Gotan Project’s Tango Project

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FOR SILVIA

The Olympia Music Hall in Paris, May 17, 2010: The concert launch for Tango 3.0, the third album from the Parisian group Gotan Project, begins to take shape with an acoustic song, played in the dark by a quartet consisting of a bandoneon, a violin, a guitar, and a piano. The song is “Cuesta abajo” (Downhill), the famous tango by Carlos Gardel, composed in 1934 with Alfredo Le Pera for the film of the same title, shot in New York by Paramount Pictures: “Las ilusiones perdidas / Yo no las puedo arrancar” (Lost illusions / I cannot tear them away). It is played in a conventional arrangement, except for the fact that at the end, instead of the typical dominant and tonic chan-chan rhythm, electronic percussion emanating from a mixing board weaves its way in, as it moves on to the second piece, which will be played in full light. The second piece is “Época,” one of the band’s hits released in Paris in 2001 with their first album La Revancha del Tango (The revenge of the tango), whose lyrics allude elliptically to the era of the desaparecidos, that is, to the dictatorship of 1976–83, its sad procession of disappeared people, and to the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo: “Si desapareció / En mi aparecerá” (If he disappeared / He will reappear in me).

It is tempting to see in this beginning, which was repeated at each concert of the tour, a sort of manifesto or at the very least a commentary on the history of the tango genre. One might gloss the initial scene of the concert thus: the electronic tango was born of the classic tango, which lives on in its own venerable history, connecting it to recent and tragic historical experience.
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This thread drawn between different periods in Argentine culture, which found in large cities like Paris or New York an auspicious location to resume its quest for sensuality and for richness, would therefore project the music of Buenos Aires into the future and into glory. Such a scenario has the merit of clarity. In addition to being the band’s third album and the technical term indicating the future of the web, Tango 3.0 thus announces a third life for the genre, after the traditional tango and the tango nuevo of Astor Piazzolla. That is, unless we take “Cuesta abajo” at its word and see the downward slope of Gardel’s tango (the star died in 1935 in a plane crash in Medellín) as an allegory of the melancholic heart of the genre itself. Tango in this sense becomes like a phoenix, always dying, being reborn from the ashes of each of its countless declines. Nevertheless, the conclusion would remain the same; Gotan Project’s tango project is nothing less than the future of tango.

What we have here is, to say the least, something of a risky bet, and no one knows what the outcome will be in the next few years—historiographical consecration, pure and simple forgetting, or, rather, something in between. In any case the members of Gotan Project are not the only ones concerned with these efforts. They implicate all of the groups who, in France, Argentina, and elsewhere, make up the phenomenon of electronic tango, which is emblematic of the creative renewal within the tango of the last ten years. It must, however, be pointed out that for the moment, the global socialization of this music expresses more a generic instability than a clear inscription in the tango milieu. At the same time, there is no doubt that we are dealing with a massive phenomenon. Shortly after its release in April 2010, Tango 3.0 reached the spot of the fourth best-selling album in France, where it remained for two weeks before beginning to drop slowly, not to mention first place in Belgium and second in Italy. Even more significantly, six weeks after its release the album was still in second place overall in the world music category and fourteenth in the dance/electronic slot on Billboard.com, the main indicator of the record market in the United States. If one adds to these partial figures an ambitious international tour, extensive radio airplay, and an unknown number of pirated copies on peer-to-peer sites, and if one notes that YouTube in January 2012 showed “Época” as having nearly nine million views after four years online and that at the same time “Mi Confesión” was approaching three million, one must conclude that from a purely quantitative point of view the career of Gotan Project, and of its founders Eduardo Makaroff, Philippe Cohen-Solal, and Christoph Müller, has no equal in the history of the tango.
That is, of course, if we are speaking of “real” tango. The aforementioned chart rankings betray the generic ambivalence of this music, one that lies most prominently in its technical features. Indeed, from the basic eurhythmics to the melodic profile and by way of the secondary role of instrumental virtuosity, the pieces’ open form or the brevity of the lyrics, not to mention the invisible, powerful percussion triggered by computers that contrasts sharply with the absence of a drum set characteristic of the tango, all this is distant from the family resemblance that established until now any minimal belonging to the genre, even in non-prototypical cases. It is of course true that any attempt whatsoever to renew a genre cannot emerge as a novelty except at the price of a certain distance from the genre’s conventional forms. For this reason the proposition’s aesthetic validity cannot be decided solely on the basis of its initial strangeness. And while it may be unorthodox, the electronic tango maintains enough in common with the tango that even specialists cannot easily rule out the question of what relationships might link them.

In the case of Gotan Project, the presence of traditional instruments played by musicians of incontestable tango skills—the bandoneonist Niní Flores and Facundo Torres, the singers Cristina Vilallonga and Claudia Pannone, the arranger and pianist Gustavo Beytelmann, among others—tends to align their experiment with other reforming currents that the genre has witnessed throughout its history. And the farther we move from the networks of specialists, the greater the chances that what distinguishes the electronic tango from the traditional tango tout court becomes blurred, and what we might call a tangotude or, stated otherwise, the global presence of the tango signifier in the public space, prevails.

In this sense the electronic tango—the latest example of what Ramón Pelinski, taking up a phrase of Mauricio Kagel, has called the “nomadic tango” (El tango nómade)—seems to summon up a number of ideological polarities that have become incontrovertible in the contemporary context. It is anchored in local heritage as well as a worldwide context via a technological crossover, that of the venerable German bandoneon vulgarized in the suburbs of Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century with the computer freshly arrived from Silicon Valley. In this crossover, the rhythmic sex appeal of the old, languorous dos por cuatro and of the metronomical regularity of electronic percussion combine. The phrases built into periods of four bars in accordance with the legacy of nineteenth-century dances are unhinged as they become minimalist, circular sequences, and all of it is reflected in the double, localized rootedness of the tango hall’s location and the dance floors
of this local globality that has become, or so we’re told, the world. And with it we find everywhere a revisited eroticism, with girls in fishnet stockings cleverly “cross-dressed” with hats perched at a jaunty tilt. The conventions here rediscover that which can always be indexed in relation to the law of desire, as Pedro Almodóvar would say, even if it means being left to wonder what remains of desire once it has become a law.

