

Topics of Spanishness in Tango Scenes. A Postcolonial Reading of Mainstream Film.¹

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In a now legendary scene, Rudolph Valentino, wearing an Andalusian hat and dressed in full gaucho attire (spurs and riding crop included), mesmerised audiences by dancing the tango with Beatrice Domínguez in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.² She wore a heavily embroidered Manila shawl, a Spanish hairdo (including a *peineta* or mantilla comb) and a carnation in her hair.

A 2009 TV commercial for erectile dysfunction medication, part of an advertising campaign called *Viva Viagra!*, shows a middle-aged, Anglo-American couple in their living room. He is watching TV; she is browsing fashion magazines. A dramatic tango rhythm, emphasised by castanets, signals the man's arousal (presumably the medication has been ingested and had the desired effect); TV remote and fashion magazines are tossed out of the window and the couple tango into the bedroom. The sound of the castanets remains throughout the score.³

Separated by eighty-eight years, these two scenes share a number of common elements, including the obvious association between tango and eroticism. More striking to an Argentinean, though, is the conflation of tango with iconic elements of Spanishness such as Andalusian hats, Manila shawls and castanets. Examination of more than a hundred tango scenes from mainstream media shows that these are not just two isolated instances. At some point in the history of mainstream cinema a slippage of meaning between Spain and Spanish music and Argentine tango occurred. In this article, I trace the genealogy of this slippage, from *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* to the present, and offer an interpretation for its existence from a postcolonial perspective.

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² Rex Ingram, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Metro, 1921).

³ “Tango (Viva Viagra!).” YouTube video, 1:01, from the Viva Viagra! Campaign, posted by “lapriscilla”, October 25, 2008, <http://youtu.be/P4TgboFSwd8>. Formerly available from the Viagra web site <http://www.viagra.com/>. Cfr. Priscilla Peña Ovalle, “Viva Viagra! Or, How Race Dances Around Erectile Dysfunction,” accessed December 4, 2012, <http://flowtv.org/2008/10/viva-viagra-or-how-race-dances-around-erectile-dysfunction-priscilla-pena-ovalle-university-of-oregon/>.

The famous tango scene in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is an iconic moment in the history of tango representations and a landmark in the history of film itself. It catapulted Valentino to international acclaim and instituted his reputation as the quintessential “Latin lover”.⁴ Valentino plays Julio Desnoyers, a “youthful libertine”⁵ and spoiled grandson of a wealthy landowner in Argentina before World War I. His grandfather, Madariaga, “still clung to life and its pleasures”⁶ and took him along on dissolute expeditions to the Buenos Aires district of La Boca, described as “steeped in Old World sin, harboring the dregs of humanity”.⁷ The tango scene is set in a rough saloon, its disreputable atmosphere denoted by the presence of drunks, prostitutes and menacing-looking characters, all enveloped in smoky haze.

As they walk in, Madariaga is immediately joined by a sultry blonde, her dress and demeanour clearly indicating her occupation. The three sit at a table and watch as a couple approaches the dance floor. The woman wears the heavy make-up that marks her as a prostitute. Draped in a Manila shawl, she parades with a flamenco arm gesture before her partner leads her into a tango. Julio swaggers over and asks to break into the dance; the man brushes him off. Julio’s reaction is exceedingly violent: he strikes the man with his *rebenque* (riding crop) and takes over. The rendition of tango that follows presents a “dramatic exaggeration of masculine domination and female submission”⁸ and culminates in a remarkable full kiss that would make women sigh for decades to come. Yet, after the dance, he will drop her in disgust like “a sack of potatoes”.⁹ Valentino displays here the intensified masculinity that made him the epitome of the Latin Lover, combining danger and latent violence with sexual allure.¹⁰

This scene established a number of common places that would recur in subsequent films. Due to its extraordinary success—the film was one of the first box-office hits—it had an enormous influence in shaping public perceptions of tango dancing in the US. As is well known, the tango scene contributed to fuelling the “tango craze” and forever linked the image of Valentino with tango dancing.¹¹

⁴ Emily W. Leider, *Dark Lover: The Life and Death of Rudolph Valentino* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2004) p.110 ff.

