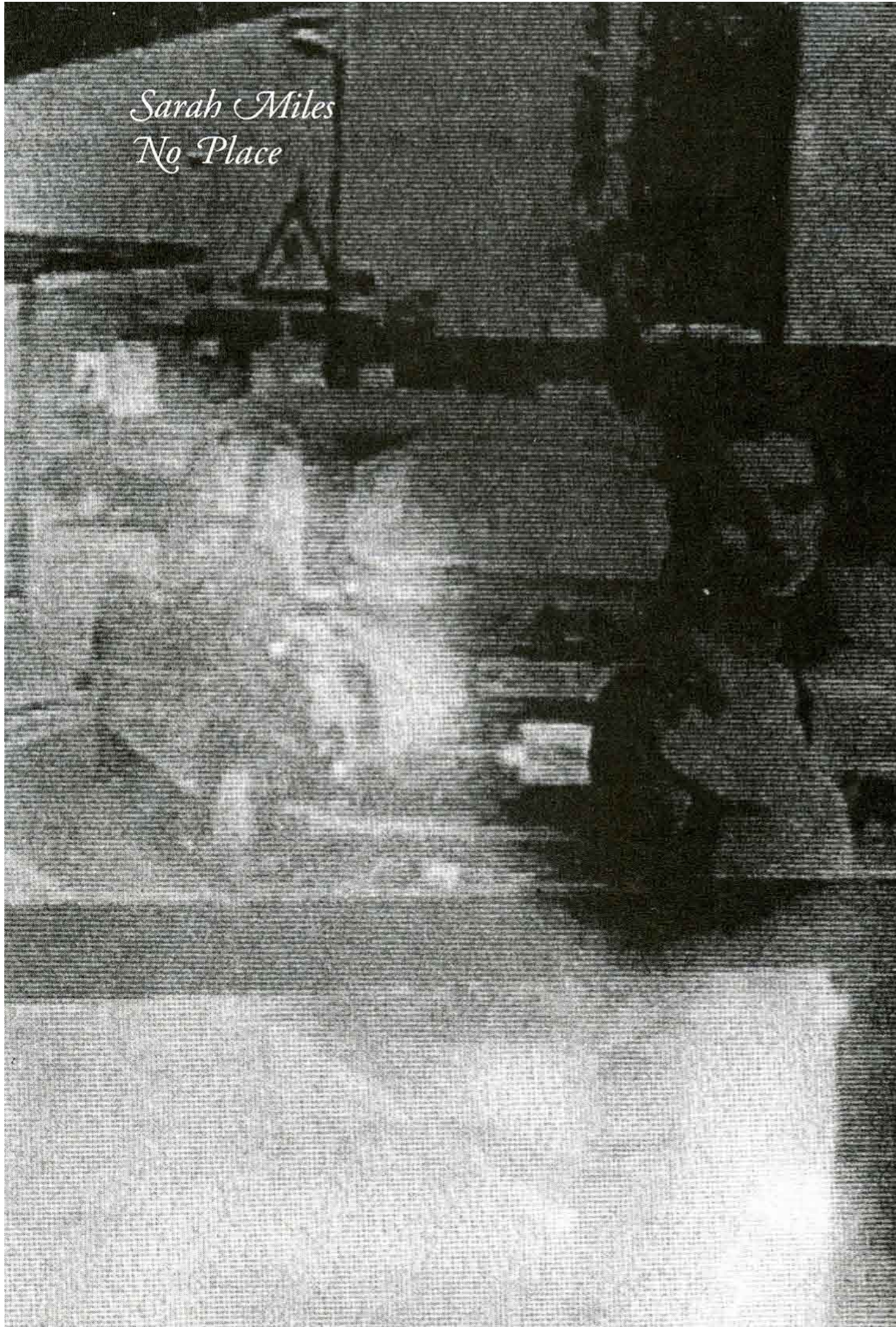


Sarah Miles
No Place



No Place is a new film work by Sarah Miles, shown as two different companion installations, in two separate but related locations – King’s Lynn in Norfolk and King’s Cross in London.

King’s Lynn and King’s Cross stand at either end of the railway line into and out of London and, in their own way, provide archetypal representations of the country and the city: the one set amongst a flat, agricultural landscape of rural isolation; the other a teeming, and often seedy, vision of the all-consuming but anonymous urban metropolis. Divided into two parts, and consisting of a dream-like collage of images from both locations, *No Place* traces a series of parallel stories involving a number of young country girls, whose paths in life are played out against the backdrop of cinema, and in particular that exemplary fantasy journey undertaken by Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*.