Until now, all of this seems to have worked quite well. The extensive list of uses of the Parisian band’s music in cinema and on television—here in a movie with Jennifer Lopez and Richard Gere, there in a gymnastics sequence at the Olympics in Beijing, or there again as a jingle for a brand of soap, or in a soundtrack for a documentary denouncing consumerism— is an ambiguous indicator of its prestige and its influence, once we realize that any, or almost any, sign of success can invite critique. Reactions to this music can take various forms. For example, one could advance an apology for innovative music whose progressive perspective proclaims the black roots of tango. One might celebrate the fact that this is music whose international success has heretofore only been paralleled by the brilliant career of Carlos Gardel. On the other hand, there are critiques that perceive in electronic tango a commercial product based on nationalist clichés, and one that is subject to the standard procedures of the culture industry. Between these two extremes, the spectrum of reactions and responses to this phenomenon is remarkably broad. That is why the gamble of integrating the electronic tango with the history of the tango, which is just as much a narrative construction for specialists as an international form of sociability, is in reality primarily a question of the definition of the tango genre and—which is to say the same—of its limits. And any question concerning the limits of a genre is also a question of values, those of the genre and those of the limit itself.

Biographical Trajectories

The origin of electronic tango’s ambivalences is first and foremost to be found in the story of its protagonists, a story that is nothing like those of tango musicians in the traditional sense. Eduardo Makaroff’s career before Gotan Project was that of an eclectic artist, and one whose principal strength would perhaps be his ability to circulate not only among different genres but also between different spaces of production, from the underground to mass media via the café concert and advertising. According to his autobiographical narrative, he began as a rock musician before breaking into advertising and television, which explains why his first tango, “El Tango de los pebetes”
(Tango for kids), was actually a children’s song. The very fact of claiming to compose tangos, whereas in that genre it is the interpreter who reigns, is drawn from rock and roll, as was the decision to use Gotan Project’s success to promote the revival of tango innovation through his label Mañana.⁷

Born in Buenos Aires in 1954 to a secular Jewish family, Makaroff’s parents combined a bourgeois domestic status—an engineer father, a chemist mother—with activism in the Communist Party. His adolescent years were marked by his closeness to his brother Sergio, born in 1951. The rebel of the family, Sergio would land, in those hippy years, a part in the local version of Hair. With him, Eduardo formed a rock duo in 1972 called Los Hermanos Makaroff⁸ One of their songs, “Rock del Ascensor,” has remained in the popular memory thanks to its saucy image of a couple making love in an elevator: “Hagámoslo de parado / hagámoslo de pie” (Let’s do it standing up / let’s do it on our feet).

In the duo Eduardo played the guitar, which he had begun studying at age fourteen with Juan Tata Cedrón. The latter incarnated, well before his years of Parisian exile, a reforming current in the music of Buenos Aires, one that was sensitive to tango and to modern poetry. Cedrón was also a politically active person, most notably in left-wing Peronism. Makaroff’s apprenticeship with Cedrón, who would soon encourage him to diversify his knowledge of musical styles by taking bossa nova and classical guitar classes, was until that moment his sole contact with tango. He remained distant, however, from the repertory’s figures and the institutions of the genre that, in those days under pressure from “youth music,” had become set in a decadent and often bitter conservatism. It was in this context that he discovered Piazzolla’s music, though without dwelling upon it. At that point in time his identity seemed clear: “Fui rockero” (I was a rocker), he would later say, describing an Argentina colored by the “contrast between being a rocker and what the tango represented, such as well-groomed fascists”:

[I] didn’t have any contact with the true tango, I knew nothing about the tango. In reality my training was primarily that of an Argentine rocker. But because I knew music and I could read it, because I could play classical guitar and all that, my training was a little more extensive than my brother’s, for example, or than that of some guy who would pick up an electric guitar and an amp and who would try to do solos from Jimi Hendrix or whoever, or the blues. . . . I never had the prejudice or the close-mindedness of the rocker against the tango. (Makaroff)⁹
A dispute with his brother and the latter’s departure for Spain in 1977 would mark a new stage in Makaroff’s career. Argentina had been, since March of the previous year, under the repressive boot of General Jorge Rafael Videla, and some of Makaroff’s friends from the revolutionary Left, who happened not to be communists, found themselves pursued by the regime. At that time he became associated with a friend who would become his artistic partner for nearly twenty years: Daniel Mactas, better known as El Pollo, who, eight years older than Makaroff, had a true tanguero background that he had inherited from his father, “a character of the night, a friend of the showbiz people and the racecourse people” (Amuchastegui; un personaje de la noche amigo de la gente del espectáculo y del turf). The Mactas-Makaroff duo soon became Edu y el Pollo, and then Mano a Mano, the title of a Gardel tango. At Mactas’s side, Makaroff began something of a long march toward the tango, one that nonetheless took a rather humorous turn from its beginnings—a tango joyeux (cheerful tango), in sum, an oxymoron, one that would become the album’s title as well as the theme of the duo’s tour after their arrival in Paris in 1990. Indeed, their first tango, “The Typical One,” was a parody of the genre’s platitudes (Amuchastegui).