⁵ Rex Ingram, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Metro, 1921) Intertitle 23.

⁶ Ibid. Intertitle 22.

⁷ Ibid. Intertitle 21.

⁸ Gaylyn Studlar, ‘Valentino, ‘Optic Intoxication’; and Dance Madness’, in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 32.

⁹ Leider, *Dark Lover*, 118.

¹⁰ Gaylyn Studlar, “Valentino, ‘optic Intoxication; and Dance,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993), 23–45. See also Ashton D. Trice and Samuel A. Holland, *Heroes, Antiheroes, and Dolts: Portrayals of Masculinity in American Popular Films, 1921-1999* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 10–13.

¹¹ Leider, *Dark Lover*, 219.

It is interesting to note that, after *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, Valentino would go on to feature in two notoriously exoticist films: *Blood and Sand* and *The sheik*. In *Blood and Sand* he plays the role of Juan Gallardo, a bullfighter.¹² The action is set in Spain and the film features another memorable dance scene, sharing a number of elements with the one in *The Four Horsemen...*: the smoky interior, the cheering crowd, the Andalusian hat and the woman's Spanish attire. The scene also features the seduction-rejection dynamics: a woman approaches Juan with a flower in her mouth and lures him into dancing. Even though their dance is not a tango, this 'flower in the mouth' trope will recur in tango scenes from then on, perhaps a result of the strong association of Valentino with the tango in popular imagination.

We find it, together with castanets and unambiguously linked to tango dancing, in *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928), the third Mickey Mouse animated film and the second in which Mickey and Minnie appear together.¹³ Initially silent, sound was added later in the same year.¹⁴ The action starts with Mickey, donning an Andalusian hat and a poncho, galloping across a Pampa-like landscape on an ostrich, rather than a horse. He arrives at a seedy "saloon" called "*Cantino Argentino*" [sic], where Minnie is dancing the famous Spanish song (Cuban-inspired) *La paloma* and playing the castanets. She wears pasties over her breasts, suggesting she is a dance hall girl, and the place is so rough that it has a side door called "family entrance".¹⁵ A black-faced musician playing a banjo provides the music.¹⁶ We know that Mickey is an outcast, since there is a reward notice for him ("*El gaucho*") on the wall. When the tango music starts, Minnie picks up a flower, holds it in her mouth and flirts with Mickey who soon joins her in the dance. The music features a clear habanera rhythm and the sound of castanets can be heard occasionally—although they are not in sight.

This mixture of tango with stereotypes of southern Spain—especially Andalucía—flamenco, and gypsies, is also found in the literature of the period. For instance, in their influential *Modern Dancing* of 1914, Irene and Vernon Castle described the tango as "an old gypsy dance which came to Argentina by the way of Spain, where in all probability it became invested with certain features of the old Moorish dances."¹⁷ The "gypsy" connection was reinforced in 1925 by the extreme success of a 'Tango Tzigane' titled *Jalousie*, written by Danish composer Jacob Gade to

¹² Fred Niblo, *Blood and Sand* (Paramount, 1922).

¹³ Sean Griffin, *Tinker Belles and Evil Queens: The Walt Disney Company from the Inside Out* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 10; See also Steven Watts, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life* (University of Missouri Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Dennis Hall and Susan G Hall, *American Icons: An Encyclopedia of the People, Places, and Things That Have Shaped Our Culture* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006), 475.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Obviously, the banjo was not a traditional instrument in the Pampas. Walter Clark has suggested that the black minstrel might have served to emphasise the roughness of the establishment. (Personal communication, 26 April, 2013).

