LATIN AMERICAN ICONS

*Fame Across Borders*

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Tango International
Carlos Gardel and the Breaking of Sound Barriers

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Cada dia canta mejor" ("His singing gets better every day"), declares a popular saying about Carlos Gardel, the beloved Argentine singer of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s who continues to enjoy unparalleled popularity with tango lovers all over the world. As the phrase suggests, the tributes of present-day fans keep the singer’s memory and recorded voice alive; tourists who make the “pilgrimage” to his grave in the Chacarita cemetery in Buenos Aires often bring flowers and place lit cigarettes in the hand of the tuxedo-clad statue that marks his resting place. In suggesting that Gardel’s musical performances become even more triumphant as the singer’s life recedes further into the past, the saying points to the pivotal role of intense nostalgia in his star image. In Gardel’s case, this nostalgia stems most immediately from his premature death in an aviation accident in 1935, but it is also a central theme of the tango genre as a whole. Suggesting the effects of this nostalgia on the listening experience, the saying “cada dia canta mejor” implies that replaying a Gardel record is not a mere repetition of the same. Rather, it implies that the passage of time and the intervention of the technology that allows us to hear the voice of a dead icon have in fact added something to the aesthetic experience. Arguing that in Gardel’s case the sense of loss produced by technological mediation amplified the emotional experience of audiences who were physically and culturally distant from the singer, I will explore the pivotal role of sound recording and reproduction in the elevation of Gardel to iconic status and the preservation of his popularity into the present day.

The circumstances in which Gardel’s music has been produced and consumed complicate prevailing discussions of sound recording technology, in which cultural critics emphasize the loss of immediacy resulting from a recorded performance. Tom Levin and Mary Ann Doane draw attention to the problematic way that the mediation of sound recording technology is assumed to all but “disappear” in advertisements for technical improvements that promise an ever-greater fidelity to the “real” sound (Levin 1984, 55–59; Doane 1985, 163–64).1 Yet the intense emotional experiences produced for contemporary listeners by Gardel’s scratchy recordings, which to modern ears are full of “noise” (dust damage, limited recording range), suggest the extent to which a sense of distance from the listener, whether
defined in terms of space, time, or cultural identity, can become central to the experience of a musical recording or sound film.

The appeal of distance and loss rather than possession and proximity seems to have been central to Gardel's popularity. He is considered an icon of national culture, despite, or perhaps because of, his frequent physical separation from his adopted homeland, Argentina, beginning in 1923, when he embarked on extended tours in Spain, France, and the United States to perform onstage, in radio broadcasts, and on film. Gardel's recordings were felt to exemplify the tango's nostalgic and pessimistic themes: economic misfortune, shattered romances (often between pimp and prostitute), and longing for one's distant homeland. The lyrics of Gardel's tangos often register a dislocation in historical time as well as geographic space, hearkening back to a way of life—the semi-lawless existence of the Buenos Aires arrabales (suburbs)—that was being eradicated even as the tango rose to national popularity. In fact, as Tamara Falicov argues in "Argentine Cinema and the Construction of National Popular Identity, 1930–1942," the tango's broad popularity is in some ways contingent on this very disappearance, linked to the reshaping of urban space as well as the influence of emerging mass media that created a sense of a shared national culture between the working and middle classes. In a nostalgic phenomenon similar to the tango lyrics of the 1920s and 1930s that glorified a type of neighborhood that no longer existed, Gardel's music remains popular precisely because of its distance from us in history. The technological mediation that separates the contemporary listener from Gardel's voice is precisely what allows it to travel in space and time, creating a sense of dislocation and loss that contributes to his tangos' emotional potency.

