In order to understand the significance of the growing corpus of tango-related documentaries by Argentine filmmakers produced in the last few years (particularly after the economic debacle of 2001), it is important to read them against the background of the multiple, rich lives of tango in twentieth-century Argentine and international films. Whereas tango has been featured in many American films as an exotic dance existing in a historical vacuum, invoked to process varied if often entangled passions and anxieties along gender, class, and cultural divisions, for these Argentine documentaries of the last decade or so, tango entails addressing a national history that is inaccessible as a straightforward, continuous temporality. The status of what these films set out to document is placed into question at the outset by the films themselves, as tango’s manifestation, its being there, is somewhat ghostly—thus complicating the documentary genre’s traditional reliance on the indexical.

Contemporary tango musicians inevitably draw on and emulate the canon of tango music produced and solidified during the first half of the twentieth century, but nothing parallel occurs in filmmakers’ search for styles and themes of the same era. That is, these documentaries do not posit a fundamental continuity with the earlier development of the Argentine film industry that accompanies the ascent of tango itself into mainstream middle-class culture. The vast majority of Argentine dramas and comedies from the first half of the twentieth century featuring tango music intricately woven into the plot, and starring tango singers, neither established themselves as “classics”
that provided filmic models to follow nor presented a tradition to be challenged. Even though these films might follow melodramatic formulas, they came to represent retrospectively a mythical era when tango coincided with its surroundings. The fact that Argentine filmic production of the last two decades has not continued this lineage suggests that tango might have lost its argumentative thrust or that its ability to reveal the social fabric has diminished. Certainly, earlier tango dramas and comedies contributed to the establishment of a mythology, a repository of tropes and a fictional world that current tango expressions cannot help but interrogate. While addressing a cultural expression that might have only a residual or monumental value, such documentaries are haunted by the gravitational force of a past time when tango appeared to have been one with its present. These documentaries do not continue a filmic legacy as such but instead incorporate it as embedded footage, pointing to a discontinuity while interrogating the current, albeit allegorical, significance of the tango film archive. The remnant of an era of national cultural production, this integrated footage functions in every sense to ground such projects, but it cannot help but reveal at the same time that this ground is undermined, its ties to the present threadbare—and that it wasn’t very stable in the first place.

More than the language and narratives developed in early tango film, it is the whole era of tango production, which included the advent of the orquestas típicas and the dissemination of this music through mass media (radio, recording industry, and film), that these documentaries cannot escape and that exerts a constant pressure upon the present and on the imagination of contemporary filmmakers. As they strive to document tango’s persistent significance following the disappearance of both the universe it portrayed and the cultural apparatus through which it developed, these documentaries cannot avoid being self-reflective, signaling a present moment when tango is no longer produced and consumed in a state of distraction but in one of heightened awareness.

In the face of tango’s current incarnation as a world-cultural commodity supplying a trace of remote authenticity, the documentaries I will discuss eschew the never-ending dispute of what deserves to be sanctioned as real or authentic tango—a claim inherent to tango as it has anxiously redefined itself against the current of international flows that have been its condition of production and circulation. Instead, these films point to the current presence of tango within the order of the real. What I call the real is the postulation of an extemporary, dislocated presence bearing the traces of inaccessible
history, an aural manifestation with no visible reference in the very material that the documentary sets itself to represent.

It is therefore not surprising that the documentarians’ search for something more primary and less subject to objectification and commodification in the current state of tango often falls back onto the body as the ultimate dwelling place of the real; or that from there, it leads to an autobiographical exploration of the tango maker, also mirroring the filmmaker, to confront the question of mythical beginnings, the intersection at which tango bites and touches the subject, a fleeting moment holding the secret of passionate attachments. The encounter portrayed is often one with death itself, with the phantasmagorical presence of what is no longer there. Such films record the search within the self for that mythical encounter that makes the subject what it is, a historical search that transcends both history and the self, marking the irrecoverable condition of life passing.\(^5\)

If the dance has been, in Monjeau and Filipelli’s lucid analysis, “tango’s conservative force par excellence” (16), it has also been, simultaneously, and perhaps partially just because of its picturesque conservatism, the privileged medium for tango’s earlier and current worldwide recognition and celebration. Given that the body is central to these films, it is remarkable that tango dancing has only a peripheral presence, as if the “moving image” wanted to recede from the visually recognizable and readily spectacular. But I would argue that it is because of this very success, with dance as the most visible and global expression of tango, that the documentaries assume a distance from the dance, as they also eschew the all-too-common celebration of tango’s renewed recognition in order to interrogate its current significance. Furthermore, if tango’s world circulation was always determined by the business of exoticism and self-exoticism (Savigliano, Tango and the Political Economy of Passion 2–3, 137–39), and dance was the privileged medium for the performance of this romance, for gendering the coloniality of power, shying away from the dance might be the documentarians’ best bet for bypassing the colonial knot at the very apex of global tango consumption.

Rather than a language already available, ready to be transferred to film in order to display a mysteriously dangerous attraction across national, generational, or cultural borders (as tango has been incorporated previously on the international screen), these documentaries reestablish tango as a set of unavoidable local references and symbolic practices whose present significance, and thus the filmic capacity to document and portray tango’s presence, is not taken for granted. Thus the documentaries are troubled by the condition of
carrying on a lineage that while historically closed—a residue of past social formations, systems of cultural production, and ways of life—never ceased to exist and to persist.

I will turn first not to a documentary proper but to a drama containing in its plot the possibility of a documentary. The director Daniel Burak’s *Bar El Chino* (2003) features a documentary filmmaker as its protagonist and is set against the historical condition of possibility characteristic of all the documentaries I will discuss, but which this particular movie with its pedagogical bent makes explicit. I am referring to the socioeconomic crisis of 2001, which closes a decade of upbeat narratives of financial globalization that advised local institutions to refashion themselves in terms of a market economy or to perish and that not coincidentally saw the global reemergence of tango as the chief Argentine export in the scenario of world-culturalism.6

What moves the plot along in *Bar El Chino* is the story of one documentary that’s been abandoned and a second documentary that might finally be realized by the movie’s end. Both documentaries are about the titular neighborhood bar that doubles as a tango bar at night. That is, the drama is a fictionalization around documenting the existence of a real bar that figures prominently in tango mythology, a bar located on the exact corner of the working-class Pompeya neighborhood mentioned in the movie, remote from any of the trendy sections of Buenos Aires. The bar stands in the film not only as a place for true tango authenticity but also as a shrine for revisiting the values of community and friendship.