¹⁷ Vernon Castle and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing*, Reprint of the 1914 edition., Da Capo Series in Dance (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980), 83.

accompany the silent movie *Don Q., son of Zorro*.¹⁸ Gade wrote other tangos emphasising the Spanish connection, such as *Glamour*, *El matador* and *Romanesca*. In the United States, some Spanish songs, such as Yradier's *La paloma* and José Padilla's *La violetera* and *Valencia*, were played in "tango rhythm". Both *La violetera* and *Valencia* were included in successful Broadway shows, further contributing to the consolidation of this stereotype.¹⁹

The Andalusian connection was expanded further in *Anchors aweigh*, a 1945 musical comedy by George Sidney, starring Frank Sinatra, Kathryn Grayson, and Gene Kelly, which adds the toreador cape to the trope.²⁰ Unable to express his love for the girl he wants, Kelly fantasises about her.²¹ In this fantasy, Kathryn Grayson appears dressed as a Spanish bride-to-be, wearing a stunning white-lace mantilla and a *peineta*. The scene is reminiscent of serenading episodes: she is on a balcony, in a set resembling an Andalusian patio with its red floor and water fountain. Kelly, dressed as a Spanish toreador, throws a red carnation at her and swirls his red cape around with his sword in a series of virtuosic gestures. He then dances the tango *La cumparsita* by himself in a free choreography that includes tap dancing and stylised arm movements loosely reminiscent of Spanish folk dancing. The confusion of tango with Spanish music is strengthened further by a middle section featuring the paso doble *España Cañí*, one of the most conspicuous musical signifiers of Spain in Western imagination, during which his movements become more energetic.²² This brief episode is followed by the reprise of the tango music, with Kelly's tap dancing now clearly imitating the sound of castanets. After the dance Kelly climbs up to the rooftop and swings across the patio on a red curtain in a spectacular episode reminiscent of Douglas Fairbanks. The scene ends, like so many tango scenes, with a full kiss.

Olé!, that quintessential Spanish interjection, is the next addition to the trope. Unlike previous examples, the tango scene in *The pajama game* is not set in an exotic Argentine or Spanish locale but in Iowa, at the offices of the Sleptite Pajama Factory.²³ Sid Sorokin, played by John Raitt, has been hired as factory superintendent in the midst of a labour dispute over a salary rise. He

¹⁸ Carlos G. Groppa, *The Tango in the United States: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 71.

¹⁹ According to Groppa, *La violetera* was included with English lyrics in *Little Miss Bluebeard* (1923), while *Valencia*, also in tango rhythm, became a hit in the musical *Great Temptations* (1926). *The Tango in the United States*, 73.

²⁰ George Sidney, *Anchors Aweigh* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1945).

²¹ Brooks Robards, "California Dreaming: Dream Sequences in Hollywood Musicals, Melodramas, and Horror Movies," in *Beyond the Stars II: Plot Conventions and American Popular Film*, ed. Paul Loukides and Linda K. Fuller (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991), 118 ff. See also Trice and Holland, *Heroes, Antiheroes, and Dolts*, 48–49.

²² I am indebted to Jorge Pítari for the correct identification of this piece.

²³ George Abbot, *The Pajama Game* (Warner Brothers, 1957). The film is an adaptation of the 1954 Broadway musical of the same name, choreographed by Bob Fosse. Cfr. Margery Beddow, *Bob Fosse's Broadway* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), 1–4.

wants to access the factory's account book, which the manager insists on hiding from him. In the hope of gaining access to the locked book, he invites secretary Gladys Hotchkiss (Carol Haney) on a date and asks her to suggest a meeting place. Suddenly she makes a come-hither gesture with her fingers, and starts singing her description of the "joint" she suggests for their rendezvous: "Hernando's hideaway". She raises her arms dramatically to a flamenco-style position and then ... breaks into a tango, embracing Sid and forcing him into a stiff-armed promenade reminiscent of the one in *The Gallopin' Gaucho*. Hernando's hideaway is described as "a dark, secluded place", where "no one knows your face", and—most importantly—where "all you hear are castanets". Castanets are heard, indeed, from their first mention in the lyrics, and continue to play a prominent role in the instrumentation until the end of the scene. Four of the six stanzas end with the interjection *Olé!* (spelled "O-lay!" in the score).²⁴ The music, written by Richard Adler and Jerry Ross, features a marked rhythm in quadruple metre, somewhat reminiscent of the strong pulse of *La cumparsita*.