The King’s Lynn part of the project reflects the point of view of a young girl (one of a number of surrogate Dorothys) growing up in the country, who seeks regular refuge in the cinema and who dreams of one day moving to the city. The companion work represents the point of view of an adult woman (Dorothy grown up into Judy from Hitchcock’s classic *Vertigo*...) looking back, from the apparent sanctuary of a church, contrasting her nostalgic memories of the countryside with the loss of her innocence, and her childhood illusions, following her arrival in the Emerald City.

King's Cross has long been a magnet and a refuge for transient populations (the displaced, the dispossessed, the disturbed), as well as a haven for artist-outsiders – an enduring feature of the area that is evoked by the fragments of video footage that Miles (as a long-time resident) has accumulated down the years. This documentary material (faces flowing in and out of the underground, a montage of the hotel signs in Argyle Square, glimpses of the red-light district) is counterpointed with a number of setpiece scenes which echo significant moments from Hollywood movies. Following the Yellow Brick Road to a seedy hotel room near King's Cross station and on to the belfry at St. Pancras Church, Miles' film conjures a feeling in which contemporary characters' footsteps are not only shadowed by traces of the past but also prefigured and reflected in the language and mythology of cinema.

At the heart of the work is the motif of a crystal ball: as an object in the newly-filmed scenes, and as a distorting lens through which much of the material is viewed. Taking its lead from *The Wizard of Oz*, the crystal ball acts as a gateway into a world of heightened colour. A medium for scrying, for invoking the spirits of the past, it is also a portal into the parallel fantasy-world of cinema, creating a phantasmagoria in which the film and video footage starts to coalesce. Oblique and episodic, the non-linear, looping nature of the installation also suggests a dream-like blurring of fiction and reality.

*Good Girls go to Heaven,
Bad Girls go to London.*

But there is No Place like Home.

Maria Walsh

Sarah Miles' *No Place*, a film work inspired by *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) as well as other mainstream narrative and art cinema films, consists of two versions installed in two separate but related locations, King's Lynn, Norfolk and King's Cross, London. In Miles' transcription of Dorothy's odyssey, King's Lynn functions as Kansas, the home and point of departure, while London functions as the City of Emeralds, her journey's destination. On one level, *No Place* could be said to follow the logic of 'narrative transformation' set out by Tzvetlan Todorov¹ where an initial point of stasis, e.g. the home, is ruptured and put into action, in this case by the force of a cyclone. The resulting narrative is a movement over time that proceeds by means of obstacle and delay but whose ultimate goal is to get back home. In other words, to return 'to a same yet different stasis at the end'.² Transported by the 'twister' from Kansas to the land of Oz, Dorothy follows the yellow brick road to the City of Emeralds to enlist the Wizard's help in getting back home and her eventual return resolves the disturbance that generated the narrative adventure in the first place. Dorothy is a classical hero(ine), the home being both the origin and destination of her odyssey.

Home is merely a concept, necessary to travel from or to leave behind. It exists only at the price of being lost and is perennially sought. In this logic, voyage is circular: a false move in which the point of return circles back to the point of departure. ³

Miles' *No Place*, however, disrupts the logic of this voyaging. To begin with, the journey's point of origin, the home, rather than being a purely static entity as in Todorov's model, is already pulverised in being traversed, by not one, but seven Dorothy characters, thereby undermining the singularity of the hero in classical narrative film. This dispersal of the function of the hero(ine) into multiple characters is further accentuated in the second version of *No Place*. Transported from King's Lynn to King's Cross by the cyclonic force of Miles' visual imaging, the multiple Dorothy characters, now played by different actresses, segue into female characters from a number of mainstream narrative films ranging from Judy/Madeleine from *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), Holly Golightly from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961), and Mrs. Miller from *MacCabe and Mrs. Miller* (Robert Altman, 1971) to name but a few.⁴ What

unites these female cinematic personas is that they all stem from narratives in which they are contaminated in some way by the perils of the city, often succumbing to prostitution and drug addiction. The transformation of the innocent girl into a prostitute is a recognisable narrative strand of nineteenth-century fiction, which often gets replayed in mainstream cinema. However, Miles' experimental narrative form does not follow the linear logic of this tale, which ordinarily proceeds as follows: the protagonist loses her innocence, falls on hard times and is corrupted by the city, but retains 'a heart of gold' and is eventually saved, usually by a man. Instead, in *No Place* we are presented with fragmentary narrative strands and voices that move in and out of one another in a way that echoes the logic in dreams. The circularity of the male voyage in *The Odyssey* is replaced by the cyclonic nature of female voyaging where the digressions that comprise the journey, rather than being resolved, increase in intensity, criss-crossing between the past and the present. Image sequences are repeated between the two versions of *No Place* as the adult Dorothys in the city – Judy, Madeleine, Holly Golightly – remember their pasts, and the girl Dorothys in King's Lynn anticipate their futures.

