Tango Lessons
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Paris is usually considered the second capital of tango. It is obvious to connoisseurs of tango—or even regular consumers of the music—that Paris is the international location most frequently mentioned in tango lyrics and poetry. It is also common to understand the Paris–tango association as a historical occurrence limited to the years between the First and Second World Wars, when tango was absorbed by the porous show business of the French capital—a process most commonly referred to from the Argentine perspective as tango’s “conquest” of Paris. It was in that moment of fluid communication between Buenos Aires and Paris (via the port of Marseilles), when singers, dancers, musicians, and tango orchestras would not infrequently relocate to Montmartre and tour Europe, that a repertoire of Parisian images, concepts, stories, and characters were incorporated into the rhetoric of tango. Most mentions of Paris, its neighborhoods, bridges, and streets, or even French characters date back to those years. By the 1940s it had already become a fossilized set of commonplaces, and it is not until the 1970s that the fantasy of tango in Paris was revisited by a new type of Argentine exile, one less concerned with the picturesque characters of the Parisian landscape and more with the city’s status as a refuge or safe house in the midst of political (and thus aesthetic) instability.

The early internationalization of tango via Paris had a decisive impact not only in economic terms but also in terms of the critical and social recognition of the genre—especially in Buenos Aires, where tango had until that moment been marginal and sometimes even clandestine. Given that tango
is a particularly self-reflexive form, the circulation of artists and tango personalities between Paris and Buenos Aires was immediately seized on by tango composers and soon became a dominant topic. There were two basic approaches to narrating this new scenario: the humorous tone of tangos that stressed the contrasts between the still provincial culture of Buenos Aires and Paris’s metropolitan, sophisticated lifestyle, and the pathetic tone of tangos that turned this experience of difference into sentimental tragedies. “Araca París” (Beware of Paris, 1930, music by Ramón Collazo and lyrics by Carlos Lenzi) and “Anclao en París” (Anchor’d in Paris, 1931, music by Guillermo Barbieri and lyrics by Enrique Cadícamo) are, respectively, the most popular and representative examples of each tendency, as well as standards in the repertoire of Carlos Gardel (Barsky and Barsky). From either perspective, tangos about Paris establish a list of common tropes that include the fantasy of the easy, instant success in Paris of any tango-related activity (instrumental performance, singing, dancing, or even sporting a “tango” look); the revelation that this fantasy is usually, if not always, groundless; complaining and whining about failure, in most cases translated into poverty, romantic disappointment, or both; and the hyperbolic representation of distance or separation from and nostalgia for the homeland (centered on Buenos Aires, one of its specific neighborhoods, or even a particular corner of the city).

It is important to underline two privileged mechanisms of representation in this corpus, both of which illustrate the affective investment made in the narrative of the tango experience in Paris. First, the process of appropriation of the symbolic center by a peripheral cultural product was often represented in terms of seduction and romantic conquest of a feminine Paris by a masculine Argentina, as an erotic act regardless of the result of the attempt. The line that most effectively expresses this ideal of erotic domination is “Morcho y argentino, rey de París” (Swarthy and Argentine, the king of Paris) in “Araca París.” The eroticization of tango’s expansion to new markets signals the affective component mediating the relationship between Argentina and France: entrée into the domains of French culture responds to the logics of desire. Tango lyrics reflect in the language of simple love stories the seductive power of metropolitan institutions and Argentine culture’s need to be recognized at a universal level. This desire can be described within many levels and facets of Argentine culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, but the erotic and intimate imprint of tango (manifest in the content of the lyrics and especially in the close contact of the dance) transforms a latent political principle into an overt statement, a socially threatening irruption.
of the unconscious in the material. Second, even in the euphoric context of success in Paris, the anxiety of separation and distance from the origin (that is, Buenos Aires) takes the form of memento mori. Death—in the form of a fear of dying away from home—is the principle that structures the narration of the experience of dislocation and the paradoxical by-product of the triumphant adventure of tango in Paris.

Even if “La canción de Buenos Aires” (The song of Buenos Aires, 1932, music by Orestes Cufaro and Azucena Maizani and lyrics by Manuel Romero) does not mention Paris, it might be the text that best synthesizes these commonplaces. In this self-reflexive song, a song in which the story of a genre is told, tango is not only the topic but also one of the interlocutors addressed by the speaker. The narrator (or singer) speaks both to “tango” and to the city of Buenos Aires and represents tango as a triumphant peripheral product: “This is tango, the song of Buenos Aires / born in the slums, now reigning in all the world” (Este es el tango, canción de Buenos Aires / nacido en el suburbio, que hoy reina en todo el mundo). Tango operated as a way to overcome the anguish of separation when the speaker was displaced: “When I found myself far away from you, Buenos Aires / my only consolation / was in the notes of a sweet tango” (Buenos Aires, cuando lejos me vi / sólo hallaba consuelo / en las notas de un tango dulzón). Now that the speaker seems to be at home, he or she hopes tango will be a consolation in his final moments: “And I ask of my fate a favor / that at the end of my life / I can hear the weeping of the bandoneon / playing your nostalgic song” (Y le pido a mi destino el favor / de que al fin de mi vida / oiga el llorar del bandoneón / entonando tu nostálgica canción). Distance and death are represented as comparable ordeals, and in both cases tango is given a curative value.

Death finds no place, however, in the cheerful, satiric story told in “Araca París” (1930), which enlists the imaginary of romantic conquest. The anecdote in this song centers on the narrator’s illusion of an easy life in Paris, since he is a handsome, exotic Argentine man who can seduce wealthy women with his capacity to dance tango. Tango is assigned a specific economic value: “with three tango steps you will be a millionaire” (con tres cortes de tango sos millonario). Paris is feminized, represented as a resource for male agency. The fact that this is a story of defeat, and that the narrator does not succeed in becoming a gigolo, indicates that this trope was a familiar one in the popular imaginary and was already the object of deconstruction.