Most of the elements summarised up to this point are parodied in the tango scene in *Some like it hot*, a 1959 romantic comedy film directed by Billy Wilder, in which Jack Lemmon, in drag as Daphne, dances the ubiquitous *La cumparsita* with millionaire suitor, Osgood Fielding III (played by Joe E. Brown).²⁵ The sequence, fragmented, offers a counterpoint between Daphne and Osgood's date and the intimate scene between Sugar Kane (Marilyn Monroe) and Joe (Tony Curtis). In order to seduce Sugar Kane, Joe is pretending to be a young, impotent millionaire; her attempts to "cure" him increase in explicit eroticism as the scene advances. The image of a curvaceous and scantily dressed Monroe lying seductively on top of Curtis is juxtaposed with that of Jack Lemmon in drag, wearing a flapper dress and a carnation in the cleavage, stiffly dancing the tango with Brown. Particularly amusing is the parody of the "flower in the mouth" trope, as they exchange a rose from mouth to mouth with typical head jerking movements. The increased sexual tension on one side of the story is echoed on the other; thus, at the end of the alternating sequence Osgood ends up wearing the carnation over his ear and has wrapped a tablecloth around his hips *alla* Beatrice Dominguez while Daphne dances by herself, using flamenco arm movements. They embrace and perform a brief stiff-arm promenade ending with the obligatory bending backwards. The clichéd step, however, comes with a twist: initially Osgood bends over Daphne in the traditional move but as the piece reaches its end, she takes over and forces Osgood to bend backwards, to which the band shouts *Olé!*

As we have seen, the conflation of Argentine tango with Spain inaugurated with *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* expanded over time to incorporate neighbouring associations such as castanets, the flower in the mouth, the swirling toreador cape, shouts of *olé!* and flamenco-like gestures. Castanets are never used in Argentine dances, whether folk or urban; they certainly have no place in the world of tango. Toreador capes are only seen in Buenos Aires at costume parties, as bullfighting was partially banned in 1822 and its practice became rare, until it was

²⁴ *Hernando's Hideaway* (New York: Frank Music Corp., 1954).

²⁵ Billy Wilder, *Some Like It Hot* (United Artists, 1959).

finally declared illegal in 1899.²⁶ Argentine women have not worn *mantillas* with large *peinetas* since the mid-19th century. Flamenco dancing, Manila shawls, and carnations worn over the ear—or elsewhere—are as exotic in Buenos Aires as they are in the United States.

An endless source of hilarity among Argentineans, the scenes examined here have been relatively neglected by the scholarly literature on tango.²⁷ Ochoa's *El tango en el cine mundial*, probably the most comprehensive survey of tango in cinema to date, is mostly concerned with pointing out misrepresentations and distortions of 'authentic' tango dancing. Can we do more than laughing or dismissing these examples as 'not real tango'? Is it possible to find an epistemological space where these scenes make sense?

I propose that we consider these scenes as instances of cultural representation and examine their inaccuracies and idiosyncracies under the lens of post-colonial theory. The notion of Latin America as a Western invention, initially formulated by Mexican philosopher Edmundo O'Gorman in 1968,²⁸ has been followed up, and expanded on, by Latin American scholars such as Walter Mignolo.²⁹ The concept of *Latinamericanism*, understood not as a field of study but in the post-colonial sense, as the equivalent of Orientalism for Latin America, has been applied in recent decades by authors such as Enrico Santí and Eduardo Mendieta.³⁰ Santí states that 'Latinamericanism [is]... not so much Latin America... as our [the United States] image of it.'³¹ He points out that Latin America as a discourse remains a field largely unexplored and makes "a

²⁶ Ricardo Levene (ed), *Historia de la nación argentina: (desde los orígenes hasta la organización definitiva en 1862)* (Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 1939), 416 ff.

²⁷ Some British and European films featuring tango, such as Sally Potter's *The tango lesson*, Carlos Saura's *Tango* and Bernardo Bertolucci's *The last tango in Paris* have received relatively more attention. See, for instance Marta E. Savigliano, "Destino Buenos Aires: Tango-Turismo Sexual Cinematográfico," *Cadernos Pagu* no. 25 (2005): 327–356.