The time is the spring of 2001, smack-dab in the middle of the financial crisis that led to the freezing of bank accounts, a strategy with catastrophic consequences for the middle-class existence of the main characters and that indeed will prompt, in the movie and in reality, the collapse of the government structure. The protagonist Jorge is a middle-aged filmmaker whose current line of work entails making promotional videos for Spanish companies with investments in Argentina (foreign investment being the line of economic growth favored by neoliberal policies of the 1990s). Jorge’s life is divided between work and his passionate, personal filmic project, a split that perfectly mirrors the contrast of a new world order against the primary attachment of surviving local structures.7 He had been developing a documentary about his beloved bar but had abandoned the project after El Chino, the owner and spirit of the bar, dies.

Although he had been living in exile in Spain, Jorge had come back to Argentina after the return of democracy in 1986, leaving behind in Madrid a son,
now in his mid-twenties, and an ex-wife. He never stopped missing Buenos Aires and this bar, and at the beginning of the movie, that’s where we find him, on his birthday, singing tangos along with his two male best friends and the rest of the bar’s regulars. His story will intertwine with that of the young and beautiful Martina, who shows up at the bar as part of a TV crew covering tango night. Inspired by the humble venue, with its contrast to the glittering tango circuit catering to foreigners, Martina plans to shoot a documentary. She contacts Jorge to discuss the possibility of including his treasured footage, most importantly the conversations shot with the late Chino. Initially ambivalent because Martina, a hip young woman in the TV industry, doesn’t seem to have any tango credentials, Jorge and Martina start collaborating, and once Jorge realizes her sincerity, romance predictably ensues.

Many elements of the movie, such as the romantic plot and its frustrating finale prompted by the economic crisis and Martina’s sudden departure for Spain, as well as the topic of male friendship, lend themselves to a national allegorical reading, but I will leave them aside here to concentrate on the interdependent role of documentaries and tango bars in the Argentina of the 2000s. By now we realize that the two connected documentaries within this film will ultimately find the authenticity they seek in a place that has remained unencumbered, faithful to its spirit, and unmoved from its rightful spot within the humble peripheral barrio. In contrast to the visibility and flashy surfaces of renowned tango bars favored by TV cameras and tourists, the marginal and unassuming El Chino bar and its late owner are revealed as the secret center of the porteño universe. The place is filled with tango iconography, as it is tango that allows for the expression of genuine emotions and for the ethics of hospitality articulated at one point by the late owner. The footage included at the end of the film suggests that tango is not something primarily visible or audible but instead the name of a generous spirit that opens itself to the other, in the same way that this drama provides a space in which the failed documentary can be resurrected.

Bar El Chino thus postulates two roles for the documentary genre, first as a personal exploration of intimate attachments and then as a quest for and redemption of posthumous remains. The documentary register of this drama is relevant not only because documentary making moves the plot forward but also most significantly because we get to see and hear the “real” late Chino philosophizing about life and death behind the bar’s counter—real but ultramediatized, as he can only be present in the unedited footage rescued from oblivion within a not-yet finished documentary, within a feature film. But by
the same token, the drama stands as the recognition that documenting might be a way of declaring time as having run out, a testimony to a slow but certain death—a suspicion that might have stopped Jorge short of finishing on his first (failed) attempt. Indeed, these fictional documentaries deal with the magic of resurrecting what is dead (tango, local attachments, and el Chino himself), or at the very least, they ponder the conditions of a kind of survival in animated suspension.

It might be argued that Buenos Aires’s shifting character, or what might be regarded as its de-characterization, bound up with new cultural and economic constellations that have transformed antiquated cafés into glossy pizzerias and storied theaters into discotheques or mega-churches for TV pastors, is precisely what remains unspoken, even as it drives the search for a place of a “pure” or untouched memory. One modernizing wave (that of the neoliberal 1990s) appears to have erased the traces of an earlier modernity from which tango emerged. But after the financial crisis of 2001 marked the dramatic end of a model in which the free market promised to pave the road for Argentina’s positioning in the First World, the march of history reaches a standstill in which discarded and recycled pasts are again resignified. Thus, the real-life Bar El Chino, which ceased to function as a neighborhood bar after the death of its owner, both attracts and resists mediatic interventions, and following renovations of the building that aim to both halt and freeze the march of time, it sporadically opens for occasional tango shows as the reincarnation of itself.

Perhaps as a gesture of eschewing this historical drama altogether by challenging the obsession with the relic and the shrine, thus disseminating tango’s powerful allure everywhere, a nondescript neighborhood restaurant becomes the setting for another movie, El tango de mi vida (The tango of my life, directed by Hernán Belón, 2007). Far from the mythical café of many tango lyrics in which male attachments are primary (assumed in Bar El Chino but also in the documentary Café de los maestros which I discuss below), here what pulls men and women from different socioeconomic backgrounds together on four consecutive Mondays is an organized talent show and competition for amateurs and semiprofessional tango aficionados.

Presenting the performances and successive elimination of the contestants along with the details of the jury members’ deliberations, the film offers an evolving drama of artistic consecration, albeit on a modest scale commensurate with the reduced horizon of expectations of the struggling middle class. Thus, far from the dramatic buildup predictable in talent show formats
in which the prize opens the door to fame and perhaps fortune, here the prospect of mediatic success never casts its bright light—perhaps because no TV channel or record company hopes to create a profit machine out of the performances, but more importantly because the movie suggests an intimate association of tango with the simple, everyday life of the title. Indeed, the decision process is not imbued with pathos, and there is no display of anticipatory emotional extremes, as if the “tango of my life,” the entanglement of tango and life, were more subtle, intimate, and intricate than what the contest format can allow.

Drawing on another template for a contemporary conception of popularity and stardom, the film is also peppered with “daily life” segments akin to reality TV. The camera follows the contestants for a casual survey of the material of their daily existence; it finds them at work and in public spaces and communes with them at their homes as they carry on with their lives, lives that are neither organized around the pursuit of artistic heights nor particularly imbued with tango mythology or iconicity. Although the subjects produce some “natural” behavior for a camera eager to capture the quotidian, the film also approaches its subjects lightly, with a playful, forgiving, compassionate look that seems to put them at ease. The more casual the evocation, the more mysterious the link between the daily reality of jobs, schools, family, homes, and so on and a tango that seems to simultaneously dwell and persist deep within, nowhere and everywhere. The film thus projects flows of affect that are revealed to act independently of the film: they do not await cinematic redemption, and they are not organized in relation to the achievement of fame, recognition, or professional careers.