All of these topoi, common in tango’s depiction of Argentine displacement to Paris, would be recuperated—and sometimes revised—in the films that
I discuss in this chapter, but this is especially true of the Eros–Thanatos axis just delineated. I will analyze the way two films released in 1985, *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel* (*El exilio de Gardel: Tangos*) by Fernando Solanas and *The Pavements of Saturn* (*Les trottoirs de Saturne*) by Hugo Santiago, use tango as a thematic and rhetorical artifice for the cinematic representation of the political in relation to the circulation of Argentine culture between Buenos Aires and Paris. The immediate referents of the stories narrated in these films are the experiences of exiles during the last dictatorship in Argentina (1976–1983), when both Solanas and Santiago were living in Paris. But there is also a conscientious effort to transcend the contingency of the local, individual context and elaborate a generalizing statement that refers to the nation as a whole. We could even say that these two films appear among the last examples of such an effort in the Argentine tradition. This allegorizing impulse does not only consist of a synecdochal procedure by which exiles stand for the Argentine community as a whole but also of the historical, diachronic amplification of this process so that the present (the political) and the past (history) can be read as a unitary phenomenon. We will pay particular attention to the role of tango, the history of tango in Paris, and the way tango registers its own history in this process.

In the 1980s, a period that marked the last years of dictatorship and the first stages of redemocratization in Argentina, two Argentine directors were seemingly shooting the same film in Paris. Each was making a film that told the story of a bandoneon player and a group of Argentine exiles in France, but each was also a fable about tango, history, and national “identity” and a treatise on how Argentine exiles and their culture were perceived in the cultural center of the world, the “capital of all exiles”—to quote the narrator of *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel*. Judging from the varied results of their efforts, it is admittedly difficult to maintain that *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel* by Fernando Solanas and *The Pavements of Saturn* by Hugo Santiago, released in the same year, are in fact the same film. The differences are apparent not only at the formal and aesthetic level but also in the way each approaches the present. Nevertheless, both films respond to a similar impulse and stem from the same basic premises: there is a story to be told of the Argentine exile in Paris, and this story has to be told in the style of tango. However, there is a fundamental difference in what each film understands as *tango* and what the relationship between tango and history should be, a difference that a shallow reading of the films may miss by employing a simplified (and colonizing) notion of tango as merely an expression of national identity, separated from
the logics of art in general. At this superficial level, tango belongs to the world of folklore rather than to the world of the arts. I want to argue here that both films use tango as an instrument for the expression of Argentine particularity in terms of affect, art, and politics, and they do so by representing tango not as a commodity for metropolitan consumption or the differential result of Argentine “otherness” but as a structure of thinking, feeling, creating, and resolving historical conflicts.

Since both films were atypical products in the French and Argentine cinematographic industries, they do not fit easily into either history. Financed mainly by French funds, both were conceived as mainstream feature films for commercial exhibition. They were shot on location in Paris and postproduced in France and Argentina, and their casts (especially in the case of Solanas’s film) include notable figures of the French and Argentine cinema industry, as well as some iconic actors of the Argentine exile community in Europe. Though both films were successfully released in France and widely reviewed by the press, their circulation since has been rather limited—especially in the case of Santiago’s film, which is now a cult object and difficult to obtain. The films’ limited circulation and commercial success might be attributed to two factors: first, their linguistic hybridity, as dialogues are spoken in a mix of Argentine Spanish and various levels of French to characterize the speech of the Argentine exiles; second, the unique nature of the late twentieth-century Argentine exile experience, bound by temporal and spatial specificity. To facilitate my exposition here, I will provide short summaries of the plots of both films.

The script for The Pavements of Saturn was written by Santiago in collaboration with Juan José Saer and Jorge Semprún over a period of five years.3 The original version is by Santiago and Saer, while Semprún’s role was to revise the text to incorporate a “French tone” (Civale). The setting is the Paris of October 1986 (that is, it is a futuristic piece), but the story is closely related to Santiago’s first feature film Invasion (Invasión, 1969), which he cowrote with Jorge Luis Borges. Based on a plot conceived by Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, Invasion told the story of a conspiracy to resist an invasion in Aquilea (an imaginary city) in 1957. The exiles that the plot of The Pavements of Saturn follows come from Aquilea, a country that has recently suffered a military coup and is shaken by civil unrest. Fabián Cortés—played by the renowned tango musician Rodolfo Mederos—is a successful bandoneon player who has lived in Paris for years, but whose life has been altered by the events in Aquilea, events that have changed him from a “travelling musician”
into an “exile.” Fabián falls into a sudden state of melancholy and is considering the possibility of returning to Aquilea when his sister Marta comes for a visit. Marta, a guerrilla activist twenty years younger than Fabián who has been forced to flee the country, convinces her brother to return to Aquilea with her and take part in the plans of her militant organization to sneak several activists back into the country. At the same time, Fabián is haunted by the “presence” of Eduardo Arolas, a legendary Argentine bandoneon player who died in Paris in 1924. Cortés is in the process of recording an album of new interpretations of Arolas’s compositions. He also claims to meet with Arolas several times a week in the streets of Paris to have conversations with him and even to receive professional advice from him. Cortés’s girlfriend, a French lawyer who helps exiles from Aquilea with their political asylum papers, is puzzled by his new mood and makes every effort to “understand” these people and their conflicts, though with limited success. Against the recommendations of his Parisian friends, Fabián Cortés finally decides to return to Aquilea. After meeting with the guerrillas to coordinate travel plans, he receives instructions not to make the trip, which it turns out was a setup, and all those who made it to Aquilea have been killed. In the last sequence of the film, Fabián tries to warn his sister of this ominous turn of events, only to find her dead body before he himself is also killed in the streets of Paris.