The role of technological mediation in the impact of Gardel's music is humorously explored in Argentine director Eliseo Subiela's fantastical film No te mueras sin decirme adónde vas (Don't Die Without Telling Me Where You're Going, 1995), a self-reflexive tale of love and reincarnation involving a television-like apparatus that records visions. In a subplot of the film, an inventor constructs "Carlitos," a Gardel robot sporting a wide painted grin and luminous bow tie, with the capacity to respond to humans' emotional conundrums with a series of pre-recorded tangos and lines from his films. Programmed to serenade any woman in his presence with "El día que me quieras" ("The Day You Love Me"), the title song from the 1935 film starring Gardel, Carlitos mechanizes and standardizes emotion through automated response and playback. The implied absurdity of this project makes the robot a laughable figure; yet it also evokes some of the contradictory images of technological progress and nostalgic affect that have continued to cluster around the figure of Gardel up to the present day.

The singer has been credited with a series of "firsts" in Argentine media history, the best-known being his 1917 performance of the first tango-canción (tango song) "Mi noche triste," with lyrics by Pascual Contursi. This performance, which became one of the first tango recordings, created a genre considered much more emotionally moving than the tango-danza (tango dance), a form that included only improvised lyrics or lacked them entirely. Gardel also appeared in some of Argentina's earliest experiments with optical sound in a series of musical performances and one comic short directed by Eduardo Morera in 1930, and he even featured in an experimental television broadcast in 1931 (Peluso and Visconti 1990, 137–38,
Between 1931 and 1935, Gardel appeared in the first wildly popular Spanish-language films to be viewed in Buenos Aires, though these were productions of the Hollywood studio Paramount rather than the emerging Argentine industry. Fully synchronized sound features would not be made in Argentina until 1933, when Tango! and Los tres berretines (The Three Amateurs) premiered. Like Gardel’s Paramount films, these productions focused on tango performances, indicating the importance of the genre to the emerging national industry’s attempts to develop both domestic and export markets for its films.

Gardel’s participation in this series of media experiments suggests a hope that new technologies could bring tango culture to an ever-broader national audience and even win fans abroad. As Donald Castro has argued, after the first Buenos Aires radio stations opened in 1923, radio transmission had increasingly allowed tango to be consumed in domestic spaces, where “respectable” women had access to it, and in the interior of the country (1999, 94–95). The tango was thus distanced from its unsavory origins in the crime- and prostitution-ridden port areas of Buenos Aires. The radio catalyzed the genre’s transition from a marginal to a middle-class musical form, even as it helped catapult Gardel to mass stardom in the mid-1920s (Vila 1991; Castro 1999, 96). Gramophone records, which became popular in upper-class Buenos Aires households in the early 1920s before the popularization of radio, provided a performance that could be relocated not only in space, but also in time (Castro 1999, 94). Recordings could be consumed repeatedly and at will in domestic as well as public spaces, but this convenience was only available to those with the means to purchase the expensive machines and records, which excluded the working classes.
In the late 1920s, the development of more powerful electronic amplification and effective synchronization of projectors and sound equipment allowed for the successful premiere of films that added a visual dimension to recorded musical performances. This possibility was considered to be a key aspect of the new technology's novelty and audience appeal, as is evident in the production of short films made up of a single song or multi-song musical act, such as the Warner Bros. Vitaphone shorts that premiered in 1926. The 1930 Gardel shorts produced by Moreira manifest a similar logic, this time expressly intended to consolidate a viable film industry in Argentina for the first time (Peluso and Visconti 1990, 138). The fact that the breakout 1927 film The Jazz Singer, generally considered the first “talkie,” was silent except for scenes featuring musical numbers by prominent vaudeville performer Al Jolson indicates the centrality of musical performance to the development of an internationally popular sound cinema.