Around 1985, at the invitation of a live music venue called Café Mozart, the duo produced their first tango show, leading Makaroff to take lessons with professional tango guitarists. But rather than being tango musicians, the two friends were then artists who navigated between musical genres and various professional milieus. Even before the end of the dictatorship in 1983, they started to write music for advertising, such as a government campaign against tobacco that included a famous Ohrwurm, or earworm, as the Germans say, that played obsessively in one’s head: Chau chau chau pucho. Then, beginning in 1984 under the democratic presidency of Raúl Alfonsin, they would have access to radio and to television with a children’s show on the state-run channel ATC. The next year they made their incursion into cinema, as interpreters of the songs from the Fernando Solanas film El Exilio de Gardel: Tangos, which was set in Paris during the dictatorship and portrayed the world of Argentine exiles living there. Aside from the songs composed by Solanas and José Luis Castiñeira de Dios, which musically have very little to do with the tango, the film includes several original pieces by Astor Piazzolla, thus sketching out a perimeter of hybridizations that anticipates, in certain aspects, Gotan Project’s future project.

In 1990 the two left for Paris at the invitation of their friend Silvia Yako-McCloskey, an Argentine psychoanalyst who had recently arrived in France
herself. In the next six years, after France’s Radio Latina gave them their start, they appeared under the name Mano a Mano and not without success. This was despite the vagaries of the immigrant artist’s life, one that invariably included problems with papers or difficulties with official status as cultural workers. Mactas’s return to Argentina in 1996 would mark the end of their long collaboration. Makaroff then became MC at the Coupole dance hall in Montparnasse, which marked a turning point in the rediscovery of the tango by Parisians. He met Philippe Cohen-Solal, a producer at Virgin, in 1998 and proposed a collaboration that would become a hit during the World Cup soccer competition: “La Ola Dance,” in which the sound of the bandoneon can be heard over a milonga rhythm. Shortly thereafter he made another move, this time with the folk dancer José Castro. For Makaroff this amounted to holding on to an old idea, one that in 1995 had already furnished the theme song for the French television program Droit de regard: “The electronic tango, we had tried that with El Pollo plenty of times, already in the eighties. We even wrote a jingle called ‘Tecnotango’” (Makaroff; Y con el tango electrónico ya con el Pollo habíamos intentado muchas veces, incluso en los años 80. Habíamos hecho hasta un jingle que se llamaba tecnotango). But Cohen-Solal did not agree to this new suggestion: “I told Eduardo that the project he wanted to do didn’t interest me, but that rather than doing a ‘commercial’ project, I said to him, let’s do just the opposite, let’s do a project that we like and if we like it, maybe other people will too” (Cohen-Solal).

Setting aside the debate over the “commercial,” with or without quotation marks, this early sketch of Gotan Project’s undertakings would find in Philippe Cohen-Solal an ear as if made to hear it. Born in France of a Tunisian father and a Dutch mother, he had drawn from his family background a real taste for music from “far away,” particularly from Latin America. He also acquired a sort of generic nomadism that led him to have difficulty understanding people who, as he put it, “spend their lives in one kind of music” (Cohen-Solal). This upbringing, and in particular the strong left-wing bent of his parents, gave him a certain idea of the historical experience of Latin American countries and would eventually translate into his borrowing of the name of his record label, Ya basta! (We’ve had enough!) from the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos. The same can be said of the fragments of political speeches that can be heard in Gotan Project’s songs. In fact, it is Cohen-Solal, and not the Argentine Makaroff, who is behind the loops of Evita Perón that can be heard in “El Capitalismo Foráneo,” or those of Che Guevara in “Queremos Paz.” It is also Cohen-Solal who records, in Buenos
Aires in 2000, the *cacerolazos*, the noises of citizens banging on cooking pots that became symbols of revolt there and that can be heard in the live version of “La Revancha del Tango.” And it is, once again, he who, after reading in the French newspaper *Libération* the story of the poet Juan Gelman and his granddaughter Macarena, who was born in captivity after her parents were kidnapped by the military, imagined a song dedicated to those who were disappeared during the dictatorship of 1976–1983 and asked Makaroff to write the words: whence the song “Época.”

Cohen-Solal distinguishes this sensibility from political engagement, preferring perhaps the more modest notion of an aesthetic perception of politics. At any rate, when he met with Makaroff in 1998, this “great nostalgia for [his] childhood” was connected to diversified professional experiences in advertising, in the record industry, and in media. During the eighties he was successively a booking agent and the host of a radio show, helping to bring house music as well as other “new sounds” to France. He next became a producer, first at Polydor and then at Virgin, where he worked mainly on film soundtracks alongside Arnaud Depleschin, Nikhita Mikhalkov, and Bertrand Travernier. He soon came to write music himself, notably for Tonie Marshall. At the same time he pursued a career as a DJ and musician with the group Boyz from Brazil, which was named after the thriller of 1978 based on the story of Josef Mengele’s blonde and blue-eyed clones in Amazonia. Cohen-Solal created this latter duo in 1997 with Christoph H. Müller, who had been collaborating with him for the previous two years. With the occasional participation of a Brazilian musician from the transvestite group Les Étoiles, Rolando Faría, he blended house music and Brazilian popular music for the dance floor.

Müller, who was born in Germany and raised in Switzerland and who had studied in London and Paris, experimented with hybrids of electronic music and non-Western musical forms, beginning with the song “Muhammar,” something of a techno fantasy piece featuring samples in Arabic and produced by a group called Touch el Arab. The track made it to the Swiss top five in 1987. More recently, besides collaborating with Makaroff on the film *El Gaucho* (2008), Müller ventured into Afro-Peruvian music with Rodolfo Muñoz and the group Radiokijada, releasing an album titled *Nuevos Sonidos Afro-Peruanos* (2009).