When Dorothy stood in the doorway and looked around, she could see nothing but the great grey prairie on every side. [...] Even the grass was not green, for the sun had burned the tops of the long blades until they were the same grey colour to be seen everywhere.⁵

While Kansas, Dorothy's home, is pervaded by greyness, extreme colour and contrast permeate her odyssey. In the first version of *No Place*, the bleakness and greyness of King's Lynn is accentuated and combined with black and white shots of the adolescent Dorothys which contrast with the luxuriant red hues of the cinema. Cinema features in *No Place* as both an actual place and a mnemonic screen of remembered phantasms. It is an actual place in the sense that the cinema we see in the King's Lynn version of the film is the local town cinema, which as a socially prescribed place for indulging in time travel and fantasy, plays a specific cultural and social role in the identity of places such as King's Lynn. However, the nature of cinema in Miles' film harks back to the enchantment and fascination of cinema-going as a child, which resonates with early forms of film spectatorship characterised by absorption in the magic of the spectacle.⁶

Cinema in *No Place* performs a kind of witchery. Its spell is made evident in a scene in which we see one of the young Dorothys watching herself tap-dancing on stage, enthralled by the possibility of becoming a dazzling creature lit up in lights. Her starry-eyed look surrounded by an aura of white light recalls the opening sequence of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), another of the films Miles quotes in *No Place*. At the beginning of Lynch's film, the captivated look on Betty's (Naomi Watts) face superimposed on a group of couples jitterbug dancing echoes her expression later in the film when she is shown arriving in the City of Angels; proximity to Hollywood's bright lights automatically seeming to realise her dreams of becoming an actress. Paralleling the darkness of Lynch's universe, which is also set against the backdrop of contrasts between small town and big city, in Miles' *No Place*, the cinema, its sound and visions, has an equally mysterious, perhaps even sinister, meaning for the Dorothys. The cinematic space of fantasy does not end with exiting the cinema, but leaks into Dorothy's home life. We see her play back recordings of *The Wizard of Oz* on her Hitachi tape recorder as if these disembodied voices, these ghosts in the machine, held the secret of a magical elsewhere.⁷ Dorothy is possessed by

these voices before she ever encounters the wicked witch in the belfry at St Pancras Church in King's Cross near the end of *No Place* where her odyssey criss-crosses with the ending of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* when Judy/Madeleine falls to her death from the bell-tower.

*Departing on a journey is one of the commonest and best authenticated symbols of death.*⁸

The return to a 'same yet different stasis' characteristic of Todorov's model of narrative transformation often results in the death of the female protagonist in classical narrative cinema and film noir. The eradication of the disturbance signified by the figure of the woman allows the story to come to an end. In Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, Judy must die for the sake of narrative resolution as, while Scottie desires her, she disturbs his need for mastery. Again Miles, while following elements of this narrative pattern, alters it significantly. Rather than having Dorothy as Judy die *per se*, the cyclonic force of *No Place* returns us to scenes from the beginning of the film thereby suggesting that a Dorothy character's point-of-view is still operative. One could read this return to earlier scenes in the film in terms of

having one's life flash before one on the moment of death or one might read it as implying Dorothy's return home. However, and this is my preference, one might read it as a return of a different kind, a return to the sense of hope that cinema's images held out to the 'innocent' Dorothy in the first part of the film. In this reading, the film's trajectory links to contemporary trends in film theory where the affective aspects of the cinematic image are attended to rather than the more negative views of theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry who compared the film viewer to a child that needed to be disillusioned of the seductions of the image.⁹ While on the one hand Miles' Dorothy could be said to stand in for such a film viewer as she moves from captivation to disillusion, Miles' derailment of chronology upsets this supposed progression and instead moves the viewer through spaces that play with the ambiguities of seduction. This is nowhere more apparent than in the images of the crystal ball which functions as a twisted space within the screen through which the chronology of past and present and the distinction between fantasy and reality become unhinged and de-realised. The breaking up of temporal logic, combined with the metastasising of the female protagonists into a series of personas, evaporates the negative connotations of Dorothy's/