All of this amounts to a reclamation of that aspect of tango most neglected in its metropolitan circulation and appropriation, the untranslatable singing practice of emotionally charged lyrics narrating an intimate drama and worldview that are, by convention, performed with a studied sense of personal involvement. The title of the movie makes an explicit allusion to tango singing as something not learned but lived, and the voice is here the material ground on which the lyrics and the body become one. But even as tango lyrics and singing style seem to be the matter of melodrama, the general tone of the film is one of a celebration, albeit in a mellow key. Tango dwells not so much in what the lyrics express, often referring to a world no longer visible, but in the emotional charge of the voice, which has remained. What is celebrated? Perhaps the sheer survival of this middle class and its aspirations, despite decades of political and economic violence; perhaps tango as a gift, a bonus,
a leftover that history—the iteration of interrupted projects of modernization—failed to wipe out.\textsuperscript{8} Removed from the passionate entanglements channeled by tango in international film, remote from the camera-ready visual plasticity of the dance, this tango film is clearly more interested in looking at the fabric of the contemporary Argentine urban middle class. These are lives that, rather than defined or justified by tango drama, are sweetened by tango’s faithful company.

Contrary to the collage composition of \textit{El tango de mi vida}, the documentary \textit{Yo no sé qué me han hecho tus ojos} (I don’t know what your eyes have done to me, directed by Sergio Wolf and Lorena Muñoz, 2003) provides a stage for the single-minded search of one ghostly female voice, that of singer Ada Falcón—a singer and tango film performer of the 1920s and 1930s who vanished suddenly from public view under rather mysterious circumstances. It was for her that the maestro Francisco Canaro is said to have written the song resurrected in the film’s title. In a tango world dominated by male personalities, the eyes of the young rising star acquire legendary status as the object of clashing desires—the latest of which seems to be the directorial eye reconstructing, through glimpses, the star system that surrounded Falcón’s public persona. If the culture industry had the power to create through tango “a mythology in the present tense” (as the director voice-over puts it), this documentary proposes a meditation on what is absent and what remains once that present is no more.

The fact that the diva vanished in the early 1940s functions as an allegory of tango’s destiny, its mythological allure, its interrupted trajectory. Photographs, film footage, and music recordings are included in the movie not as historical records but as phantasmagoria, like haphazard glimpses of a dream world, a tango legend surviving only in the echo of a voice, the glitter of a gaze. The documentarian appears before the camera personally carrying out the investigation, conducting interviews, tracking down documents, and so forth, as the fragments of tango culture are reduced to a leftover. This use of the archival runs counter to a traditional documentarian incorporation of historical sources, as when a resort to footage naturalizes a perception of progressive time.\textsuperscript{9} The futile search for a lost early movie featuring Falcón (\textit{El festín de los caranchos}, 1919) exemplifies this legendary aspect of an early culture industry that, rather than laying the groundwork for steady accumulative progress, survives only in mythical or fragmentary form, perhaps only as a projection of present fantasies.

The film proposes to fill this void at which it teeters by aggressively pursu-
ing Ada’s presence. The documentary thus follows the thread of rumors and legends to the hills of Córdoba, to Salsipuedes (meaning “leave if you can,” a town with a name of intriguing significance), to the cloister where Ada is said to have been living, and finally to the retirement home where Ada will ultimately be discovered. There she is—an aged ingénue at the end of her life, lost and found. When the documentarian-narrator shows her a tape of her performance and recordings of her voice, she seems to recall those moments; she sings along, albeit quietly, some phrases; she remembers, or so it seems, intermittently, with a sense of wonder or detachment. The camera is fixated on Ada’s profile while she listens and looks at her former recorded self, but her face expresses uncertainty regarding the location of these memories—not “hers” but memories of her held by others or by mere recording technology. “Poor Ada! Poor Canaro! Is that me?,” she utters, as if her frail body preserved a secretly senile mind, an obscure secret, or both: she is the perfect allegory for tango’s vanishing but insistent presence. The intangible presence of a vanished past is made possible by reproduction technologies that, far from cancelling them out, reconstituted, re-created, and disseminated the aura of the voice and the image—modern technologies of reproduction alongside which tango was born and raised and without which no mythological “Ada” could ever have existed.

While the celebratory tango industry of recent years often glosses over historical discontinuities and erasures by way of tracking down aging tango personalities of mythical stature and humble existence, Yo no sé qué me han hecho tus ojos follows the same formula only to lead it to unsettling results because the diva is not available for redemption. She is, in different ways, not entirely present but instead “absent” or at least absent-minded in the way that people suffering from dementia might be. In a more radical sense, it was her conscious decision to cut herself off from the symbolic and institutional matrix of tango, to withdraw her body from the record of mediated social memory that makes her presence phantasmagoric. This doesn’t prevent the former star and the documentarian from listening to music together and singing along in a pure celebration of the encounter, setting free the enjoyment of the art from the entangled matrix of tango history and its systems of consecration.

If tango in international film is conveniently detached from history—an already prepackaged and shelf-ready cultural product picked up from the counter of available dramatic resources—this film is an exemplary performance of tango as a kind of aborted, traumatic history that keeps haunting the memory of the present. In searching for clues, the film takes us to places
that are no more, to significant sites that were the stuff of tango’s frayed material fabric, but that bear no traces of their past, as legendary theaters and radio stations were converted into so many McDonalds, banks, and department stores. The renovated façades are shown in fixed shots, the director silently confronting the buildings in their sleek non-concern, staging only a stubborn indifference toward bygone times. Certainly, this move attempts to overcome the logic of the crypt—the trope of a place where the object of desire, tango, is shown to be buried but magically preserved, awaiting routine visitors, like those of Bar El Chino, to fulfill the fantasy of an unchanged condition. Recourse to an actual crypt paradoxically furthers this point by revealing that there is nothing but death there: one of the final scenes of *Yo no sé qué me han hecho tus ojos* depicts the narrow, empty alleys of Buenos Aires’s Chacarita cemetery where Ada is buried in the pantheon of the SADAIC, the Argentine Society of Authors and Composers, along with many other faded figures from tango’s yesteryear.

It is not surprising that other documentaries such as *Por la Vuelta* (directed by Cristian Pauls, 2005) and *Café de los Maestros* (directed by Miguel Kohan, 2008) also postulate the continuity of tango through appeals to its aging icons. In *Por la Vuelta* the filmmaker Cristian Pauls officiates as the curious middle-aged tango amateur exploring the personal significance of the bandoneon maestro Leopoldo Federico’s music, as he pays a close look at Federico’s life. The titular vuelta, or return, is not an operation that the film itself seeks to produce by rescuing the subject from anonymity (as in *El tango de mi vida*) or from oblivion (as in *Café de los maestros*). We see Federico in his daily routine, the camera focused on his home and his body as the material base that would make the titular “return” possible. We encounter the musician in various stages of a tentative plan to return to the music scene—a very uncertain revival, both because of the maestro’s failing health and because of his insistence on making such a comeback only if he is accompanied by his full orchestra. The film seems open to its own incompletion, to the possibility of its own failure, particularly when its meandering progress is halted by the health crises of the musician. Rather than progressing, the movie becomes a meditation on time and aging, on the unpredictability of life, in terms of the very physicality that defines for all of us, but for musicians in a very specific way, the limits of who we are. A testimony of what continues on through time and beyond time, the documentary treats the subject of remains as a fleeting category, much like time and music themselves.