*Tangos, the Exile of Gardel* is Solanas’s first strictly fictional feature film. It combines a realist narrative with musical segments, some absurd humor, and a few surreal scenes, but the overall structure is that of a fictional film. The story is narrated by an Argentine teenager exiled in Paris with her mother after the kidnapping of her father, a lawyer who represented the families of the disappeared. She tells the story of a group of musicians, dancers, and actors who are trying to put on a stage show titled *The Exile of Gardel*. This is a musical piece conceived as an instrument for spreading the word about the Argentine situation. Juan Uno, who still resides in Buenos Aires, is writing the text, and Juan Dos, an exiled bandoneon player, is composing the music. After long discussions of how to end the piece, the group previews the show for the French producers, who finally decide that *The Exile of Gardel* is “too Argentine” for the French audience and is doomed to fail on the stage. This plot line is intertwined with the personal experiences of several other members of the group. An aging professor of history whose daughter and granddaughter have been disappeared is writing a text that reflects on the exile of José de San Martín, the hero of Argentine independence who died in Boulogne sur Mer in 1850. The historian’s wife travels to Argentina to search for
her granddaughter with the collaboration of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. The narrator’s mother—who is also the central figure in the musical piece and Juan Dos’s girlfriend—is dealing with the angst of exile and the need to return home. As with the musical they are trying to stage, there is no real resolution for the narrative plot of the film. Juan Dos apparently returns to Argentina after learning about the death of his mother, and the film tries to end on an optimistic note when the narrator states, facing the camera and the audience, that exile has only taught her that there is still so much of life ahead.

The most significant point of coincidence between these two films, and the reason why I argue that they can be read as the same film, is that they both aim to provide an explanation of the Argentine in a context where the Argentine is elusive, confusing, and needs to be explained in order to be understood by a foreign subject. Of course, tango turns out to be, in both cases, the closest and easiest tool at hand for assembling such an explanation. The basic premise in both stories is this: because the French cannot understand the Argentine political conjuncture or the moral ordeal faced by the exiles—who, from the French point of view, are not the only exiles in the world, or even in Paris, and whose country is not the only one going through difficulties—the Argentines must find a way to offer a comprehensible version of their history, culture, and identity, which they do by creating a tango show. Now this notion rests on the institutionalization of a radical difference between the Argentine and the French: Argentine history, politics, and culture do not follow the same rules and logic, so their extreme particularity must be justified.

The recognition of this difference presents a paradox in Argentine discourse, since The Pavements of Saturn and Tangos, the Exile of Gardel are part of a national tradition that conceives of Argentine culture as a natural continuation of French culture, with no contradiction between the two. This notion had either taken the form of “emancipation,” affirming the equal value of peripheral cultures and the right of Argentine cultural production to belong to universal culture—that is, French culture (Borges’s lecture “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” offers a good example of this tendency)—or had been framed as neocolonial critique and identified Argentine culture as constrained by the process of colonial imitation (as Solanas has contended, for example, in his film The Hour of the Furnaces, released in 1968). In any case this is the ideologeme that sustains the films by making France the natural domain of Argentine exile. It is thus odd, if not incongruous, that these films still insist on the mechanics of difference and explanation.
Using tango as the ideal instrument with which to communicate the peculiarities of Argentine history presents certain contradictions. On the one hand, late twentieth-century tango still retained elements of exoticism and typicality and could be consumed in Paris as an import. During the stages of institutional formation of Argentina in the nineteenth century, the intellectual, economic, and social elites of the emerging nation (especially those from the port of Buenos Aires, but also from other major cities in the provinces, which were by then comparable to Buenos Aires in size and political leadership) regularly visited France. A trip to Europe had become a necessary element in the formation of the well-educated subject, and French was the natural language of culture for the privileged classes (see Viñas, *Literatura argentina y política*; Sarlo, “Victoria Ocampo o el amor de la cita”). By the early twentieth century, the presence of wealthy Argentines in Paris was already a common literary topic—even in French literature (see for example Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit*). Tango played a significant role in the renovation of the Argentine tradition of cultural pilgrimage to the French capital in the 1920s and 1930s. The acceptance of Argentine dance and music in the cosmopolitan circles frequented by intellectuals in Paris was part of the process of integration of an emerging Argentine culture in the international cultural market.

At the same time, tango was a music that the French “felt as their own” (*Paris Tango* 77) and could also be thought of as a Parisian export to the world, since it was from Paris, and not Buenos Aires, that tango began to circulate as a global cultural commodity (Thompson 236; see also Pelinski, *El tango nómade*). As is well known, the experience of tango in the 1920s in Paris had reversed (or at least distorted) the notions of place of origin and place of reception in the case of tango, when the success of tango in Parisian nightclubs and cabarets had in turn allowed this outcast genre to be subsequently accepted in Buenos Aires. Since then, tango has been the privileged vehicle for representing the relations between Argentina and France.6

We will address the relationship between Argentine political history, the experience of Argentine otherness in France, and tango in *The Pavements of Saturn* and *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel* by asking the following questions: How do these films articulate the notion of a fundamental lack of understanding of the Argentine in French culture? How do the directors use tango to narrate and explain Argentine history? And finally, how does this use of tango express a particular view of the political?
Understanding Argentina

Danielle, Fabián Cortés’s French girlfriend, is the element used to express the disconnect between Argentina and France in *The Pavements of Saturn*. In a conversation (in French) with Pablo, one of the exiles from Aquilea, played by Hugo Santiago himself, Danielle complains that the exiles are overreacting, that their country will eventually move beyond this brutal dictatorship and be a normal country again. Pablo replies: “Aquilea has never been a normal country” (L’Aquilea n’’a jamais était un pays normal). Danielle concludes: “You are monsters of pride” (Vous êtes monstres de fierté). So, with conflicting arguments, both characters agree that Aquilea/Argentina is substantially different from other nations. The central narrative impulse in the film is the overwhelming need of the French to understand Argentina, an impulse that necessarily reduces music, stories, and people into nothing more than a signifier of the Argentine.