Thus met the members of this eclectic trio with varied skills and experiences in the winter of 1999, in a studio on Rue Martel in the tenth arrondissement in Paris, to produce the first creations of what had yet to be named
Gotan Project—a name that came up in their first gatherings, and one that links the utopian dimension of rock groups such as the Alan Parsons Project or the Jimi Hendrix Experience with the *vesre* or reverse term for *tango* in Argentine slang (see Oscar Conde’s description of this term and the *lunfardo* phenomenon in this edited volume).

The Making of the Project

The first fruit of this collaboration was a version of “Vuelvo al Sur,” a song that Piazzolla had composed for the Pino Solanas film *Sur* (1987) and that the famous singer Roberto Goyeneche had interpreted for the film. It reads in the screenplay for the picture:

Vuelvo al Sur,
como se vuelve siempre al amor,
vuelvo a vos,
con mi deseo, con mi temor.

Llevo el Sur,
como un destino del corazón,
soy del Sur,
como los aires del bandoneón.

Sueño el Sur,
inmensa luna, cielo al revés,
busco el Sur,
el tiempo abierto, y su después.
Quiero al Sur,
su buena gente, su dignidad,
siento el Sur,
como tu cuerpo en la intimidad.

Te quiero Sur,
Te quiero Sur,
Te quiero Sur.

[I’m returning to the South
just as one always returns to love,
returning to you,
with my desire, with my fear.
I carry the South,
like a destiny of the heart,
I am from the South,
like airs from the bandoneon.

I dream the South,
immense moon, backwards sky,
I seek the South,
open time, and its afterward.
I love the South,
its good people, its dignity,
I feel the South,
like your body in intimacy.

I love you, South,
I love you, South,
I love you, South.

In its original form, this piece is not a classic tango but rather a sort of *nuevo tango*. Even though Piazzolla is as close as he can be to traditional forms here, the text diverges from the proverbial pessimism of the tango as it expresses a communitarian ideal. These “good people,” united in dignity, would later find themselves at the heart of the filmmaker’s political program. For the filmmaker would later become the leader of an important current of the Argentine Left: a presidential candidate in 2007, and later a candidate for mayor of Buenos Aires, Solanas was elected deputy in 2009 under the banner of a movement called, in fact, Proyecto Sur. It is perhaps in the combination of a nostalgic, sentimental tone and political activism oriented toward the future, where “the South” becomes a true object of love, that we find the explanation for the success of this piece and the covers of it by such diverse artists as Mercedes Sosa, Caetano Veloso, and Florent Pagny. In any event the spirit of the song is not without its links to the “revenge of the tango” proclaimed by Gotan Project’s album, where the piece would find its place once the time was right.

That said, the piece in question was also simply one of the only musical references common to Makaroff, Cohen-Solal, and Müller, and it is primarily for this reason that they held onto it. From a musical point of view as well, “Vuelvo al Sur” allowed generic and stylistic interactions that cannot be reduced to a simple meeting of tango and electronic music. The 3–3–2 rhythm
structuring the piece, typical of Piazzolla, is also characteristic of the milonga campera, a traditional rural form. When added to a percussive background inspired by the Argentine folklorist Domingo Cura, a musical universe begins to take shape that, as far as solely Argentine elements are concerned, remains almost as close to folklore as to the tango. Whereas the initial bandoneon solo proclaims a representation of Buenos Aires and the milonga background for the guitar alludes to the image of the pampa, the percussion, inspired by pop/rock, corresponds to the metric demands of the contemporary dance floor.

It is on this principle, proper to house music, that the solo bandoneon deploys the tanguero phrasing and, later—as in the traditional tangos where the lyrics don’t appear before the refrain—the warm voice of Cristina Vilalonga, whose Catalan origins in no way diminished her porteño evocations. Within seven minutes, “Vuelvo al Sur” sets forth a vessel of signifiers organized around a rhythmic formula with a fetishized value for Argentine music, one that in turn is projected into the international arena as a sonorous symbol of a South that is to varying degrees mythical.

Reconstructing the collective production of “Vuelvo al Sur” using interviews with Makaroff and Cohen-Solal provides a clear idea of the creative process that unfolded in early 1999 and also offers a more general take on the group’s method of working. Once made, the choice of the piece launched a period of exchange of musical references between the Argentine and the two Europeans, with each member admitting his ignorance of the other’s favorite genre. Next came the first direct interventions into the song, which were guided by precise stylistic orientations. Third, other musicians were called in—a singer, a bandoneon player—who reinforced the tango’s generic markers while seeking to avoid certain melodramatic commonplaces. Last, the material that came out of the sound recordings was subjected to a process of abstraction, to use the musicians’ term.

First, it is worth returning to Makaroff’s narrative of events, told with a Spanish guitar in hand:

