists and placing them within a relay of connections between the tiny micro-details of everyday life and the vast consequences of globalized geopolitical systems, *Yes* makes the relationality of subjectivity the ground of its investigation of both the promise and limits of cosmopolitanism.

If “there can be no self-production without others,” then when She says “I am always we” in the film, she gestures toward both the undoing of the subject through the mutually constitutive dynamics of love and the indeterminacies of self-identity conceived as a collaborative and incomplete project.<sup>71</sup> As if to engrain this premise diegetically, *Yes* builds relationality into the textures of its language, giving expression to the suggestion that identity is “an ever unfinished conversation.”<sup>72</sup> This dissolves the liberal fantasy of self-grounded authorship. *Yes* presents less a vision of cosmopolitan self-other multiplicities and more a sense of the flow of the unfinished affective and ethical co-constitution as described by Bergfelder.<sup>73</sup> The cosmopolitan subject is always affiliated to something beyond her location (both geographic and historical) and is also affectively subject to the impressions of others. The vulnerability of intersubjective co-constitution generates the “precarious life” that Judith Butler locates in the power relations of unequal distribution of risks and resources.<sup>74</sup> This relationality decenters the cosmopolitan subject from its own “worlding” view, demonstrating the impossibility of ever grasping the cosmos in its entirety, as though from the outside. The foundational claim of cosmopolitanism here becomes its own undoing.

The aesthetic tensions that put the spectator in motion here are not limited to the disorientations of being held in the spaces between universals and particulars, or between discordant temporalities. In contrast to our intimate connections with the Cleaner throughout the film, our perspective on the protagonists’ love affair must shift for the film’s ambitions to succeed. The tricky question for both love and cosmopolitanism becomes: What happens when the dirt that has been brushed under the carpet returns? In some ways, the whole film addresses this question. In so doing, it introduces irresolvable contradictions that not only rhyme but also,

in undermining generic conventions with such elegant disproportion, deny us a sutured point of view of the reconciled lovers whose passion carries us into their embrace. After the emotional violence of the car park scene, we never unequivocally share the generic desire for romantic closure.

*Yes* thus mobilizes the relationalities of subjectivity to suggest the possibilities of political transformation. But there is one character arc on which our affective response to the couple's reunion relies. The film's cosmopolitan drive depends on our connection to the transformation of She from uptight, self-absorbed professional to the lover who can hear her beloved's pain and to the niece who can be undone by grief at her aunt's deathbed (and ultimately to the woman who gives herself up to the bodily pleasures of dancing with strangers in a Cuban nightclub). Liberated from her overly cerebral and sterile life in London, She can welcome him back because of her encounters with loss: her aunt's death and his turning away from her. The shift in scale that forces her finally to see herself from the outside (in order to let others in) is expressed in the outpouring of grief her aunt's voice posthumously requests:

If and when I die  
 I want to see you cry  
 I want to see you tear your hair  
 Your howls of anguish fill the air  
 . . . And sobbing, fall upon my bed  
 I want to know that I am dead . . .  
 I want to know I'm part of you  
 And that you cannot bear me being torn away.<sup>75</sup>

On hearing her aunt's soliloquy, She weeps and stares wordlessly. Able finally to listen, to pay attention, to be present, to be open to others, She is undone. The catharsis connects her back to He, to their unfinished conversation. But here the "one-world" vision of cosmopolitanism is no longer a euphemism for "'First World' culture," as He showed it to be in the car park scene. Rather, it is transformed into a humanism stemming from shared vulnerability.<sup>76</sup> As Mishra puts it: "In the last swift scene of the film, the sci-



Figure 11. Simon Abkarian as He and Joan Allen as She. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove

entist returns to Belfast to see her long-ailing communist aunt. . . . The Lebanese returns to a baptism in Beirut. From these small but symbolically momentous events—the end and the beginning of life—they travel to reconciliation in Cuba.”<sup>77</sup> Now outpost rather than vanguard, more like the graveyard of the twentieth-century project of cosmopolitan socialism, Cuba offers the couple a suitable place of neutrality.