*The Pavements of Saturn* opens with Fabián’s disappearance. He has not come to the club where he performs every night. Nobody seems to know where to locate him. Some of his friends, especially Danielle, start to worry and consider reporting the case to the police. The situation not only reflects the cases of thousands of missing people in Argentina but also is a prolepsis of the resolution of the film. In the midst of Danielle’s search, the viewer learns that Fabián is regularly meeting Arolas, who ostensibly has been dead for over sixty years. This search leads to the overt expression of the inscrutable character of the Argentine. When Danielle discusses the Arolas situation with a French girlfriend, her friend replies: “It looks like he is laughing at you. Or maybe he is talking to you in code. If he says that he just met a colleague who died sixty years ago, he is for sure sending a coded message. All you have to do is decode it” (On dirai qu’il se moque de toi. Ou alors il te parle par énigmes. S’il te dit qu’il vient de rencontrer un collègue mort il y a soixante ans, sans doute te transmet-il un message codé. Il ne te reste qu’à le déchiffrer).

What kind of message can be encoded in the reference to Arolas? It becomes obvious that Cortés and Arolas are “historical” doppelgängers, the same person living in different times, and that their stories are going to follow parallel trajectories as well. In this sense Fabián’s exile has been preannounced by Arolas’s, and he is forced to live Arolas’s fate again. This would be the most obvious hidden message in Fabián’s “hallucinations”: “you can understand me by following Arolas’s life story,” which is nothing more than
a rephrasing of the commonplace of history as a teacher. Now, there is also the more general reading of this reference: after all, Fabián is claiming to be talking to the dead, and this should not go unnoticed in the context of the immediate postdictatorship period. Not only is there a recognition of the voice of the dead but also the fact that there is something to learn from the dead, and Fabián is there to listen and convey their message. At the same time, there is the denial of death, the proposal that the dead still live. These notions could well represent ideas that Fabián has come to understand in his existence as an exile and that Danielle as an outsider to the Argentine experience cannot yet comprehend.

The gap between French and Argentine culture becomes a generation gap between the new political exiles and the old expatriates who question the validity of violence as a political tool. Mario—a painter who, very much like Fabián (and Hugo Santiago), lived in Paris before becoming an “exile” by virtue of political events—vigorously opposes the methods of the guerrilla groups and has fallen into a non-conflictive nihilism. He is the one who asserts that “the Aquilea we come from no longer exists. They replaced it with a different one. A fake one” (la Aquilea de la que venimos ya no existe. Pusieron otra en su lugar. Una falsa), and he is the one who confronts the young guerrillas with a discourse that somehow echoes the “theory of the two demons.” Even though this is a very common opposition in Argentine cultural production and political discourse, space and assimilation seem to play a role in Santiago’s particular representation of the conflict: it seems that in this case it is not only a matter of generations but also a matter of location. That is, the clash between the old expatriates and the young activists, represented in the film in very histrionic, cathartic performances, does not stem only from the difference in the political style of the 1950s versus that of the 1970s but also is a reflection concerning the effects of distance on the construction of the political imperative in terms of time, space, and cultural separation.

Solanas’s film takes a different stand on the generational issue. In Tangos, the Exile of Gardel it is those of the younger generation who do not understand the state of melancholy of their parents and can only relate to the past in terms of affect. María, the narrator, questions her mother’s attitudes toward their common situation as exiles and attends the meetings of the committee of solidarity with the Argentine exiles not because of her political convictions but because she sees the sessions as a way to reconnect with her missing father. National history has turned into a family issue for her. Since the film attempts to represent the point of view of the younger generations (in a sort
of displacement of Solanas’s own perspective), the clash between French and Argentine cultures is replaced by the conflict between a generation of Argentines who took history into their own hands and failed and a generation that does not see politics as an urgent matter. Here in his first film of the 1980s, Solanas clearly alters his position from the earlier, more radical political stance of the Third Cinema.

There is a point in *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel* in which the lack of understanding of Argentine history and identity is crucial. The group has created a new genre for the show they want to present. They call it *tanguedia*, a neologism that combines *tango* as a stem (and the main material for the show) with the suffix that appears in the complementary words *tragedia* (tragedy) and *comedia* (comedy). The new genre is thus a sort of hybrid between comedy and tragedy centered on tango. Tango is always seen as a privileged didactic tool, as the most direct way to represent Argentina, even if this generalization is in fact a fictional construct that eventually fails. The tanguedia’s title is also *The Exile of Gardel*. This title is called into question twice in the film. First, when Juan Dos is about to present a preview of the music in a nightclub, an official from the Argentine embassy asks, “*The Exile of Gardel?* As if Gardel had been exiled?” (¿‘El exilio de Gardel,’ como si hubiera estado exiliado Gardel?). Later in the film, one of the French producers regrets that the title is not more explicitly referential: “It’s a shame. Why don’t we get to see Gardel?” (C’est dommage! Pour quoi on ne voit pas Gardel?). For the Argentine, the representative of the official point of view at that moment, it is the association of Gardel with anything political that is questionable—tango and politics should not mix. For the French, it is Gardel’s absence that is dissatisfying, since Gardel is the only icon that could be recognized by the French audience, the element that would make the play understandable. They also argue that the result is “a bit local,” “too Argentine.” Juan’s response is: “Exile is about us. About the South . . . About the Río de la Plata” (El exilio es nuestro. Es bien sureño . . . del Río de la Plata). His answer identifies *exile* as the point that is difficult to transfer to a different code, when the producer’s remark made reference to *tango*. So for Juan, tango and exile are the same thing. I will return to this point later.