The Jazz Singer’s combination of silent and sound sequences also signals the uncanny effects of the transition to sound films, as detailed by Robert Spadoni in his work on early horror films of the period. As he points out, contemporary reviewers felt that when the film reverted to dialogue intertitles and a recorded soundtrack after Jolson’s first musical performance, the characters who had been speaking were suddenly struck “deaf and dumb” (Spadoni 2007, 21). Even in the absence of such a mixture of silent and sound strategies, or the technical defects that plagued early sound films (problems with volume, timbre, and synchronization), contemporary responses to sound film manifest a feeling that, as Spadoni suggests, “something vital had been added along with the sound, but also something vital had been leached away,” namely the physical presence of the actual performer (2007, 22). The coming of sound film thus rendered audiences aware of the heterogeneity of the medium—the source of the actor’s voice is not his or her mouth, but rather a loudspeaker (Altman 1980)—and made actors seem like grotesque composite figures. While few films in the period adopted this strategy, audiences often associated the spectacular novelty of sound film with an awareness of technological mediation or merely a sense of the loss of the performer, simultaneously experienced as strangely present and keenly absent.

Addressing the effects of transportation and media technologies, Gilles Deleuze reflects on the capacity of “the telephone, the radio . . . gramophones and cinematographs” to “summon up phantoms” and evoke “affects which are uncoordinated, outside all coordinates” (1986, 100). This sense of ontological destabilization in turn evokes Deleuze’s and Guattari’s notion of “detrimentalization” and helps explain the ways in which media technologies can work to unsettle the categories of space, time, and identity, categories that firmly locate us within a “territory” (2004, 165–84). By creating ghostly effects of sound or image separated from the body, media technologies can provoke irrational emotional responses.

Just as his voice crossed international frontiers by means of the phonograph, the radio, and later, the sound film, the singer himself crossed oceans and continents using the latest transportation technologies: the transatlantic ocean liner—featured prominently in his films El día que me quieras and Tango Bar—and the fatal airplane he boarded in Medellín while promoting his films and RCA recordings throughout Latin America. The extensive publicity surrounding Gardel’s travels suggests the importance of these modern transportation vehicles for the imagina-
tion of a cosmopolitan international culture in the period, supplemented by the circulation of Gardel’s records in places he could not physically reach, to win him new fans across Latin America and in Spain and France.

While debates over whether he was born in France or Uruguay continue to rage up to the present day, all agree that he rose from a life in the slums of Buenos Aires to international fame and fortune. As Blas Matamoro suggests in *La ciudad del tango*, Gardel’s success held out a promise of upward mobility for the working classes (1982, 94–96). These two types of mobility, geographic and social, were intimately linked in Argentina, a nation that has always emphasized its origins in massive European immigration and prided itself on its cultural cosmopolitanism (roundly criticized by leftist intellectuals as an extension of colonization by cultural means).

The tango itself was a product of cultural mixing in the ports, slums, and red-light districts of Buenos Aires, although its mode of hybridization was far removed from the adoption of French and English literate culture conspicuously displayed by the elites. The musical form emerged from the collision of the Cuban *habanera*, African rhythms, and several other musical genres of diverse national origin around 1880 (Loza 2000, 791). As Pablo Vila noted in his 1991 article, “Tango to folk: Hegemony construction and popular identities in Argentina,” published in *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, the intricate eight-step pattern was originally danced in brothels between prostitutes and male clients, or between clients waiting outside for their turn, as men significantly outnumbered women in Buenos Aires at this time. The tango did not become respectable until fashionable Parisians adopted the steps taught them by young Argentines from wealthy families making their grand tour of Europe (quoted in Matamoro 1982, 80–86). After the emergence of this Europeanized, and somewhat sanitized, version of the tango, the dance attained massive popularity in the United States, where it retained its associations with sensuality and passion. “Tango teas,” afternoon parties attended by society women accompanied by male dancers for hire (who were often immigrants and almost exclusively working-class) rather than their husbands, became a craze in Jazz Age America, sparking a panic about these “immoral” events where liquor flowed freely and sensual dance steps were the norm. As Gaylyn Studlar has written, the dance was felt to have the power to undo class and ethnic distinctions by forging intense erotic connections, and thus to undo the social order itself (1996, 161–63). This association followed the tango in its appearances in Hollywood movies, most famously *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), in which former dancer and matinee idol Rudolph Valentino performs a provocative version of the dance, although he is incongruously dressed as a gaucho rather than a stylish denizen of a Buenos Aires cabaret.