*Por la vuelta* seems to share with *Yo no sé qué me han hecho tus ojos* the
tendency to dwell in the severed connection between a vanished past of tango halls, whose grand names remain only as empty echoes, and the concrete present of a city that seems unforgiving, ready to dispose of its past and possibly its very identity. The many silent passages where we see the directorial camera-eye skimming through a book of old photographs of Buenos Aires (by Horacio Coppola) or contemplating Federico’s own childhood pictures or wandering around the city are not offered as a natural referent for tango music but rather as a set of incidental images reluctant to coalesce into a narrative.11 The constant recurrence of images of traffic, from inside or outside a car or a train, suggest a city in constant flow, a city that is itself a metaphor for the passage of time—where no return is possible.

The meditation on what is passed on, what constitutes a legacy, is expressed explicitly in the language of quasi-filial ties; the filmmaker shows open concern for Federico’s failing health and even attends his medical checkups. The movie closes with a revelatory exchange between the filmmaker and the musician who stops chatting, as if struck by a sudden realization, inquiring of Pauls, “You don’t know much about tango, do you?” to which the filmmaker, some thirty years younger than Federico, replies, “Not really; that’s the reason I am making this film”—a testimony to a generational breach intensified by a historical discontinuity. The only bridge across time is the authoritative, ghostly presence of Astor Piazzolla, who placed Federico in the pantheon of the chosen few great bandoneonists and whose tenderly quarrelsome letters to Federico are read aloud in the film. But discursive authority is absent, an absence reflected in the documentary’s reluctance to include even a single interview. The traditional didactic components of documentary genre are interrogated from a stance of awareness of the impossibility of transmission or of the mere remedial aspect of a transmission whose would-be recipient lacks what only experience, a personal involvement with the sound of tango, might have provided. Thus the term vueltas points not only to Federico’s returns (to the stage, to fame, to renewed health) but also to the destiny of the narrator-filmmaker whose relation to tango is uncertain except when he identifies it as the sound that “saw me growing up and that was now coming back to tell me ‘Here I am. And now what? It is impossible to keep going without me.’” That is, we witness a return that is neither conjured nor welcome, the violence of its obstinacy, its stubborn insistence, confronting the filmmaker unexpectedly and condemning him to a never-ending game of catch-up.

Maybe because this film focuses on a bandoneon player who is often seen playing solo (such that the documentarian-narrator says at one point that
“Portrait of a solo artist could have been the title of this film”), it shares with the docudrama El último bandoneón (The last bandoneon, directed by Alejandro Saderman, 2003) the sense that there is something arcane about tango, that it contains a knowledge accessed and transmitted only by a chosen few. Here, tango is distant from its populist celebration in the talent show, or the picturesque collective sing-along in Bar El Chino. In El último bandoneón the drama of survival doesn’t pertain only to tango’s aging figures but to the bandoneon itself, threatened by the growing rarity of the instrument, by the increasing lack of experienced luthiers trained to repair and maintain it, and by the very world popularity of tango as it converts the bandoneon into a curiosity, a prized commodity, and a cult artifact in the global market of enthusiasts and collectors.

The fictional thread that drives the plot of El último bandoneón is the plight of Marina Gayotto, a young and struggling single mother and bandoneonist whose artistic talents are challenged by the lethal combination of a dire economic situation and a crippled instrument in need of urgent repairs. In the early chapters, she awaits an audition with the famous bandoneonist Rodolfo Mederos, who is forming a young tango orchestra in order “to bring tango orchestras back to the world, and also as a social program,” as he claims in the film. The meeting between a representative of a new generation of musicians, who is nevertheless stalled in her development by the lack of networks of support (she is seen playing in colectivos, public buses, for donations from the passengers), and the acclaimed Mederos points to yet another attempt to reconstitute a broken lineage. The fact that she is a woman is of course indicative of an epochal change, since the overwhelming majority of bandoneon players are and have been men. The film moves constantly between the older generation and the youth, with Mederos mediating between them (born in 1940, he appears to be one of the few members of his age group). The film projects him as a stable, reassuring presence, connecting not only the old and the young but also the old guard and the innovators, tango tourists and locals, collectors, instrument tuners, dancers, and musicians.

Beginning with its title, the film is haunted by the pathos of endings. The movie sets itself up to deny the titular acknowledgment by displaying counterexamples that build to a crescendo. The peripatetic trajectory of the young bandoneonist takes her to different neighborhoods, where, led by word-of-mouth referrals, she knocks upon doors of possible bandoneon sellers, aficionados ready to elaborate on the instrument’s special character and on their own relationship to it. After her ailing, irreparable bandoneon is sold to a
well-known Japanese dealer, Mederos helps Marina buy an instrument in working condition at an auction. Marina starts rehearsing with the young orchestra. So the last bandoneon might not be the last bandoneon after all, the movie is ready to assure us, provided the magic revival works at all those different levels.

But what will this (pen)ultimate bandoneon play? The old classics? Because despite Marina’s hip looks, the only compositions she rehearses are classics from the 1930s and 1940s. Implicitly, tango is doomed if its composition indeed stopped some time in the early 1950s—as if a bandoneon might remain, but the key to any creative impulse has been lost. In a couple of revelatory moments, Marina asks maestro Rodolfo (and she repeats this question to another older musician as well) if he is currently composing and if so, what. This suggestion gestures at what one of the interviewed mature dancers openly declares: that from 1955 (the year of the so-called Revolución Libertadora that toppled Juan Perón’s government, banned public meetings, and made expressions of popular culture suspect) to the mid-1980s, tango was virtually dead, pure and simple, with the only supply of air provided by those few dancers who kept it alive against all odds by continuing the tradition of the milonga, in which the same old tunes were (and still are) played over and over again. Though the comment disregards Piazzolla because his music is seldom played in dance halls, the question remains of whether the musician’s unsurpassed musical genius has left any direct musical descendants. Mederos is in fact a prolific, talented composer, but none of his compositions have achieved the recognition reserved for the closed repertoire of the classics. And when he listens to Marina in the first audition, playing with her original bandoneon, he comments in private to the bassist that the girl is “struggling with a dead elephant” (peleando con un elefante muerto), faulting not only a lack of air—and this in the wielding of an instrument whose sound originates in compressing and absorbing air—but also invoking a presence of something heavy, exotic, and threatened with extinction. Despite its narrative of overcoming difficulties, this documentary is haunted by imminent death.