According to Mishra, in recognizing the implications of how “short and precarious” life is, She glimpses the possibility of love’s cosmopolitan cure after all. Death brings a belated transformation that enables the recognition of a shared human precarity. The closing scene of the lovers embracing on the sand in the sunlight returns to us the hope they invested in love. For Mishra,



the film offers love as a hopeful transcendence of the materiality of life itself: in the “scenes full of glorious light and colours of the Caribbean, Potter brings them together, believing that, as the poet said, ‘What will survive of us is love.’”<sup>78</sup> But reading these words in their original sequence with the poem’s preceding line—“Our almost-instinct almost true”—we might heed Philip Larkin’s qualifiers and hesitate at the threshold of this reading of love as a purely redemptive closure.<sup>79</sup>

These final scenes move us into a different register—one that conjures an almost dreamlike state of flowing sounds and images, leaving us with a desire for connection and intensity that includes but moves beyond the two-in-one world that previously proved so violently impossible. Leaving behind the pace and verse of speech, time is slowed to a series of trancelike and self-consciously cinematic visions. The shots of her dancing in the nightclub and of him returning from Beirut share this sense of cinema as wish fulfillment, the imaginary resolution that films can offer and life rarely matches. As the lovers roll in the sand by the sea (fig. 11), as so many in the history of the cinema have famously done before them, we are left in the spaces not only between East and West, self and other, but also between the imagination and the social, between the cinema and politics. Cosmopolitanism’s utopianism in these final scenes is haunted by its dystopian others. In this liminal space between utopia and dystopia, the film presents us with the ambivalence generated not only by cosmopolitanism and love but also by cinema itself: if we long for the ideals offered on the screen, we also anticipate their undoing, knowing that a sense of pleasurable loss will return “on leaving the movie theater.”<sup>80</sup> Potter’s film pushes against the potential failures at the heart of the idealizations that drive both love and cosmopolitanism, even as it mobilizes both love and cosmopolitanism to seduce us. In this sense, love’s cosmopolitanism remains a promise most powerfully demanded in its moments not only of delivery but also, most potently, of failure (fig. 12).

## Notes

My heartfelt thanks go to Hilary Hinds, Homay King, Lalitha Gopalan, Amber Jacobs, and Janelle Hixon for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. I am grateful to Sally Potter and Adventure Pictures for kind permission to reproduce the film stills contained in this article.

1. For full details of the short film of this scene, see Sally Potter, *Yes: Screenplay and Notes* (New York: Newmarket, 2005), vii; and Cynthia Lucia, "Saying 'Yes' to Taking Risks: An Interview with Sally Potter," *Cineaste* (2005): 24–30. Although the film title most often appears in bold capitals, in this article the title will be written as *Yes* for ease on the eye of the reader. The same pertains to the script's capitalization of "HE" and "SHE," which will appear here as "He" and "She."
2. For two excellent exceptions, see Giuliana Bruno, "Yes, It's about Time: A 'Virtual' Letter to Sally Potter from Giuliana Bruno," *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 1 (2008): 27–40; and Sophie Mayer, *The Cinema of Sally Potter: A Politics of Love* (London: Wallflower, 2009).
3. In the span of a few months in 2016, Britain decided by referendum to leave the European Union (following a campaign fueled by anti-immigration rhetoric), and Donald Trump was elected as US president (following a xenophobic campaign to "Make America Great Again").
4. At the moment of writing in August 2017, we might list the following (though by the time of reading, further tragedies will have no doubt risen to prominence): the war in Syria, generating the mass migration of people into the Mediterranean and northern Europe; the advent of the so-called Islamic State (variously known as IS, ISIS, and ISIL), bringing a series of IS-related attacks to Europe and elsewhere; the recurrent shooting of black men in the US by police officers, leading to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement; the mass shooting at Pulse, a Latinx gay nightclub in Orlando.
5. For an interdisciplinary volume covering recent debates, see Nina Glick Schiller and Andrew Irving, eds., *Whose Cosmopolitanism? Critical Perspectives, Relationalities and Discontents* (New York: Berghahn, 2014).

6. Jon Binnie, Julian Holloway, Steve Millington, and Craig Young, introduction to *Cosmopolitan Urbanism*, ed. Binnie, Holloway, Millington, and Young (London: Routledge, 2006), 13; Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London: Routledge, 2004).
7. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 103.
8. See Jackie Stacey, “The Uneasy Cosmopolitans of *Code Unknown*,” in Schiller and Irving, *Whose Cosmopolitanism?*, 160–74.
9. Robert Spencer, *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 12.
10. Felicia Chan, *Cosmopolitan Cinema: Cross-Cultural Encounters on East Asian Screens* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2017).
11. See Sharon Willis, *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).
12. Bruno, “Yes, It’s about Time,” 29.
13. Jacqueline Rose, “The Performativity and Suspension of Disbelief,” in Schiller and Irving, *Whose Cosmopolitanism?*, 42–43.
14. Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Uncommitted Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 40.
15. Despite (or because of) the awkward grammatical consequences, I adopt the film’s naming of “She” and “He” throughout the article.
16. For a discussion of how this theme relates to Potter’s previous films, see Catherine Fowler, *Sally Potter* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 95–108.
17. Mayer, *The Cinema of Sally Potter*, 191.
18. Willis, *Marguerite Duras*, 34.
19. Mayer, *The Cinema of Sally Potter*, 196.
20. Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).
21. Fowler, *Sally Potter*, 131.