Hollywood once again sought to capitalize on the international appeal of the tango during the transition to sound, as it moved into the production of foreign-language films in an effort to maintain its overwhelming dominance of foreign markets in the face of the language barrier posed by synchronized sound. Yet it has been suggested that profit was not the only motive for this production strategy; rather, an attempt to neutralize the uncanny effects of novel sound technologies may also have been at work. Nataša Durovicová argues that Hollywood studios began to produce multiple-language versions in an effort to avoid the strangeness...
of what she calls a "synthetic 'transnational' body"; that is, a disquieting figure that combined the image of an actor speaking one language with the voice of an actor speaking another (1992, 148). In remaking entire films with dialogues translated from English and spoken by entire casts of foreign actors, the organic unity of the actor's speaking mouth and audible voice was maintained. As Ruth Vasey notes, foreign-language versions were soon superseded by dubbing, which became technically feasible with the introduction of sound mixing technology (1997, 91–93). Yet resistance to the practice remained, expressed in terms that resonate with Durovicová's formulation. Jorge Luis Borges wrote in 1932 that "Hollywood . . . by means of the malignant artifice of dubbing, proposes monsters that combine the illustrious features of Greta Garbo with the voice of Aldonza Lorenzo" (quoted in Durovicová 1992, 336).4 Borges's objection to the grotesque fusion of an anonymous, unsophisticated voice with the celebrated face of Garbo also suggests some of the problems that made Hollywood's versions of Latin American films unpopular with spectators overseas. These productions, hastily made on low budgets, lacked the American stars that the studios had elevated to the status of demigods and were thus distinctly lacking in drawing power for audiences. Few recouped their modest investments, and the practice had been almost entirely discontinued by 1932 (Vasey 1997, 96).

A notable exception to the system of foreign-language production described above was a group of seven Paramount musicals featuring the real voice and image of Gardel, the most celebrated media personality Argentina had produced until then. These films were based on original Spanish-language scripts rather than translated English dialogues and thus did not produce the sense of cultural dissonance provoked by films spoken in a language other than English, but the characters had American mannerisms and, often, American names as well (Durovicová 1992, 146). Shot in studios established for foreign-language production in Joinville on the outskirts of Paris and in Astoria on Long Island, Gardel's films attained massive popularity across the Spanish-speaking world. Domingo di Núbila judges them to be the "decisive factor" in creating an audience for Spanish-language films in Argentina, a significant first step for the establishment of a national industry (1998, 107). Gardel's musical melodramas—tales of romance across continents and social classes punctuated by tangos and other popular tunes—provided effective models for domestic film production in Argentina, winning fans at home and abroad.5

In addition to being transnational in terms of their production—made by an American studio in France or on Long Island, the Gardel musicals feature Argentine tango performers but also actors with varied accents from across the Spanish-speaking world—Gardel's films tend toward transnationality in their settings and themes. This is most notable in the films made on Long Island in 1934 and 1935: *Cuesta abajo* (The Downward Path) and *El tango en Broadway* (The Tango on Broadway), directed by Louis Gasnier; and *El día que me quieras* and *Tango Bar*, directed by Reinhardt. Evoking Gardel's international travels and implying an address to film audiences across the Spanish-speaking world (Collier 1986, 241), these films thematize voyages to Europe and the United States, often linking such globe-trotting to the erosion of traditional moral values or cultural authenticity. For example, in *Tango Bar*, most of which takes place aboard an ocean liner, Gardel's character
meets a beautiful young singer (Rosita Moreno), who is forced to moonlight as a jewel thief. Arriving in Barcelona, he reluctantly employs her in his club but eventually protects her from the police when she becomes a victim of blackmail.