To close the cycle of legacy and elegy, we should mention Café de los maestros (Café of the masters, directed by Miguel Kohan, 2008), an ambitious, monumental reunion of surviving tango maestros organized by Gustavo Santaolalla. Café de los maestros attempts to solve the historical conundrum through production grandiosity (including an audio CD boxed set, a concert in the Teatro Colón, and the movie itself): it recalls tango history and creates
a new series of enhanced auditory, visual, and stage performances that can leave no doubt as to tango’s lasting legacy. The documentary registers the project leading up to the concert and the recording of the CD, constructing a narrative that assumes the filmmaking process itself and not only its final results will be significant and worthy of celebration. We witness the musician and producer Santaolalla aboard an airplane as it lands in Buenos Aires, where he will visit the studios, and then watch as the old masters warmly greet each other, play, sing, record, and share their musical knowledge before the camera, first in the privacy of their homes and finally on stage, in a continuity that proceeds toward the final performance and recording event that crown the project: this is not just a musical album but a document and a monument. By the time of its release, three of the musicians had already died (Lágrima Ríos, Carlos García, and José ‘Pepe’ Libertella), and the film ends with a dedication to them. Like Wim Wenders’s Buena Vista Social Club, with which it shares many features but chiefly an epochal anxiety, the movie seems to purposely regain for the maestros their iconic status, to widen their reach, to bring them from semiretirement to grand stage recognition, and to promise them the remembrance they deserve once they have passed on. This is probably the most unabashedly celebratory of the documentaries, with many scenes imbued with the flavor of a class reunion; the present is shown as charged with a rich past, but its projection into the future is fragile. This fragility is perhaps the very reason to celebrate tango’s presence, to indulge in an urgent, overdue homage.

Café de los maestros points to a larger phenomenon of tango orchestra revival that deserves a full-fledged treatment; I will limit myself to consider its filmic representation. Tango revival or survival is, as we see, often presented as an overdue act of recognition of some aging masters, complemented in some cases by a ritual of transmission, with tango officiating as the missing link between a glorious past and the disjointed present. Nonetheless, it is the young who possess the necessary components for mending the wounds of broken history. Recuperation and restoration are accomplished by the young and talented in films such as Orquesta típica (Typical orchestra, directed by Nicolás Entel, 2006) and Si sos brujo (If you are a sorcerer, directed by Caroline Neal, 2005), which although different in many regards—the former irreverent in its attitude, the latter more didactic and academic—both center on the formation of new tango orchestras (Orquesta Típica Fernández Fierro and El Arranque, respectively). Forming new orchestras in a “typical” configuration becomes a remarkable feat when considered against the background of the virtual disappearance of
these orchestras and the environment that sustained them, in part due to financial reasons, after the 1950s ebb of tango culture. Successive generations of urban youth whose musical education was built on the sounds of Argentine rock—a powerful cultural movement from the 1960s onward, which gained strength even during the dictatorship, diversifying and developing amid political and economic turmoil—had been mostly indifferent to or disdainful of what tango represented (nostalgia, tradition, lament, failure, old age, resentment, and so on). The preeminence of the orchestra formation is tied to a particular aspect of tango’s greatness: its Apollonian era, as Rafael Flores calls it, marked by the 1940s explosion of orchestras that codified tango for their players, creating a school of musicians “who knew how to read a score” (69). Thus it is not only tango glory that is recuperated by the contemporary orchestras but also a certain sense of order and continuity. Indeed, it might be argued that the two orchestras, despite their radically different sound, bring together the old and the new, both of them integrating new compositions among the old classics. And if Fernández Fierro plays the classics irreverently while El Arranque interprets them literally, it is in any case the innovative spirit of these classics, their untamable force, that remains as the object of desire.

While Si sos brujo portrays institutional indifference and a lack of official support for the incipient El Arranque orchestra, in Orquesta típica day-to-day improvisation becomes a method of survival and enjoyment for the members of the Fernández Fierro. In both films precariousness only adds to the realization of destiny, in which each orchestra’s formation, originating in a leap of faith, is at last led home by fate. Si sos brujo rescues an academic model of apprenticeship that the movie suggests fortified the traditional orchestras of the 1940s and that the orchestra El Arranque (named after a Julio de Caro tango) intends to revive. The orchestra embarks upon the project of bringing back to life the style of the canonical orchestras (Gobi, de Caro, Troilo, Pugliese, D’Arienzo, and so on), heeding that legacy to the point of mimicking the sound of each one of them, in order to pass that legacy on, not only through the media of music scores and records but also through the very physicality of playing styles. Thus emerges an orchestra able to conjure up not one sanctified member of tango royalty but the whole hall of fame, a band of ventriloquists, a monster of sorts, since it needs (as is stated in the movie) to be a contemporary orchestra as well, one that is able to yield up the sounds of new tango to a city that has witnessed a profound transformation since the old masters populated the theaters and dance halls.
At the beginning of Si sos brujo, we see the bassist and orchestra director Ignacio Varchausky tracking down the retired maestro Emilio Balcarce (former arranger, composer, violinist, and bandoneonist for some of the most important orchestras and one of the maestros featured in Café de los maestros) to see if he is willing to collaborate with firsthand knowledge of the golden age orchestras’ techniques. Firsthand must be read literally, since it is the body involved in playing an instrument in a particular way that is impossible to recover in absentia; thus, semiretired maestros are invited to rehearsal to pass on their unique ways of playing. Urgent action is called for, as Varchausky clearly states at the outset: “We are in a constant race against time . . . trying to codify what the maestros who played in these orchestras know.” A tension emerges here, since the codification intended by the project, the handbook for orchestras that Varchausky declares he is planning to compile, cannot stand in for the physical presence of those musicians who had already codified and expanded tango vocabulary through their performances with the great orchestras. When media, from records to scores that Varchausky digs up from dusty antique stores and Balcarce’s drawers, is pored through exhaustively, its limits become apparent. The limits to cultural mediation ultimately yield to a desire for the real, for a presence, an actual apprenticeship to the evanescent element of the “style” to be re-created, which can never be codified.