“Allright, let’s do a version of . . . so, what do you know? Piazzolla? OK.” I like singing, you know. I’m neither Piazzollian nor neo-Piazzollian, not when I play or anywhere else. I love it, but no. So, “Vuelvo al Sur,” Piazzolla and Solanas. OK. . . . And I began playing a milonga on the guitar, the same one that Cedrón had taught me early on in my lessons. Here’s how it goes: in A minor . . . I’ll show you, there’s a method to it. To do rock, this is what you
do [he plays a rock scheme]. And this A minor sixth, the sixth minor in 3–3–2, that is to say, in rhythm [he begins to play a milonga with a bordoneo or melodic bass in 3–3–2 rhythm]. And I said to the girl who was singing with me: sing the same thing, but with a canchero [casual] style. Not like this: [he sings in an exaggerated, whiny tone]. I began to imagine what would happen with a rhythm like that in the background, instead of doing it like Piazzolla, I mean, [he plays some chords with a 3–3–2 rhythm,] even if Piazzolla is very good, what he does is great and all the versions that have been done of it are great. And then I told Christophe: put in a clip, instead of putting in 1–2–3–4 put in 3–3–2. . . . We recorded the song two times, and then I said “for me it’s ok like that, now it’s your turn to work, see you later.” No, sorry, I mean I said: “Now we have to put in a bandoneon.” . . . I said, “I’m going to introduce you to a country boy, he doesn’t speak much French, what’s more he doesn’t speak at all, in general.” . . . [Niní Flores] played to that, to the song, and I told him: “Good, play here, left hand, right hand. Record it another time.” You know, you can record eighty thousand times with these machines. . . . You no longer have to get the arrangement right and play right, otherwise you’re screwed. You can play well, badly, however you like. “Now, improvise, play along. Now we’ll just give you the middle part, the milonga part, and you improv,” etc. . . . Nothing was written in that version. Afterward, yes, we started to write certain melodies down more precisely, but the song was already written. . . . And that’s how we made the song “Vuelvo al Sur.” Because afterward, they [Cohen-Solal and Müller] were left alone with this recording, they started to experiment with it, and what you hear is what they did at the end of what I played. (Makaroff)16

Makaroff’s story will be corroborated by Cohen-Solal point by point and notably with regard to the principle of a real division of labor within the group, one that translated into their way of connecting themselves in the circuit of the creative process. Once the choice of the Piazzolla piece was made together, we can perceive a first stage where the Argentine of the band contributes his technical awareness of the original genres (tango and milonga) and the social and artistic resources of his network of friends (that is, the tango musicians). In the next stage, the two Europeans, left alone to their computer, subject these materials to a process of abstraction. This process consists of attenuating, via electronic manipulations, the generic connections to origins, with the goal of bringing the material closer to dance floor music. Here is Cohen-Solal’s story:
We had to start somewhere and I proposed a Piazzolla piece that came from the movie *El Sur* . . . So we started to do a cover of “Vuelvo al Sur” and at first it wasn’t working so well, not quite conclusively. And then, along with Christophe, I remember . . . you know when you don’t really know what to do in the studio . . . we began to go a little crazy and add effects, echoes to the bandoneon, to Domingo Cura’s percussion, to all kinds of things, you know . . . and we started to make it a little more free, and a little more irreverent most of all. And it started to sound really good . . . . I think Eduardo did the guitar chords first, then Niní added the bandoneon; it was really great, he made more tracks than you can count, each more beautiful than the other, which became useful later for “El Capitalismo Foráneo” but anyway . . . it was very . . . the skeleton of it was very simple, guitar, we added a bass, a bass line on the keyboard, and the percussion. We sampled little bits of percussion from Domingo Cura and made some more along the same lines. But the problem in the beginning, I’d say, was that we hadn’t yet gotten into the sound of the bandoneon. Those are two kinds of music that are a little bit incompatible, in a way, that is, on a rhythmical level it’s very different, it’s a very mechanical music, one that’s really . . . there’s no movement between one time or another, and the very principle is to dance to something rather repetitive, very sequenced, and the tango is kind of the opposite, lots of accents, lots of halts, things . . . they’re really not kinds of music that share enough for them to get along. But I think that what provided the connection, what made the connection was the dub part, the dub element, a music that Christophe and I listened to a ton at the time, and that influenced us enormously in our production. And I think that the difference . . . I think that the acoustic tango that we had with us . . . was something very concrete, very realistic, what you hear is what was played, whereas in electronic music what you hear isn’t exactly what was played, it’s what was transformed, tampered with. And from the point where you start to make tango more abstract, in a certain way, less concrete, less realistic, that’s where it begins to become interesting for us. (Cohen-Solal)

These two stories of the genesis of “Vuelvo al Sur” give us insight into the internal dynamics proper to a project constructed from a universe whose elements are “a little incompatible,” to use Cohen-Solal’s expression. At least in this particular case, the group’s work seems to start right where the artist stopped. The relationship of complementarity is clear here, and one could even go so far as to describe it as a meeting between a man from the South, a
provider of techniques and materials from a cluster of types of music from his heritage, with men from the North who put these techniques and materials together with a know-how that is at once technological and aesthetic. This schema must have some truth to it, a truth that can offer a solid grounding to a number of critiques. At the same time, we must not draw parallels too quickly based on a suspect notion of economic and geopolitical contrast between a South that gives raw materials and a North that is the sole power capable of transforming them. On the one hand, it would be erroneous to reduce the entirety of the electronic tango phenomenon to this framework, given that the majority of musicians, in Argentina and elsewhere, combine an awareness of both generic registers and the technologies that make it possible to manipulate them. On the other hand, the mode of production behind Gotan Project’s very first song in 1999 did not define their roles once and for all. From one album to the next, the group would modify their discourse and their aesthetics. To give only one example: while the tracks of La Revancha del Tango lasted around 6 minutes and 12 seconds, on Tango 3.0 this figure was 3 minutes and 54 seconds, clearly much closer to the song format than to the vinyl format used by DJs. And the stories of other moments of production allow a glimpse into the more complex and interactive exchanges between Makaroff and his friends Cohen-Solal and Müller (whose much lengthier collaboration would itself merit a special examination). Also, one can note that “Vuelvo al Sur” is a rather atypical piece of their repertoire, comparable in this light to “Chunga’s Revenge” by Frank Zappa or to “Last Tango in Paris” by Gato Barbieri, also covered by Gotan Project.

That said, it would be wrong to see arrangement and composition as being in opposition. The arrangement of pieces that are to various degrees well known holds a vital place in the history of the tango, somewhat similarly to how in the history of jazz an artist’s originality comes into play through his or her approach to the standards. In the framework of electronic music too there is no creation that, with its pre-recorded samples, loops, and colors, does not presuppose preexisting elements. Moreover, one could say the same for any piece that is taken to exemplify a genre, whether a waltz, a symphony, or reggae.