As a language for explaining the peculiarities of the Argentine, tango (as music, lyrics, and dance) seems to be insufficient. In the discussion with the producers, the artists need to keep paraphrasing the piece to make its meaning clear—a gesture that implies the complete failure of the programmatic impulse behind the show: to tell the story of what is going on in Buenos Aires.
The genetic process of the piece sheds light on the value of understanding. As mentioned before, Juan Uno is the author of the story and still resides in Buenos Aires, from where he sends the text to Juan Dos, who composes the music. When Pierre, the French general director of the production, visits Juan Dos in his attic to get the text of the play, Juan presents him with an old suitcase that contains a mess of loose papers, stray notes, and drawings. “Is this the show?” asks Pierre, surprised. Juan Dos justifies the disorder: “Uno writes in bars and restaurants with no logic. . . . We must find the overall logic.” That is, Buenos Aires is where history takes place, Paris is where history has to be understood—and explained to others. It is, though, the joint experience of Buenos Aires and Paris on the part of the protagonists that produces both versions of *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel*.

I Only Have a Tango . . .

How does each film construct tango to explain Argentina? *The Pavements of Saturn* focuses on the image of Arolas, and Solanas’s film centers on Gardel, two tango names particularly associated with France. This association is due not only to their French origin (Arolas, originally Arola, was the son of French immigrants; Gardel may have been born in Toulouse) but also mainly because of their role in the introduction of tango in Paris. Of course, Arolas is a more obscure figure in the history of tango than Gardel and certainly more suitable for use as an “enigma.” When Fabián Cortés makes reference to Arolas and recovers his music, he is taking a part in the writing of tango’s history and he is choosing Arolas over an ample assortment of Argentine characters (either real or fictional) who have an important role in the development of tango in Paris, or in the history of Argentine exile in France. Choosing Arolas means not choosing Gardel, who is the triumphant conqueror of the Parisian scene, or the farcical protagonist of “Araca París,” the arrogant but likeable morocho who fails to succeed in Paris and returns home after learning his lesson. Arolas is a more tragic figure. His is an unfortunate story, marked by personal failure. Against the legend that he died a premature death in 1924 at age thirty-two as a result of a knife fight over a woman, some historical reconstructions suggest a less romanticized story: Arolas left Buenos Aires to overcome the personal crisis of being left by his wife, only to become an alcoholic and die of tuberculosis in a Parisian hospital. To the viewer (especially those viewers who are not well versed in the history of tango), the enigma of Arolas takes the form of substituting this less publicized musician for the stereotypes of Argentine *tangueros* in Paris, both real and fictional. The experience
of Arolas in Paris is not especially picturesque—not even when retouched by popular imagination—so his presence in the film entails the recovery of an aesthetic project: Arolas is presented not so much in the story of his life as in his music. Fabián’s recording of Arolas’s compositions stages a return to Arolas’s expression of the Parisian experience, even if he did not compose all of his tangos in Paris. It is as well a return to the stylization of that expression through the elimination of the lyrics and the role of the singer and through the simplification of the orchestral configuration into the “sexteto.” In this sense Santiago’s filmic effort to explain Argentina through tango is an act of digging into the past to excavate a nucleus of sense and truth in order to expose it to a new light and reinsert it in the flow of history. Not even the vanguard aesthetic superimposed on Arolas’s music by the new players can outshine the ghostly reappearance of the past as the force that can provide the answers for the present ordeal.

In one of the tangos written by Solanas himself for Tangos, the Exile of Gardel, the voice of Roberto Goyeneche sings: “I only have a tango with which to tell the story of my exile” (Solo tengo un tango pa’ contar mi exilio). The film proposes that tango is the only rhetoric suitable and available for the narration of the present. The tanguedia that the group of exiles is staging is mainly a narrative device, conceived to tell the story of what is happening in Buenos Aires. There is not only a clear awareness of the importance of communicating that story but also of the fact that tango is the only means for doing it. In the preview they stage for the producers, the artists are confronted with the fact that not only are the rhetoric and the narrative instruments considered provincial but also the topic itself. The imaginary of tango and the tango songs themselves are seen by the French producers as being too obscure for the metropolitan audience, not recognizably exotic in the way of early twentieth-century tango. This contrast is stressed by one of the producers: “The music, the characters, even the tangos. It’s a little too Argentine for us” (La musique, les personnages, même les tangos. C’est un peu trop argentin pour nous).

There is a significant displacement in the translation during this conversation taking place in French. In the urge to justify his view, Juan Dos switches to Spanish and claims: “El exilio es nuestro. Es bien sureño . . . del Río de la Plata,” (Exile is about us, about the South . . . about the Río de la Plata), which is translated into French as “Il dit que la tanguedie c’est vraiment du sud, que ça vient de Río de la Plata” (He’s saying that the tanguedie is really from the South, that it comes from Río de la Plata). In the passage from Spanish
to French, the concept of “exile” has disappeared, as well as the notion of belonging to or being intrinsically about the group of Argentines, since the French translation also discards the possessive adjective. “Exile” is not really the topic of the piece (which, according to the purposes described by Juan Dos and the fragments that we see on screen, is actually about the events that are taking place in Buenos Aires), but the historical process that makes it possible, its condition of possibility. That is the reason why not understanding exile as a historical (or even ontological) process preempts the French from understanding the show, including the music, the characters, and the tangos. But the translation also proves that exile and tango bear equal value. The word *exilio* has actually been translated as “tanguedie.” This transposition suggests, on the one hand, that exile as a historical process only exists in its output, in the cultural production that it can generate. On the other hand, it also insinuates that history has been replaced by its representation, that the spectacle of tango has taken the place of exile.

Now, why do the film and the artists in exile candidly trust the expressive potential of tango to convey *argentinitad* to the French audience? Most probably, because of the historical pressure exerted by the previous triumph of tango in Paris, the fact that tango did work once as a rhetorical device to incorporate Argentine autochthony into the metropolitan imaginary. Historical change might thus be the force behind the fact that tango, and the traits that made it attractive in the past, such as exoticism, uninhibited sensuality, and an overexposed sentimentality, no longer serve as a language of communication between center and periphery. Both Paris and Argentina are not in the 1980s what they were in the 1920s, and the same goes for tango. The dysphoric resolution of the project of staging the tanguedie indicates that Solanas’s premise diametrically differs from Santiago’s proposal of stylized repetition. *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel* contends that for Argentines living in Parisian exile in the 1980s, tango is an exercise of double nostalgia: for Argentina and for the Paris of the 1920s, a predisposition to evasion that, in the narrative, is punished with failure.