Thus, the most insistent question in the movie is about arranques, jump starts, (new) beginnings: how to start a tango orchestra, how to recommence and connect with what is no longer there, how to break through the isolation of aficionados, how to imbue disseminated treasures with present, physical thrust. Whereas the film tracks the musicians to their homes to portray their domestic lives, it also includes 1930s and 1940s tango movie footage to strategically contrast the disseminated, individual efforts of the present with the populated orchestras and halls of the golden age. While the orchestra school is the answer to the tangueros’ isolation, it also attempts to sublimate the anxiety of beginnings with the progressive narrative of growth and transmission of the legacy. What appeared implausible then becomes not only possible but ultimately highly successful, as confirmed by an impromptu invitation for El Arranque to perform in Europe and taste there the same Parisian acclaim the great orchestras enjoyed in years past. The film also establishes tango’s mythical trajectory by comparing it to similar developments in jazz. The master trumpeter Wynton Marsalis is interviewed and describes his visit to an Arranque rehearsal, comparing the methods he sees and hears there to
the intergenerational transmission of jazz knowledge in New Orleans. As in Café de los maestros, a performance in the Teatro Colón, Buenos Aires’s consecratory stage par excellence, signals another apex at the end of the movie. The successive creation of new orchestras comprised of young musicians ascertains the academic quality of the project, granting its continuation.

This narrative of renewal is countered, however, by the aging maestro Balcarce, whose progressive hearing loss becomes part of the storyline when he shares his concerns for his growing limitations with some of the young musicians—thus making material the significance of physicality in their enterprise. The film is able to tie together homage to the glorious past (of the soon to be re-retired maestro, composer of the film title’s “Si sos brujo,” among other tango classics) with regeneration against all odds. If Varchausky was initially discouraged from attempting a quixotic project in a country lacking continuous institutional support for the arts, with naysayers warning him in classical cynical Argentinean style that he could only put this kind of orchestra together si sos brujo (only “if you are a sorcerer”), the movie affirms by the end that he and other members of the orchestra indeed possess such sorcery and that such magic does exist. So, too, does tango succeed commercially, expanding its energy, marketing itself to the rest of the world—thus re-creating one of its central narratives of (humble) origins and (worldly) transcendence. Despite the infamy of its low-class breeding at the margins, tango survives against all odds, and its poor (arrogant, some would say) but dignified spirit remains a central tenet of its international status and success. This is the other, complementary sorcery: the art form survives not only against time and death but also through space, projecting a narrative of social ascent onto a world scale—a fantasy fitting for the poor European immigrants to the South American metropolis: a venture abroad that is also a triumphant comeback. The extent to which this narrative privileges the European connection, re-animating parts of tango’s legacy but also obfuscating other elements that have been lost or ignored (such as the African components in the form’s origins or its capacity to articulate popular elements as it once did), is material ripe for debate—but not one in which this film engages directly.

While Si sos brujo posits the orchestra as the institutionalization or academization that would supplement and remedy this broken continuity, the film Orquesta típica is invested in rogue tango: a surprising, untamed vitality—a different scene of revival. Although the renowned bandoneon master Daniel Binelli (who played with the legendary orchestra of Osvaldo Pugliese) is at one point called upon to perform the necessary ritual of transmission
and approval (which, interestingly enough, he is shown delivering somewhat reluctantly), the film is much more invested in playing up young musicians’ irreverence and energy.

The movie opens with a scene of the musicians transporting a piano on a cart through the streets of the San Telmo neighborhood in order to play a traditional tango formation for an enthusiastic crowd that has assembled on the sidewalk. But the police show up, call for order, ask for permits, and insist on keeping the street clear; the young musicians argue that they have no official permit but that they had made previous arrangements with the shop owners, who were accommodating. The placement of this scene at the outset of Orquesta típica is designed to underline the creative rebelliousness of the young musicians, their respectful but innovative spirit, and the lack of support of government institutions, which they didn’t seek anyway—all of which translates musically into a heterodox embrace of a form that had been viewed both as mainstream and old-fashioned but that under their interpretation unleashes its wild energy, its street cred. The impromptu audience follows suit by spontaneously rebelling against the men in uniform, whose call for order culminates in a heated debate, articulated by members of the crowd in terms of a repressive authority versus expressive enjoyment of culture. No arrests or further enforcement of public order follow, a détente that might be attributed to the presence of the camera, to the atmosphere of a leisurely and tourist friendly sunny day in San Telmo, to personal arrangements made with the officers off camera, or to the sheer ritualistic aspect of this discussion constructed of ready-made antagonisms (the people versus the men in uniform).

In any case this initial scene seems designed to conjure up a vision of a tango renaissance not reduced to an articulation of local expression in tune with the demands of world-culturalism but showing instead its unruly, untamed thrust. Still, in what might be the most novel and revealing turn in the debate, one neighbor defends tango on the streets as an alternative to cumbia villera, the music identified with the inhabitants of the slums of Buenos Aires (many of them migrants from poorer neighborhood countries, cumbia itself containing influences from Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia) and associated with drug addiction and criminality. This redefines the discussion in terms of clashing cultures and social classes, in which tango’s local credentials are solidly grounded on core middle-class values, in opposition to the global flow of the poor and displaced. One member of the audience even interpolates a policeman with a challenge that he stand by the authentic local music of the city against the reprehensible cumbia—a demand that leaves the police officer visibly startled.
If tango in its origins was an illegitimate offspring, it might be mobilized in its resurgence as a cultural heir and bastion for the defense of legitimacy, an element of a core identity that retracts from new social actors and popular articulations. And that, among other things, is what these documentaries accomplish. That is, if Orquesta típica postulates that tango tradition might be carried quite unexpectedly to a new level of realization, that the “typical” is alive and well in the hands of these studiously untidy young musicians assembling an orthodox formation to revive tango’s nonconformist spirit, then the contemporary resurgence is perhaps enabled by the social abjection of the new urban poor and the new immigrant. In a silent acknowledgment of what they largely leave to the side, Orquesta típica includes short sections in which street kids and other homeless city inhabitants are seen from a distance, a camera glance akin to a fleeting thought, granting filmic existence to what falls outside the scope of the main narrative. If tango grew out of early twentieth-century class and gender oppression and radical changes in the constitution of the social body, these scenes are perhaps harbingers of new tango art forms, the movies showing what tango is not prepared to express, signaling how the real will be confronted anew if tango is to remain as more than a token of sweetened postmodern nostalgia for elite consumption.

Against the usual resort to stock images of Buenos Aires set to a tango soundtrack, Orquesta típica offers images of cartoneros (cardboard gatherers) and others processing the city’s daily production of garbage, accompanied by the sounds of the Latin American pop fusion group El Portón, of which one of the bandoneon players is also a member. The visual-sound semantics are open but seem to suggest a city redefined by its improvised economy, equating not only old and new tango, and new tango spliced with other rhythms, but also the creative irreverence of the musicians with the ever-changing survival techniques of the destitute. The film leaves it at that, however, not going any further down this muddy path. And once again it is the European tour that confirms tango’s artistic credentials, as if implicitly accepting that the form’s current success is predicated on its incapacity or reluctance to express new social formations or history in the making.