²⁸ Edmundo O'Gorman, *La invención de América; el universalismo de la cultura de Occidente*. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958), published in English as *The invention of America: an inquiry into the historical nature of the New World & the meaning of its history*. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1961). This book had been preceded by his *La idea del descubrimiento de América; historia de esa interpretación y crítica de sus fundamentos*. ([México: Centro de Estudios Filosóficos, 1951).

²⁹ Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); *The Idea of Latin America*, Blackwell Manifestos (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2005).

³⁰ E. M Santí, 'Latinamericanism and Restitution', *Latin American Literary Review* 20, no. 40 (1992): 88–96; Eduardo Mendieta, 'The Emperor's Map: Latin American Critiques of Globalism', in *Rethinking Globalism* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 231–242.

³¹ E. M Santí, "Latinamericanism and Restitution," *Latin American Literary Review* 20, no. 40 (1992): 88.

plea for [its] archaeology”.³² Recently, I have proposed the existence of a body of texts about Latin American music comparable to the Orientalist archive and made a similar plea for its scholarly study.³³ Mainstream film is a significant component of this archive, having been instrumental in the creation, dissemination and perpetuation of ideas about Latin America.

A number of stereotypes about Latin Americans recur in mainstream film. Notable among them are the “*bandido*” or the outcast, the sleek and suave Latin lover, and the alluring *señorita*.³⁴ These characters are associated with a primal sexuality that is both sensuous and dangerous.³⁵ They can be emotional and irrational as well as wild and violent; their passions frequently of hyperbolic dimensions, sometimes approaching caricature. They are often homogenised into a generic “Latino” or confused with Spaniards, the individual differences between their countries and cultures happily obliterated.

These stereotypes contribute to the construction of a series of tropes of representation, which I have tentatively called *danger* (including the allure of the outcast), *erotic-exotic*, *irrationality*, *excess*, and *homogeneity*. These tropes have a double function, providing Western culture with sexual titillation and vicarious experience of its fantasies and obsessions, while reinforcing the superiority of reasonable, restrained, and law-abiding individuals who, of course, inhabit the West.

The trope of homogeneity, a time-honoured strategy of othering, is particularly relevant to the corpus analysed here. It refers to the action of erasing diversity and individuality, transforming the Other into a faceless and homogeneous entity.³⁶ Mainstream representations of Latin American music often operate within this framework: Mexican sombreros, Spanish castanets, Mariachi bands, *bandoneón* sounds, habanera rhythms, flamenco guitars and Cuban claves are often happily thrown into the mix, regardless of the genre or specific country that is supposed to be alluded to. Tango in film is often a metaphor for seduction, sexual allure, jealousy, or –as in the Viagra commercial—a sublimated form of foreplay. By drawing from the already existing allure of Spain as the locus of the exotic Other in Europe,³⁷ the homogenisation of Spain and Argentina in the cinematic use of tango also partakes of the erotic-exotic trope.

³² *Ibid.*, 95.

³³ Melanie Plesch, “Musical Latinamericanism: Some Notes Towards the Deconstruction of a Discursive Formation” (Paper presented at the 19th Congress of the International Musicological Society, Rome, 2012).

³⁴ Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance*, Texas Film and Media Studies Series (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).

³⁵ This duality of violence and sensuality is a time-honoured strategy of Othering, most notably enacted in Orientalism.

³⁶ M.L. Pratt, “Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen,” *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 119–143.

³⁷ This topic is further explored in Geraldine Powers’ article in this same volume.

Thus, with the aid of the post-colonial lens the mixture of tango with castanets, flamenco, Manila shawls, *peinetas*, carnations, toreador capes and shouts of *olé!* begins to make sense. They are instances of “musical Latinamericanism”, i.e., a discursive formation, an archive of texts about Latin American music that the West has built for its own consumption, within its own epistemological logic, and to serve its own interests.

Dreams, as Freud told us, can be the key to the mind of the dreamer. Fantasies may not depict reality but they certainly tell us about the fantasiser. Similarly, these scenes tell us very little about tango or about Spanish music, but constitute an invaluable source for understanding the conditions by which certain enduring stereotypes of Spanish and Latin American music have been reproduced in Western mainstream consciousness.