The Lesson of Tango

We return finally to our last question, that of what each of these narrative uses of tango as difference reveals concerning the political. This, I argue, is where the crucial difference between Santiago and Solanas resides. Both directors rescue from tango a lesson on history: tango has, in the past, represented the experience of displacement. There is something to be learned from tango
if we use it as an archive of Argentine history. Tango, like a history book, can provide us with answers for performing Argentine identity in France, for explaining Argentine particularities to the French. The use of tango as a didactic instrument is thus legitimized by history: we can find in tango a discourse and an affective structure that somehow resolves the conflict of dislocation—either physical or symbolic. “Anclao en París” serves as the key example of this dynamic. It accompanies one of the surreal sequences of Solanas’s film in which the characters of the 1980s interact with personalities of Argentine history such as the military general José de San Martín, the singer Carlos Gardel, and the musician Enrique Discépolo. The incorporation of this tango number in the film resolves the search for a finale to the show: it is in Gardel’s appearance and performance of this song that Juan Dos and Mariana experience an epiphany related to the finale.12 “Anclao en París” tells a story that diverges so significantly from the experiences of these exiles that it is certainly puzzling as a dramatic resolution, unless we are aware that it is not the story told by the song but Carlos Gardel’s presence that is being proposed as a dramatic resolution—much in the way that The Pavements of Saturn uses Eduardo Arolas to recover and actualize a particular zeitgeist.

The difference between the two films stems, though, from the capacity of tango to interpolate history, to erupt as a creative possibility in a context in which tango has only been assigned a role that has to do with tradition. Can tango be used as a language to narrate new experiences? As we have already mentioned, Santiago stages a situation in which tango is the re-creation of experience. The relationship between Cortés and Arolas entails an intervention only at the level of execution. Cortés’s agency is limited to the interpretation of the music scores composed by Arolas. Replaying his music and reliving his life become two sides of the same experience. But Cortés resists seeing Arolas’s story as a mere warning and intends to take an active role in the writing of history. When Danielle takes Fabián to Arolas’s gravesite and urges him to accept the fact that Arolas indeed died sixty years earlier, she is also telling him the truth regarding Arolas’s stay in Paris—that is, that he was defeated by exile, that he never made it back home (not even as a corpse, since he is still buried in Paris), that the dramatic version of his death is only the product of popular imagination. Fabián stubbornly refuses to accept this rational explanation and insists: “He is alive. I saw him yesterday. I talked to him. He talked to me” (Il es vivant. Je l’ai vu hier. Je l’ai parlé. Il m’a parlé). There seems to be in Fabián a will not so much to write history but to “re-write” it, to correct Arolas’s ineffective life by resuscitating not only his music
but also the figure himself. If his life mirrors Arolas’s own life in the 1920s, his return to the homeland will serve the purpose of redeeming Arolas, tango, his generation, and himself of the sin of not assuming a role in history. Within the logic of the film, Fabián understands his return to Aquilea as a form of political agency.

That it all ends with Fabián’s death is not really a sign of defeat. If there is the pessimistic implication that the repressive forces in control of Aquilea are unquestionably stronger and more efficient than the forces of resistance, there is also the realization that Fabián did succeed in rewriting Arolas’s life and in investing the figure of the bandoneon player in Paris with a heroic death. The narrative has granted success to Fabián’s impulse toward agency in two ways: he gets to correct Arolas’s experience, and he gets to escape from a predetermined life, limited to an imitation of the past. His death also overwrites his earlier remark about the political tone of a conversation with friends: “Politics again! What a drag! Not my problem: I play the bandoneon” (Otra vez la política. ¡Que opio! Yo no tengo problema: yo soy bandoneonista). Even if, however, Fabián has taken steps toward political redemption, we still have the problem of originality: tango remains a territory for reiteration, a domain where the only intervention of new generations can be through rectification but never creation. Cortés is recognized as a very original and genuine artist—there is a significant investment in the construction of the character as an inspired creator, a romantic genius, and even an “artiste maudit”: lonely and moody; misunderstood by his epoch, his friends, and his peers; lost in his inner world; but with the capacity to move an audience and generate a profound aesthetic experience. He achieves this not by producing his own music but by interpreting music that someone else has composed. The difference between his activity and that of any other musician who is not a composer, though, stems from the fact that Cortés’s agenda resembles that of an archeologist who excavates the past to recover something that is lost and to expose it to a new light. This is the only function the film seems to assign to tango: to serve as an exhibit of the past.