Indeed, Orquesta típica also reenacts the legend of modest beginnings, transcending el barro del suburbio (the mud of the outskirts), where tango is said to have been imbued with its spirit, and traveling to the center and abroad to become a celebrated world music. The documentary accompanies the band in the peripatetic wanderings of its European tour. The lifestyle
of the band, its laid-back attitude of mischievous, playful, and somewhat unpolished but charming boyishness, is the signature of this film. We see the band members inside the van they are driving, getting lost and excited in the course of their trotting about Europe, being hosted in private homes, borrowing a piano from a stranger and pushing it on a cart, putting together impromptu meals, and enjoying their quotidian wanderings in cities, towns, and on the road, admiring the scenery and always having lots of fun, with energetic music-making peppering their every adventure. Pushing a piano might be read as the image allegorizing the intended emotional climate of the movie: obstacles are happily overcome through passionate work, and precarious arrangements are pulled together by artistic magic. The movie concludes with an intriguingly cathartic scene, showing members of the band, once they’ve returned to Argentina, again pushing a piano, only this time it’s toward a run-down or perhaps unfinished pedestrian bridge, where they proceed to push the instrument over into a free fall, punctuated by a sonorous crash to the ground. We are left with an image of urban Third World cool that reinforces a sense of an irreverent but charming youth, of those mischievous but artistic South Americans self-consciously displaying their cultural difference with a light, joyful spirit. The trick seems to work nicely, for they are welcomed to the world-culturalist table where they bridge the cultural gap while performing the enfant terrible. If, as Pedro Ochoa argues, early Hollywood and European films portrayed tango as a barbarian dance when performed by natives or in South American settings but as sophisticated and sexy when performed in Europe and by Europeans, Orquesta típica suggests the possibility of a remapped geography of passions, one in which tango is the sophisticated cultural capital flaunted by sexy new barbarians who happily enact their own self-exoticization.

Certainly, one single hypothesis won’t do justice to this varied documentary film production, much less to the vast background of the long and complex deployment of tango in films against which it is set. Nevertheless, an epochal character becomes clear in the refusal of these films to treat tango as a self-transparent, available form of cultural expression to be mobilized for negotiating otherness (on the international screen) or dramatizing the same (in Argentine films). Tango’s pull toward the closed era of its glory doesn’t induce nostalgia, but it exerts pressure as if demanding new recognition and resignification while questioning whether the primary ties to its place of enunciation have been irredeemably lost. If nostalgia and authenticity
are prevalent in the promotion of tango as cultural commodity, these documentaries approach tango with a sense of innocence lost and occasionally recovered. Tango, a remnant from another modernity, remains present as a pending assignment, imbued with guilt and remorse but also with desire, guiding yet another historical adventure.

Notes

1. One could argue that this impetus is energized by a global boom in documentary production, which responds to concurrent demands for the testimonial, the (auto)biographical, and the (post)memorial. But more specifically this documentary production is part of a larger boom of Argentine cinema that occurred before and after the economic crisis of 2001, particularly after 1995. New laws protecting national cinema, the organization of new festivals, the emergence of young directors and film critics coming out of different film schools, and the inception of advanced and more economically accessible video technologies all have been cited as relevant factors in bringing about unprecedented growth in the number and diversity of films produced (Aguilar, Otros mundos 7–10). Many of those feature films, some of which are considered representative of the new wave of Argentine cinema, include a documentary register and borrow from styles developed by or generally associated with documentary genres, thus interrogating the relationship between fictional film and the indexical (Aguilar, Otros mundos 64–66). Paradoxically, the documentaries I will discuss in this chapter do not subscribe to the same neo-realist ethos of this new cinema wave practiced by such prominent directors as Pablo Trapero, Lisandro Alonso, and Adrián Caetano. Among the critical surveys of the rich last two decades of Argentine film, see also Emilio Bernini, “Un proyecto inconcluso.”

2. I mention U.S. film production because of its obvious influence and worldwide circulation, but tango has appeared more or less regularly (as a dance form or in diegetic or extradiegetic music) in many world cinemas. Pedro Ochoa’s encyclopedic book is to my knowledge the best study of the variety of films of different origins (from Japan, Europe, the Middle East, and beyond) that incorporates tango in these different ways. A good survey of tango in Euro-American movies can be found in Thompson (13–24). Hollywood’s early fascination with tango begins, as is well-known, with Rudolph Valentino’s ur-performance in The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (directed by Rex Ingram, 1921), includes Paramount Studios’ casting of Carlos Gardel for the Spanish-speaking market in the early 1930s, and arguably closes with the tango number of an aging diva in Sunset Boulevard (directed by Billy Wilder, 1950). But a new cycle opens in the 1990s, at a time when the performance of difference functions paradoxically as symbolic glue for times of upbeat globalization, and tango’s gendered enactment becomes a medium to choreographically conjure up and make visible a powerful if ambivalent attraction. Blockbuster films featuring tango or tangoesque dance and music numbers include Scent of a Woman (directed by Martin Brest, 1992), Schindler’s List (directed by Steven Spielberg, 1993), True Lies (directed by James Cameron, 1994), Evita (directed by Alan Parker, 1996), Moulin Rouge (directed by Baz Luhrmann, 2001), Chicago (directed by
Rob Marshall, 2002), Shall We Dance (directed by Peter Chelsom, 2004), Rent (directed by Chris Columbus, 2005), and Take the Lead (directed by Liz Friedlander, 2006). Notably, some of these films are retrospective pastiches of an era, the first half of the twentieth century, when tango mythology is established internationally through film; this feature is in itself telling in terms of the kind of intercultural fantasies that remained attached to “tango” through the arc of the twentieth century. Tango is mobilized for these exercises of postmodern nostalgia to signal lost authenticity in the age of the purported end of history. Some art-house films such as Tango Lesson (directed by Sally Potter, 1997) and Assassination Tango (directed by Robert Duvall, 2002) also display the ambivalence of an exotic attraction for tango culture that becomes a pedagogic adventure for a metropolitan subject.

3. The category of the “indexical” is widely used in film and photography studies and in particular in reference to the documentary genre, in which we assume that “the sound we hear and the image we behold seem to bear the trace of what produced them” (Nichols 35). The terminology (icon, index, and symbol) borrows from C. S. Peirce’s early semiotics. See also Mitchell.