To return to the pieces created by Gotan Project, their original creations are based on rhythmic or harmonic formulas typical of folkloric Argentine genres such as the chacarera (“El Mensajero”), milonga (“La Viguéla”) or baguala (“Paris, Texas”). There are also many musical gestures typical of tango itself, omnipresent albeit often reduced to a cadence, a color, or a repeated
melodic motif. At times it can also be a matter of working with sounds that are invested with a strong symbolic content, as are the speeches of Che Guevara or Evita, with a cultural reference value, as with the voice of Julio Cortázar reading one of his own texts (“Rayuela”), with a fragment of an old Argentine film soundtrack (“Desilusión”), or with sounds that have a documentary function, such as railroad noises (“Mil millones”).

The project would thus appear to be a way of coming to terms with the tango genre and its history—otherwise put, with the twentieth century. It attends to the national territory just as much as it does to its inverse, which is to say, the world. The paradox of the electronic tango is that its roots—in the sense of a stable relationship between a past, a practice, and a territory—are, strictly speaking, nowhere, yet the phenomenon unfolds in an international space thanks to a systematic return to a place that is quite clearly fixed on the map while remaining ontologically in motion. This is of course Argentina, but an Argentina that is less a particular country in South America than a theoretical vision or rather a repertory of symbols: the tango of Gardel and Piazzolla, dancing couples in red and black, the neighborhoods of La Boca or San Telmo, the mounted gauchos on the horizontal vertigo of the pampa, Evita, Che Guevara, Maradona and soccer, the writers Borges and Cortázar, Videla’s dictatorship and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and so on. All these signifiers are associated not only in the music but also in the assemblage of images, since in the case of Gotan Project, all the song videos bear the signature of director Prisca Lobjoy—and they are infinitely recycled, in a sort of kaleidoscope of identity.

Revenge of the Tango?

At its start the project undertaken by Gotan Project was not aimed at the tanguero public but rather at the world of electronic music. According to Philippe Cohen-Solal, “the first ‘Vuelvo al Sur’ came out on vinyl [in 1999], and it was for DJs, and we had no desire to add our stone to the edifice that is the tango” (Cohen-Solal). That said, retrospectively one might think that the ambition to bring a “stone to the edifice that is the tango” was indeed already inscribed, under the surface, in the title of Gotan Project’s first album, which came out in 2001, La Revancha del Tango. With, of course, the nuance that this “revenge of the tango” was played out in a space that was not its own, neither stylistically nor geographically. The first maxi-single vinyls had quick success via the BBC, notably thanks to Gilles Peterson, an influential taste maker. At this stage the trio’s music became part of the world of dance music that, in
England in particular, was characterized by an ideological rejection of the star system.\textsuperscript{18} This often brought about a quasi-anonymity on the part of the artists concerned, as well as a voluntarily marginal status. The shift to CD format quickly capitalized on this burgeoning fad, reorienting the group’s circulation toward larger circuits, but not without modifying the cultural references. Ya Basta! worked from then on in a partnership with Barclay/Universal—in other words, an alliance between a major and a smaller label that, as David Hesmondhalgh puts it, inevitably requires the former to try to preserve the “subcultural reputation” of the latter, without necessarily guaranteeing success (244). At any rate this turning point emphasized the group members’ identification with rock and perhaps their “starification” following the rock model: it is no coincidence that in 2001 the concerts for the tour of \textit{La Revancha del Tango} began with the musicians playing behind a veil that would drop away while they performed.

It would nonetheless appear that it was the dissemination of Gotan Project in certain milongas or tango dances frequented by amateur dancers and sprinkled throughout the entire world that precipitated their introduction into the world of the tangueros. This is the moment when the electronic tango came to be inscribed in the transformations then underway, transformations that would come to raise generational, stylistic, and ideological questions. Indeed, for the men and women who believe that the practice of tango implies an eternal return to the repertory of large orchestras, from Firpo to Pugliese via Troilo or Di Sarli, the fact of dancing to electronic music was itself a major deviation. And the dancing was done more often than not with an \textit{abrazo abierto} or open embrace, that is, with two dancers at a distance from each other, rather than pressed together chest to chest as in the classic \textit{milonguero} style. This open embrace is one of the characteristics of the style called \textit{nuevo tango}. The latter, which is not without its debts to Piazzolla and which began without waiting for the electronic tango to develop itself, shares with the open embrace a number of sociological and technical traits. These overlaps can be summarized as a potential questioning of traditional gender roles and as a spatial autonomy accrued by each individual. This explains the fact that at times the new dance and the new music crossed paths, for example, when certain groups integrated dancers into their concerts.\textsuperscript{19}

Beyond this micro-sociological anchorage, it was the perception of tango as a historical loser that gave meaning to the idea of a moment of revenge. Indeed, the word’s presence in this title by Gotan Project can resonate as a sort of rallying cry for the whole of the phenomenon. In the interwar period
in Europe, the tango competed with jazz for the role of the “exotic” musical product, whether by the intermediary of Argentine musicians on tour or thanks to local orchestras for whom playing jazz and/or tango was part of their daily work. And after the first fruits of the prewar period, the 1920s featured what we might call tango’s first globalization, where the launch of disks and radio were to define its guiding role within the “political economy of passion,” to take up Marta Savigliano’s expression (*Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*). Moreover, it is worth noting that commercial success and blending with other genres had always been at the heart of tango’s socialization, particularly since the record companies Pathé and later Paramount Pictures appropriated the Gardel phenomenon and made a worldwide multimedia icon of it.