Solanas’s film, on the other hand, works hard to construct an image of tango as a vigorous, active cultural space that embodies Argentina as a whole—albeit in a simplification that, first, omits the generational conflicts that from the 1960s forward limited the representational value of tango as the main product of Argentine popular culture, and second, does not reflect the regional diversity of the country’s many forms of popular music. In this film tango is characterized as a living form of art, as the natural arena for the
expression of current social and political conflicts. It is the privileged form of expression for the communication of Argentine reality, but it is as well an art form not bound by the constraints of tradition. In Solanas’s tango, innovation is a major force capable of inventing new genres (the tanguedia), and composition is strictly an act of the present—so much so that the piece that the group is rehearsing is still in the making. Tango’s relation with history differs substantially from Santiago’s proposal of redemptive reiteration. In Solanas’s reasoning, as we have already explained, tango and history are homologues. Tango is just the name assigned in this narrative to history, exile, and reality. For him there is no space outside of tango in the Argentine experience. The sequence that visually condenses this notion is the segment titled “Volver,” one of the last chapters of the film. It takes place in the public building where Gerardo, the exiled professor, works as a night guard. Both San Martín and Gardel come for a visit. The three figures represent, respectively, three different moments of possibility: San Martín stands for the Argentina that was still only a project, since he died in 1850, before the government of the new republic was fully consolidated; Gardel, who died in 1935, is the embodiment of the Argentina that had already celebrated its centennial and was at the peak of its economic prosperity; finally, our 1970s exile protagonist, the father of a child who has been “disappeared” and the grandfather of an appropriated child, is the human face of the Argentina that was then disintegrating. The actor who plays the exiled professor, Lautaro Murúa, was also an icon of exiled intellectuals and artists. The three men drink *mate*, chat about returning home, and listen to Gardel’s recording of his tango “Volver” (Return). The scene, which mimics the sentimental tone of much tango poetry, proposes a summary of Argentine history in which tango plays the fundamental role of synthesizing past and present in a universalizing text and gesture. As Argentine history can be reduced to a tale of exile, this tale finds its perfect expression in tango and particularly the lyrics of “Volver,” a recurring signifier that is presented as timeless. Even though “Volver” is not a song about tango, its use in this segment of the film can be interpreted as a call for the recuperation of the role of tango as a cultural system that can represent that particular moment (and any moment) of Argentine history. As much as the song tells the story of a return in space, it also speaks of a return in time, of the reemergence of the past. But unlike Fabián Cortes’s recovery of past tangos as “objects,” Solanas stages in his film the wish for the rebirth of tango as a system of cultural production. In this context the line in “Volver” that describes the “fear of the encounter / with the past that returns / to confront my life” reveals the
intention of the film to endow tango with a political agency it apparently did not have during almost a century of history.

Tango after the End of History
So Hugo Santiago conceptualizes political action and the commitment to the present as a practice of rewriting, and tango becomes a metaphor for his own artistic endeavor—that is, the film itself. What his character Fabián Cortés achieves in relation to the history of tango, The Pavements of Saturn does in Santiago’s filmography. Solanas and Santiago—born only three years apart, raised in the turbulence of the rise and fall of Peronism, and thus representatives of the same generation—use these films to reflect on their own impact on national cultural production. The Pavements of Saturn and Tangos, the Exile of Gardel are the result of revisionism. If these films from the 1980s disguise behind their many similarities a fundamentally disparate political stance, their relationship parallels, in one of those bizarre coincidences of history, the correlation between the landmark films that each director made in the late 1960s: Solanas’s The Hour of the Furnaces and Santiago’s Invasion. Were these two antipodal representations of political resistance also the same film? There are so many ways to argue for the irreconcilability of these films that it would be superfluous to point out here the aesthetic and political differences between them or to refer to their respective places in the history of cinema. It is instructive, however, to focus on one particular correspondence between these earlier films, which can only be applied in a very general sense: both pictures materialize a moment of peril. Even if they identify a different source for the danger that threatens society, or if that source is not identified at all, The Hour of the Furnaces and Invasion acknowledge the fact that a destructive force threatens Argentine experience. Similarly, in their direct or metaphorical systems of referentiality, Tangos, the Exile of Gardel and The Pavements of Saturn represent the moment after the emergence of that threat and its direct consequences.

The lines traced from The Hour of the Furnaces to Tangos, the Exile of Gardel and from Invasion to The Pavements of Saturn indicate the evolution of two different versions of the relationship between culture and politics as it was conceived and practiced by the Argentine generation that came of age in the 1960s. In 1985 in the wake of the defining experience of state terrorism and the complete disarticulation of the Left, both Solanas and Santiago reworked from abroad their perception of the most brutal years of Argentine history. The circumstances of their stays in Paris during those years were different
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(Santiago’s situation, as well as Saer’s, who cowrote the script, was the basis for Fabián Cortés’s remark on his sudden and unexpected conversion into an exile after many years of living in Paris), as was their inscription into Argentine culture in the 1960s. Solanas had come to cinema from the advertising industry, he identified politically with the Peronist resistance and Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s foquismo, and he proposed creating a Third Cinema aimed at destroying bourgeois cultural institutions. Santiago, on the other hand, was an outstanding product of those same institutions Solanas explicitly rejected: he had relocated to Paris in 1959 to attend courses at the Sorbonne and work with Cocteau and Bresson, and he believed in the political power of high culture but had no concrete political affiliations.

And yet both directors resorted to tango when they wanted to stage a narrative analysis of the experience of Argentine displacement and exile. Tango turned out to be the appropriate language for this undertaking because the political game in those years had turned national history into an intimate, personal story—the political had become private. The affective proximity of tango, and the affectivity of its rhetoric and poetics, made it the natural vehicle not only for the act of explaining Argentine specificity to a foreign audience (as we discussed earlier) but also for the act of withdrawing into oneself at a personal or social level and reviewing the decisions that resulted in the current state of affairs. I am not advocating for the curative properties of tango or any other highly sentimental form of expression here, but I am trying to ascertain the relationship between the self-reflexive, revisionist spirit of these films (even their solemn and funerary tone at times) and the canonizing use of tango as the essential form of Argentine culture, in an absolute reduction of Argentina to the opposition tango versus politics.