4. Much has been written about this early development. See Couselo (1291–328) and Garramuño. There are also some early documentaries focused on tango culture and/or featuring tango figures. In his survey of tango in Argentine film, Jorge Miguel Couselo mentions “the organic contribution of Mauricio Berú, to which category we must add two films by Edmundo Valladares about Homero Manzi (1964) and Discepolín (1967), and the imaginative Gotán (1965) with a script by Ernesto Sábato” (1325). Among Berú’s filmography, the author mentions Filiberto (1964) and Fuelle Querido (1965).

5. This autobiographical tendency has been criticized as a shortcut intended to bypass the epochal questions currently raised by the documentary genre (see Beceyro, 2008 and Bernini, 2004).

6. Whereas multiculturalism is a U.S.–specific way of negotiating cultural difference with ties to foundational national narratives, I define world-culturalism as the celebratory vision of planetary cultural variety for the ultimate reaffirmation of a liberal globalizing agenda in which visual media plays a fundamental role.

7. Perhaps the alienated labor of this fictional filmmaker is already a factor of the lack of political thrust of his double enterprise. The most relevant documentary practices in Latin America have been until recently those with a political agenda, either testimonial, denunciatory, or propagandistic. The Argentine contribution to this lineage is prominent. The planned documentary on the tango bar stands as a sort of autobiographical project with lofty spiritual intentions, devoid of the political imperative, the necessity, the programmatic quality that lends force to the genre in many of its most important Latin American manifestations. Although the documentaries I explore here can’t be directly ascribed to any of these agendas, one particular filmmakers collective with a strong political edge founded in the 1980s, Grupo Cine-Ojo, is responsible for one of the documentaries I discuss, Yo no sé qué me han hecho tus ojos.

8. The expression “economic violence,” as related to the history of tango, is introduced by Julie Taylor (Paper Tangos 61), who identifies this violence with tango’s moment of conception.
9. We might contrast this use of footage with the use of archival material in an earlier documentary, *El tango es una historia* (Tango is a history, directed by Humberto Ríos, 1983), in which an impressive amount of historical material is used only as naturalistic illustration of a rather linear, unproblematic narrative of tango’s origin and evolution.

10. It is possible—that I have chosen to leave this argument unexplored in this chapter—to open up the truncated temporalities at the core of this and other tango films, their logic of oblivion and return, in reference to an altogether different site of Argentine cultural production. If the problems of complicated, discontinuous filiations are prevalent in these tango stories, they are also present in a seemingly very different body of aesthetic pursuits. I am referring to numerous artistic practices, ranging from documentaries to novels and from plays to street interventions that have emerged in the last decade, in which the personal and the political intersect in the viewpoint of those who were children during the last dictatorship. Even when the tango documentaries make no direct reference to these issues, a search for some form of continuity that has been violated, violently broken, or silenced points to a common thread in these heterogeneous loci of artistic enunciation, signaling a history marked with violent disruptions and posterior restorative efforts. Following the film critic and director Sergio Wolf, the golden age of Argentine film to which tango film belongs (especially in the 1940s) achieves an “abolition of time” (173), or perhaps historicity, through the creation of a mythical, self-enclosed world with recognizable types. If we keep in mind that film production during the last dictatorship (1976–1983) also proposed a time freeze of a different kind (Wolf 174), it is remarkable that Fernando Solanas’s films of the democratic transition (*El exilio de Gardel: Tangos*, 1985, and *Sur*, 1988) resort to tango as the expressive language that would conjure up and amend historic discontinuities produced by symbolic and physical repression and disappearance. Editor’s note: See Antonio Gómez’s discussion of these films in this edited volume.

11. Horacio Coppola’s book *Buenos Aires—1936* (published that year to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the city’s founding) is a stand-alone classic. His clean style is considered Bauhaus-influenced.

12. Mederos has had a prolific filmic career as a fictional bandoneonist, most prominently in *Las Veredas de Saturno* (directed by Hugo Santiago, 1986) and in *El exilio de Gardel: Tangos* (directed by Pino Solanas, 1985). Mederos’s music and his reflections on music are the main subject of another documentary, *El otro camino* (A different way, directed by Szollosy, 2008), which I will not discuss in this chapter, since it adds little to the sample of works I have chosen. Another famous bandoneonist of his generation is Daniel Binelli, who is seen at the end of *Orquesta típica*, supervising and approving the young musicians’ work.

13. While the local tango scene has benefited from the worldwide hype around tango and its repackaging of itself for a constant influx of new audiences and dance aficionados, this same trend triggers anxiety and the need to protect tango’s borders and original heritage. The long-standing Japanese taste for tango is exemplary in this regard: though not as flattering for the Argentine mind as the European obsession, it is much more threatening. A triple threat, the Japanese: successful capitalists, unbeatable tourists, and insatiable tango fans. The topic of cultural survival addressed in these movies thus takes a
new turn in *El último bandoneón*, which might be seen as an argument for protectionist measures in effective policing of bandoneons as material heritage. See Savigliano’s chapter “Exotic Encounters,” in *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*.

14. Santaolalla’s interesting career deserves mention. A former indie-rock performer, the Argentine musician went on to become a leading Los Angeles–based music producer, electronic tango band leader (with Bajofondo), and two-time Oscar Award–winning film music composer (for *Babel* and *Brokeback Mountain*).

15. The comparison with *Buena Vista Social Club* is intended to highlight a resonance that expresses an epochal drive; it is not a remark on Santaolalla’s originality or lack thereof. In fact, the versatile musician was involved in a comparable project long before Ry Cooder’s successful promotion of Cuban musicians, when he embarked, along with the Argentine musician León Gieco, on a two-year-long rescue operation of Argentina’s folk musicians. Together they traveled to the most remote corners of the country to record *De Ushuaia a la Quiaca* (1985), the title cut from which Santaolalla later used in the soundtrack of *The Motorcycle Diaries*.

16. For a rather pessimistic approach to this orchestra revival, see Monjeau and Filippelli, who argue that tango is basically stagnant despite its current boom and that the orchestras return to the deadlock that Piazzolla had already broken. The article also illustrates the evolution of the instrumental configuration of the orquesta típica.

17. It is perhaps worth noting that film director Caroline Neal is an American who moved to Buenos Aires in order to film this documentary. She subsequently married the director of *El Arranque*, Ignacio Varchausky.

18. Although it doesn’t feature an orchestra, the film *Tango, un giro extraño* (*Tango, a strange turn*, directed by Mercedes García Guevara, 2004) could have been part of this discussion for its focus on the young tango scene.

19. Jazz was tango’s rival in foreign scenarios (see Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* 170–71). Marsalis’s support is significant, among other reasons because he represents jazz’s most conservatively academic lineage.

20. To my mind, the most illuminating account of tango’s historical breeding ground, and the kind of class and gender issues it tackles or contains, is Adriana Bergero’s *Intersecting Tango*. 