Judy's possible suicide. If Dorothy/Judy cannot escape the perils of the city, at least she can keep on moving and her capacity for making herself over into other versions of herself keeps this process of continually becoming at work. This is the creative repetition that cinema gives us access to as opposed to the sterile repletion which would keep the myriad Dorothys trapped by their fascination with cinema and the city. In their capacity for creative becoming or making themselves over, the multiple Dorothys perform what Jackie Stacey refers to as 'the typical work of femininity: the production of oneself as both subject and object.'¹⁰ While Stacey, in her research into Hollywood films of the 1940s, views the use of female stars as models of various femininities as ultimately empowering, much feminist film theory, however much it reads against the grain, finds cinema's images of femininity affirm negative identifications with passivity, victimisation, and deadly desires. In some ways Miles' adult Dorothys repeat these stereotypes, as they are captured in languid poses suggestive of erotic availability and self-dispossession. However, on another level, in their multiplicity and chaotic splintering or segueing into one another, they confound these stereotypes by exacerbating them. In pushing these stereotypes to the limit, they

begin to intimate something else, something that is suggested but not represented in the film, perhaps the secret elsewhere sensed by the young Dorothy who listened to the ghosts in the machine on her Hitachi tape recorder.

Salman Rushdie calls 'The Wizard of Oz' a hymn to elsewhere.¹¹

Another of Miles' oblique inspirations for *No Place* is the novel by Christa Wolf, *No Place On Earth* (1979), which tells the tale of two young writers of the German Romantic movement, Karoline von Gunderode and Heinrich von Kleist, who, finding 'no place' for wholeness and authenticity in a society driven by the profit-making ethos of the assembly-line, commit suicide. The theme of searching for a place to be reverberates in Miles' film in the narrative strand of the couple that appears fleetingly and intermittently, at one time accompanied by an intertitle referring to 'home'. This couple also refers to the protagonists of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), the gamin and the tramp, the gamin (played by Paulette Goddard) being suggested by Miles as another version of Dorothy. Both Chaplin and Wolf explore whether there is any alternative to capitalist productivity, Chaplin's

film eventually siding with the triumph of love, as the tramp and the gamin walk off into the sunrise. Love is on the side of idiocy, a giving that asks for nothing in return, that doesn't accumulate capital but throws caution to the wind and travels to uncharted territory rather than returning to 'the same yet different' stasis of the end. Love is what the Judy/Dorothy characters seek in the City of Emeralds and the failure of their search results in their destruction and turn to prostitution as a form of sexual exchange fully bound up within the economy of capital. Jean-Luc Godard, another of Miles' cinematic influences, addressed similar questions in many of his films; *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) being the one that Miles most explicitly references here.¹² In *Vivre Sa Vie*, the actress Anna Karina plays Nana, a prostitute. Godard's advertisement for *Vivre Sa Vie* stated that Nana 'gives her body but keeps her soul.'

But in what serious sense, beyond the clichés of movies or of piety, does she keep her soul, a soul that transcends her giving her body, the unfortunate circumstances in which she's caught? [...] Is it possible, the film inquires, for us to be the actors and the prostitutes that our society demands and still keep our

*souls, still remain responsible and free? Can any of us preserve an inside that somehow endures, perhaps even thrives, even though we surrender the outside to others?*¹³

For adherents of much postmodern theory, the notion that we have insides to preserve seems naïve and romantic as, in our contemporary exposure and immersion in the global mediascape, our insides are turned inside out, our identities, automaton-like, comprised of surface reactions and motor responses. While the notion of an inner self preserved intact from public life is questionable, premised as it is on the idea that we are masters and mistresses of our 'homes', an idea that psychoanalysis disillusioned us from, it can be claimed that the exposure and invasion of our interior lives in and by the media has resulted in an increased desire to find a zone of intimacy, a home. While the negative aspects of this desire tend to be rooted in nostalgia for the past or driven by the impulse to acquire territory at whatever cost, there is merit in preserving the idea of home as a hopeful elsewhere that exists on the margins of not belonging. 'No place' is, of course, the literal translation of 'utopia', although it has come to mean, more commonly, 'a good place'. Any attempt to make real the potential of