The paths of jazz and tango did not take long to diverge: while the former would become a protean source of all that the twentieth century would label “popular music,” from the most standardized and “commercial” products to the most deviant and confidential, the tango would take on the role of a subaltern genre within the world economy of entertainment, following in that regard the turns of fortune of its home countries, Argentina and Uruguay. It is true that the golden age of Argentine tango, the age of the big orchestras of the forties and fifties, was yet to come. But this glory would bypass and exclude the “nomadic tango” from the ensemble of representations of the genre in favor of the *typical*, in the narrowest sense of the term. Here we can witness the downward journey of a South American genre that, sharing the advantages and the prestige of the great European trend of “American dances” with North American music, quite simply lost the battle. Hence the resonances between the narratives on the decline of tango and the more recent denunciation of the economic and stylistic hegemony of the international pop and rock “system” governed by Anglo-Saxon music.

It is from this perspective that the notion of revenge becomes the key to a historical problem. For in the album of 2001 the word *revenge* is drawn not from a *tanguera* allusion but rather from the Frank Zappa song “Chunga’s Revenge.” It sports not only a bandoneon but also lyrics that proclaim the various genealogies that the Parisian group claims: “Piazzolla, Troilo, Cura / Mad Professor Zappa / Kruder Dorfmeister Pugliese / Es la revancha del tango.” All these names are strung together, juxtaposing the glories of the tango, of dub, and of house music (with the latter being represented by the Austrian duo Kruder and Dorfmeister who, moreover, in 1996 produced a track titled “The Revenge of the Bomberclad Joint”). The message becomes
clear: salvation comes not from the tradition in its purity but rather from the blending of all of these genres.

If we are to believe this story’s principal characters and their accounts, what is at issue here is a return to the prehistoric sources of the genre, in the strictest sense of a period before history and historical documents. That is, a return to the black origins of the tango as described by the theory of the tango negro, a theory making black musicians and dancers of the Río de la Plata region the primary actors in the genre’s birth. According to this view, which can be traced back to Vicente Rossi’s book *Cosa de Negros*, published in 1926, and which has recently been articulated in the writings of Michel Plisson, Gustavo Goldman, and Juan Carlos Cáceres (as well as in the latter’s musical oeuvre), tango’s black origins are a truth that was systematically hidden by a historiography indentured to the dominant, white culture. Indeed, “negationist” is the adjective that Cáceres (13) unhesitatingly brandishes against this historiography in order to proclaim these black origins. According to this perspective, adopted by the founding trio of Gotan Project and transmitted to their fans via the abundant media attention that they enjoyed, the group’s electronic percussion is the heir of the immemorial African drums that resonated in the primitive form of tango negro, just as they resonate in the pulsating rhythms of jazz, rock, house, or techno. The revenge of the tango is therefore, in this view, a revenge of Afro-descendant peoples and their histories. Indeed, Cáceres himself echoes this view as he marries virtual drums and real percussion in the song “Notas” from Gotan Project’s album *Lunático*: “Africanos en las pampas argentinas / Toques y llamadas de tambores / Candombe, tango . . .” (Africans in the Argentine pampas/ Sounds and calls of the drums/ Candombe, tango . . .).

Given that what is at issue here is, rather than a historiographical position, an aesthetic proposition formulated in mythological terms, the ensuing debate promises to be endless. That said, a skeptic might note that the aforementioned affirmation of the oppressed is a privileged point of entry into the mainstream of the globalized pop/rock system that the world music genre has contributed to for twenty years. That fact furnishes the grounds for many negative reactions to electronic tango. It is nonetheless far from easy to separate a purely conservative criticism limiting itself to proclaiming devotion to heritage from the concerns around a renewal of cultural hegemony in the guise of modernization. Rodolfo Mederos, a pioneer in the fusion of tango and rock in the seventies, could thus reply with the following to a journalist who envisioned in electronic tango a renewal of the genre by the new
generation: “That is no doubt a form of ignorance. It seems like a good thing to me that they’re looking for their own path, but they’re taking the wrong direction. Electronic tango is nothing more than a mechanism of domestication, of the unification of cultures. Is electronic tango modern tango? What is the modern?” (Jemio).

Such a charge, which might appear strange coming from a tanguero skilled in crossover, nonetheless summarizes other public and private statements made by historical figures in the world of tango. It should be read alongside Cohen-Solal’s cutting remark that “we detest world music” (Cohen-Solal). Indeed, the intensity of this hatred corresponds to the risks inherent in an international success that was achieved thanks to icons of the anti-globalization movement. The term electronic tango itself, which would at first glance appear to be relatively neutral, is far from being unanimously accepted by those who practice the form. Cohen-Solal, for example, rejects it outright, along with the notion of “genre fusion” and suspicions as to any “commercial” aims in their project: “I find the very principle of electronic tango to be garbage.”

It is significant that everything in Cohen-Solal’s language revolves around a term that Walter Benjamin placed at the heart of the aesthetics of modernity: collage. As Cohen-Solal puts it, “I find that what was done a lot, in what is called electrotango or tango electrónico, is a collage of a techno track with a guy playing the bandoneon over it or every now and then, a little sample of tango. But that’s not techno and that’s not tango, it’s really not electronic music. That’s nothing more than a collage, it doesn’t stick together.” These claims remind us of the diversity of styles and, no doubt, of qualities of electronic tango when taken as a whole. Electronic tango runs the gamut from the mechanism of the beat box superimposed onto a fragment of classic tango to more complex and creative ways of tying and untying the musical knots of the musical heritage. Temptations to simplify in this domain can be strong. Once the sounds of a bandoneon are all it takes in order to “do tango” in another stylistic context, the aforementioned bandoneon need not play anything interesting. By the same token, when a phrase of Gardel is enough to evoke Buenos Aires, the phrase need not be elaborated upon in order to be significant. On the contrary, repeating it infinitely is a lovely way to kill two birds with one stone. Setting aside the pleasure produced by repetition itself, an already predetermined verbal content is here exploited through the simple fact of transposing it into another aesthetic framework.