It would be facile and misleading to attribute this coincidence between diverging ideologies in the 1980s, years that marked the beginning of a quick and superficial revisionism that would culminate in the total demobilization of Argentine civil society in the subsequent decade, to a universal quality of tango as the language capable of expressing anything Argentine. It would be more productive to entertain the idea that tango was in that moment emptied of specific content and turned into a new desert, an empty signifier available for various uses and misuses and the space for the projection of the most diverse national fantasies. In his study of the imaginary construction of the Argentine national space, Jens Andermann points out that the exiled intellectuals who created the nation as a text and through their texts in mid-
nineteenth century Argentina (Echeverría, Mármol, Alberdi, and Sarmiento, to name a few prominent examples) conceived the notion of the desert as the tool to reappropriate the space lost: “The desert is not just the name given to a still precarious and fuzzy [national] space, but also, as a moral signifier, the name of the contradictory relationship between this space and the text that advances and retreats over it in a constant back-and-forth. It is also a political name, the flip side of the exile from where it is uttered; a name for the precariousness of the claim over a space that has banished the author, but which the author can finally define because of his extraterritoriality” (40). In a similar fashion, I want to argue that because of its affective proximity, popular typicality, transnational history, and protean nature, the tango of the 1980s represented on the one hand the image of a forbidden territory and a lost culture and on the other the promise of just restitution. The final song of Tangos, the Exile of Gardel (also composed by Solanas) expresses this extremely versatile (and vacuous) meaning of tango by repeating the word insistently and using it as the direct object for unlikely verbs, as in “soñando tango” (dreaming tango), “buscando tango” (searching for tango), or “curtiendo tango” (sharing tango in an intimate way—a very particular expression of urban Argentine Spanish, untranslatable into English).

The contrastive analysis of these two films from the sixties and the two films from the eighties results, once again, in the substitution of tango for politics. Politics, especially in the form of collective resistance, had been the common terrain of the sixties, the lingua franca for the representation of the national conjuncture, even if expressed in the radically different forms of a Borgesian tale of bravery and treason and a social documentary intended to foster armed struggle in the proletarian audience. Politics in this sense is absent from the movies of the eighties, which overtly represent political association as a lost cause, and make of individual ethics the new way to politically justify the subject. Despite radically different political positions, these protagonists’ new commonality is tango.

Were it not for the continuity of the ideological proposals in each pair of films, we might have felt inclined to celebrate the final and definitive politicization of tango and the affective structures of popular culture in a specifically popular art form, cinema, even if in films quite close to the elitist form of second cinema, to use Solanas and Getino’s taxonomy. But this process would only take place in the novel, that is, as a subsidiary gesture to politicize the popular in a non-popular art form. Instead, Hugo Santiago’s film raised the
stakes for the salvific value of culture, for the special capacity of culture to redeem the subject, and Solanas’s film insisted, almost twenty years after the groundbreaking denunciation of the complicity between high culture and neocolonialism, that the mobilization of culture is the only way to subvert structures of domination.

Notes

1. The lyrics of all the songs referred to in this study are compiled in Russo and Marpegán but can also be consulted at http://www.todotango.com.

2. In Argentine Spanish the adjective morocho can either indicate fair skin and dark hair (as in Gardel’s nickname “el morocho del Abasto”) or darkish skin.

3. The title plays with the name of a very popular tango club in Paris in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Trottoirs de Buenos Aires, and the traditional attribution of melancholy to the influence of Saturn. For the history of Trottoirs de Buenos Aires, see Paris Tango 76–85.

4. “Yo era un músico viajero, Mario, desde hace mil años que era un músico que estaba de paso. De repente una banda de tipos me hacen volar la Aquilea en pedazos y de la mañana a la noche soy un exilado. Cambió todo.”

5. For basic information on the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, see Arditti or the organization’s website, http://abuelas.org.ar.

6. On the introduction of tango in Paris, see Cadicamo, La historia del tango en París; Pujol.

7. On the proposal to understand the dictatorial years as a war between two equally pervasive forces, known as the “theory of the two demons,” see Vezzetti.

8. Regarding Gardel’s nationality, see Barsky and Barsky; Ruffié de Saint-Blancat et al.

9. The story and the myth of Eduardo Arolas’s stay in France are referred to in the film. See also Gálvez and Espina Rawson, 21–33.

10. The elimination of lyrics and the role of the singer is a gesture usually associated with Piazzolla. See Monjeau and Filippelli.

11. Despite the risk of oversimplifying, it is worth pointing out the obvious differences in the historical contexts of the 1920s and the 1980s. On the one hand, if the importance of Paris in the map of Western culture had not diminished, its position was certainly not as central as in the early part of the century. On the other hand, Argentina had experienced radical changes in its short history, moving through the irruption of the masses into public life, Peronism, and state terrorism. Finally, tango represented in the 1980s some sort of a burden from the past, a residue of a provincial Buenos Aires, an image of the never completed process of modernization.

12. We are to believe, though, that this is not directly incorporated as the finale for the show or the producer would not be complaining about Gardel’s absence.

13. In this sense The Pavements of Saturn reinscribes itself in the Borgesian imaginary of its “prequel” Invasion, written by Borges: cowards who overcome their fear, death as the defining moment that reveals the sense of what has happened to that subject until that moment; tango as one of the cultural products that best represents these motives.
14. On the disappeared children of Argentina who were adopted or “appropriated” by families identified with the dictatorship, see Arditti or visit the website of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, http://abuelas.org.ar.

15. On the relationship between *Invasion* and *The Hour of the Furnaces*, see Aguilar, *Otros mundos*.

16. On Solanas’s proposal for a Third Cinema, see Solanas and Getino; Gabriel; Stam. For a brief comprehensive study of Solanas’s work until the early 1990s that includes biographical references, see Monteagudo.

17. The most comprehensive studies of Santiago’s work are the book compiled by Oubiña, and the special dossier prepared by *El Amante* 3, 26 (April 1994): 10–25.

18. “El desierto no es, pues, sólo el nombre que se le da a ese espacio todavía precario y borroso, sino que también es, en su carácter de significante moral, el de la relación contradictoria que éste mantiene con una letra que avanza y retrocede en constantes vaivenes sobre él. Es también un nombre político en cuyo revés está el destierro desde donde se lo emite, un nombre para la precariedad del reclamo sobre un espacio donde el autor se encuentra proscripto, pero al que puede, por fin, definir gracias a su posición de extraterritorialidad.”

19. Here we are thinking of Manuel Puig’s interventions on the issue.