utopia, to make a good place on earth, can only result in dystopia; in being realised, the promise that 'no place' keeps is betrayed. On one level, the Dorothys' utopian dream of cinematic glamour and romance turns into the dystopian vision of a city and its female voyagers on the brink of breakdown, but, throughout the film, we catch glimpses of the existence of 'no place' as a parallel, elsewhere world, especially in the narrative strand of the couple, the lovers inspired by *Modern Times*. The dusky blue hues of natural light that pervade these efflorescent scenes render home as both a dreamlike and an actual place which keeps the utopian dimension of 'no place' alive on the margins of the known rather than holding it up as a futuristic goal or desire. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze mentions how the world has become like a bad film script and that, while cinema mirrors this script in its use of clichés, hidden amongst these clichés, cinema also offers the possibility of images that might restore belief in the world.¹⁴ At the end of *No Place*, two girls link arms and walk away together as the voiceover ruminates on friendship. In a sleight of hand that preserves the idiocy of lovers and faith in friendship, Miles' *No Place* keeps the elsewhere alive and breathing.

Footnotes:

1. Tvetlan Todorov, 'Narrative Transformations', *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard, foreword Jonathan Culler, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 218-233.
2. Laura Mulvey, 'Death 24 times a second: the tension between movement and stillness in the cinema', *COIL*, no.s 9/10: 2001, unpaginated.
3. Guiliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film*, (New York and London: Verso, 2002), p. 85.
4. Except for Nathalie Press, acclaimed star of *My Summer of Love* (Pawel Pawlikowski, 2005), these different actresses are non-professional, some being Miles' friends and family with Miles herself featuring as Madeleine.
5. L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz*, (London: Puffin Books, 1982), pp. 1-2.
6. Tom Gunning, 'An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator'. *Art & Text*, no. 34, 1989, pp. 31-45.
7. This scene is inspired by Miles' own childhood sneaking of her Hitachi cassette recorder into a screening of *The Wizard of Oz* at the Regency cinema in Lyme Regis.
8. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey, vol. 4, (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 507.
9. Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', in Philip Rosen (ed), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 286-298.

10. Jackie Stacey, *StarGazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p.7.
11. This reference is in Miles' working notes for *No Place*. Salman Rushdie has written on *The Wizard of Oz* in the series of BFI film classics, 1992.
12. As well as echoing Godard's themes of love and prostitution, Miles is also referencing the scene in *Vivre Sa Vie* when Nana goes to the cinema and watches Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928), a film about a witch/saint/warrior being burned at the stake.
13. Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films & their Medium*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 347.
14. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta, (London: The Athone Press, 1989), p. 171-172.



Sarah Miles

Sarah Miles is an award-winning film-maker whose work has been screened nationally and internationally at film festivals, in cinemas and galleries and on broadcast television.

Soulsearching (1990)

15 mins, SVHS, colour. (Co-director, featuring Golden Syrup)

I Love You (1992)

1 min, 16mm, B&W (Writer/Director/Producer)

Camera: Seamus McGarvey.

Commissioned by the Arts Council of England and BBC2

Damsel Fam (1992)

12 mins 30 secs, 35mm, colour (Writer/Director/Producer)

Camera: Seamus McGarvey.

Commissioned by the Arts Council of England

Love's Secret (1994)

19 mins 30 secs, 16mm, colour (Writer/Director)

Camera: Seamus McGarvey. Producer: Sarah Jeans.

Commissioned by the Arts Council of England and Channel 4

Amaeru Fallout 1972 (1997)

10 mins, Beta SP, colour (Writer/Director/Producer)

Camera: Nick Gordon Smith. Music: Polly Jean Harvey.

Commissioned by City of Westminster Council

A Bunny Girl's Tale (1998)

13 mins, 16mm, colour (Writer/Director).

Camera: Nick Gordon Smith. Music: Polly Jean Harvey.

Producer: Laura Hastings-Smith.

Commissioned by the British Film Institute and Channel 4

Modern Times (2000)

4 mins, Beta SP, colour (Writer/Director/Producer)

Commissioned by Salon 3

Magnificent Ray (2000)

23 mins, Digi Beta, colour (Writer/Director/Producer)

Camera: Nick Gordon Smith.

Commissioned by South West Media Development Agency

2001: A Family Odyssey/Ophelia's Version (2002)

50 mins, Digi Beta, colour (Writer/Director/Producer)

Commissioned by Arts Council England. Supported by VET



Red Barn Gallery,
King's Lynn Arts Centre,
King Street, King's Lynn

17th July - 13th August 2005

The Courtyard Theatre,
King's Cross, 10 York Way,
London N1 9AA

19th - 31st July 2005

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