With this in mind, it must be pointed out that Gotan Project scrupulously avoids laying percussion over fragments of tango singing. In what probably
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constitutes the most sophisticated example of electronic tango in general, the band’s composing work is not limited to the simple operations made possible by sound-editing software. Rather, their compositions combine varied electronic sources with professional musicians playing complex arrangements live and displaying the virtuosity that is the hallmark of solo performances. But is the notion of collage enough to distinguish between the good and the god-awful? It would be better to say that there are collages and there are collages, and collages are only one gesture among others within the panoply of resources proper to the craft of a music producer in a globalized world. Here, once again we must avoid simplification, in research as in composition. As the story of the first meeting of Gotan Project’s founders shows, it was Makaroff who had the idea that the exotic and erotic image of the tango, the evolution of its technological resources, and the legitimacy of hybrid forms of music produced for dance would come together to make the project of a tecnnotango possible. Here we can locate one argument against the simplistic North-South scheme. And at the time when these new partners agreed to attempt the experiment, even as they sought to modify its terms in order to distance it from the overly “commercial” dimension, they had already undertaken similar mélanges, with Brazilian music in particular. Coming from different horizons, the three were, so to speak, on the same wavelength.

This wavelength did not result from the habits that one customarily associates with artistic creation, at least according to the cliché of the inspired and solitary artist. Rather, it can be traced to an ability to anticipate stylistic trends, one that is essential in the contexts of the advertising, media, and recording industries. It is no accident that these domains of cultural production can all be found on the cvs of our three protagonists, alongside their experience in the domain of musical creation in the proper sense. And all these resources, insofar as their very essence is relational, are made to be shared and can be seen to emerge together in a certain conjuncture. Gotan Project launched an idea that was, quite literally, in the air at that time, just before others did the same. Makaroff mentions a telephone call from Gustavo Santaolalla, a musician and producer that he knew from his time as a rocker. Santaolalla had called from Los Angeles with congratulations on Gotan Project’s first vinyls, sharing his idea “to do something like that” (hacer algo así) with his group Bajofondo. Makaroff then reportedly said to Cohen-Solal: “Let’s get to it now because soon there will be tons of groups like this. The Argentines have seen that they can do this” (Makaroff; Metámosle pata porque van a empezar a salir muchos grupos así. Vieron los argentinos que se puede
hacer eso). The album *La Revancha del Tango* should be dated to that day in 2000. In fact, the creation of the principal electronic tango groups would be spread out over the next few years or even the next few months. The takeoff of electronic tango was rapid and exponential, so much so that in November 2007 an Argentine journalist could call the category a “saturated” market (E. Castillo). And yet that in no way explains why this Parisian group had more success than all the other electronic tango groups combined. On the other hand, it does explain the fact that, looking beyond a micro-chronology of events, the same idea surfaced nearly simultaneously in different places across the planet.

Notes

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1. I am focusing on Gotan Project here and purposely setting aside their relationships and differences with other electronic tango groups such as Bajofondo, Narcotango, Ultra-tango, Tango Crash, Electrocultango, Tangodrims, Tanghetto, Otros Aires, Debayres, San Telmo Lounge, and so on.


4. See Buch. Also among the musicians who participated in Gotan Project’s activities are the singer Veronika Silva, the bandoneonist Víctor Villena, Juan José Mosalini Jr., Olivier Manoury, Serge Amico, and Matías González, the violinists Line Kruse and Ananta Roosens (also a trumpeter), and the pianist Lalo Zanelli.


7. See Bazely.


9. “Una contraposición entre ser rockero y lo que representaba el tango, como los fachos con el peluquín. . . . Pero yo no tenía contacto con el verdadero tango, ni la tenía la del tango. En realidad, me hice una formación musical que fue principalmente de rockero
argentino, pero gracias a saber música y poder leer música, y poder interpretar guitarra clásica y todo, tenía una formación un poquito más extensa que mi propio hermano, por ejemplo, o de lo que puede tener el tipo que agarra una guitarra eléctrica y pone el amplificador y trata de hacer solos de Jimi Hendrix o no sé quién, o blues. ¡Nunca tuve el prejuicio o la cerrazón mental del rockero contra el tango."

10. See Szendy.
11. On Argentine exiles in Paris, see Franco.
12. See Marcos.
13. On techno in France, see Smith; Jouvenet.
15. While these lyrics come directly from the text of Gotan Project’s version of the song, the original lyrics to “Vuelvo al sur” by Pino Solanas can also be found at http://www.todotango.com/english/las_obras/ letra.aspx?idletra=1880, accessed July 10, 2013.
17. See in particular Monjeau and Filipelli; Kohan, Estudios sobre los estilos compositivos del tango 12–15.
18. See Hesmondhalgh.
19. See in particular Liska, “El cuerpo en la música”; Plebs.
20. See Jacotot; Matallana.
21. See in particular Barsky and Barsky.
22. On the *tango negro* see also Rossi; Plisson; Goldman; Ortiz Oderigo; and Rafael Mandressi, unpublished talk from the seminar “Musique et politique au vingtième siècle,” Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, May 21, 2010.
23. “Es, sin duda, una forma de ignorancia. Me parece bien que busquen su camino, pero lo hacen por la ruta equivocada. El tango electrónico no es otra cosa que un mecanismo de domesticación, de unificación de culturas. ¿El tango electrónico es el tango moderno? ¿Qué es lo moderno?”