22. Mayer, *The Cinema of Sally Potter*, 196.
23. Potter, *Yes*, 52–53.
24. Britt-Marie Schiller, “Saying Yes to Dirt, Desire and Difference: *Yes* (2004),” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 89 (2008): 1232; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
25. Potter, *Yes*, 51.
26. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1996), 2.
27. On Jacques Lacan’s theory of the posturing of the self-grounding masculine subject, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: The Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 44–45.
28. Pankaj Mishra, introduction to Potter, *Yes*, viii.
29. Potter, *Yes*, 54.
30. Mayer, *The Cinema of Sally Potter*, 196.
31. Mishra, introduction to Potter, *Yes*, xix.
32. See Rajana Khanna, “On Asylum and Genealogy,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104, no. 2 (2005): 371–78.
33. Kaja Silverman, “The Cure by Love,” *Public* 32 (2005): 42.
34. Mayer, *The Cinema of Sally Potter*, 191.
35. Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002). For a discussion of love’s disorganizing capacities, see Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn, NY: punctum, 2012).
36. Sigmund Freud, “Female Sexuality,” in *On Sexuality*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 7 (London: Penguin, 1977), 378.
37. Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 39.
38. Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 15.
39. Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 40.
40. Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 25–26.
41. Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 28.

42. See Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001), 3–24.
43. See John Berger, “A Letter,” in Potter, *Yes*, xi–xv.
44. Mica Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Homi Bhabha, “Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism,” in *Text and Nation: Cross-Disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities*, ed. Laura García-Moreno and Peter Pfeiffer (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), 191–207.
45. Tim Bergfelder, “Love beyond the Nation: Cosmopolitanism and Transnational Desire in Cinema,” in *Europe and Love in Cinema*, ed. Jo Labanyi, Luisa Passerini, and Karen Diehl (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012), 59–86.
46. Bergfelder, “Love beyond the Nation,” 64.
47. Bruno, “Yes, It’s about Time,” 29.
48. Fowler, *Sally Potter*, 101.
49. Alongside Nava and Bergfelder, boldly optimistic readings of contemporary cultural cosmopolitanism include Berthold Schoene, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Marsha Meskimmon, *Contemporary Art and the Cosmopolitan Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2011); and Spencer, *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature*. The term “cosmopolitical” is borrowed from *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
50. Berger, “A Letter,” xii–xiii.
51. See Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 72–73.
52. Bergfelder, “Love beyond the Nation,” 64; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
53. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 169.
54. Mayer, *The Cinema of Sally Potter*, 193.
55. Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 6.

56. Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 15.
57. Gilroy, *After Empire*, 76.
58. For a reading of the blue planet as icon, see Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury, and Jackie Stacey, *Global Nature, Global Culture* (London: Sage, 2000).
59. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), 75–81.
60. Potter, *Yes*, 1.
61. Potter, *Yes*, 1.
62. Berger, "A Letter," xi.
63. Bruno, "Yes, It's about Time," 36.
64. Mayer, *The Cinema of Sally Potter*, 196.
65. Potter, *Yes*, 65.
66. Mishra, introduction to Potter, *Yes*, xix.
67. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 69.
68. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 150.
69. Potter, *Yes*, 64–66.
70. For a discussion of the spectator "*in transit*," see Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
71. Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 24.
72. The title of *The Unfinished Conversation* (dir. John Akomfrah, 2013) quotes Stuart Hall. Akomfrah's three-screen video installation investigates cultural identity through Hall's personal and political memories.
73. Bergfelder, "Love beyond the Nation."
74. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).
75. Potter, *Yes*, 61.

76. Ackbar Abbas, "Cosmopolitan De-scriptions: Shanghai and Hong Kong," *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 771.
77. Mishra, introduction to Potter, *Yes*, xix.
78. Mishra, introduction to Potter, *Yes*, xix.
79. Philip Larkin, "An Arundel Tomb," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Marvell, 1990), 111.
80. See Roland Barthes, "On Leaving the Movie Theater," in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 345–46.

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Figure 12. Joan Allen as She and Simon Abkarian as He. *Yes* (dir. Sally Potter, UK, 2004). © Copyright Nicola Dove