Treating similar themes with a more humorous tone, *El tango en Broadway* portrays New York’s entertainment world as a space of leisure, amusement, and dissipation, which Gardel’s character Alfredo enjoys as the head of a musical booking agency. This idyllic situation is threatened when Alfredo’s rich uncle from Buenos Aires arrives to investigate the use being made of his money and the moral tenor of his nephew’s life. Falling prey to a series of deceptions (Gardel disguises his disgruntled mistress as his secretary and one of his performers, played by Blanca Vischer, as his fiancée, predictably leading to a new love affair between the two), the uncle is seduced by the charms of the American metropolis and decides to stay. Although the film opens with Gardel’s performance of the fox trot “Rubias de New York” (“New York Blondes”), indicating the lure of both American women and American musical forms, the film’s plot reaffirms the appeal of the tango singer played by Blanca Vischer, whom Gardel serenades with the tango “Soledad” (Navitski 2011, 46).

Similarly, in *Cuesta abajo*, Europe becomes the site of economic ruin and personal decadence for Gardel’s character as he stalks his unfaithful lover, played by Mona Maris. Forced to hire himself out as a professional dance partner (à la Valentino), he finally decides to return to Buenos Aires to be reunited with his innocent former love (Anita Campillo). Gardel’s performance of “Mi Buenos Aires Querido” (“My Beloved Buenos Aires”), which announces his return at the end
of the film, exemplifies media technologies’ creation of irrational conjunctions of places and times, and its production of the “phantoms” referred to by Deleuze. The refrain of the tango—“My beloved Buenos Aires, when I see you again, there will be no more sorrow or forgetting”—emphasizes the joy of a reunion which would erase all sense of loss or displacement. This refrain is made literal in a superimposition of an image of Buenos Aires’s skyline with an image of Gardel singing in medium shot against the railing of the ocean liner he has just boarded (accompanied by Vicente Padula, who plays the ship’s captain). While this optical effect suggests the complete erasure of distance, its transparency also renders Buenos Aires ghostly, visibly a product of imagination and longing rather than an empirical geographic location. Suggesting the phantasmatic quality of technologically mediated perception, this sequence embeds the affectively charged contradictions of Gardel’s transnational career.

In El día que me quieras, an ocean liner again becomes the stage for the cinematic performance of one of Gardel’s most famous tangos, “Volver” (“Returning”). The performance has little connection to the melodramatic plot, in which Gardel plays Julio Argüelles, heir to a family fortune but disowned by his father when he marries a young dancer played by Rosita Moreno, who becomes ill and dies after the birth of their daughter because they cannot afford medical treatment. Heartbroken, he changes his name and becomes a celebrity, touring the world with a father-daughter tango act, but while traveling back to Buenos Aires on an ocean liner, his background threatens to thwart the plans of his daughter, also played by Rosita Moreno, to marry a young businessman. Standing on the ocean liner’s deck contemplating his impending separation from his daughter, Gardel muses aloud, “To return, to depart again as before, leaving behind my heart,” then breaks into song. The tango’s lyrics emphasize both the passage of time that leaves the singer “with a weary brow, temples silvered by the snows of time,” and the negation of this temporal distance: “to feel that life is but a breath, that twenty years is nothing.”

Eshewing the special effects used in the “Mi Buenos Aires querido” number, the scene includes only two simple camera set-ups showing Gardel in medium close-up and medium long-shot, and uses a bare-bones set (a railing with a rear projection of a shimmering ocean horizon in the background). Gardel almost seems to be performing in front of an animated theatrical backdrop, which de-materializes the setting of the ocean liner, setting his performance adrift in space and time. Even as this sequence betrays the limited budgets of the foreign-language productions, it also suggests that Gardel’s singing was accorded an emotional power strangely disconnected from all sense of location.

Gardel’s earlier films made in Joinville do not emphasize geographic mobility or liminal spatial locations as do the musicals produced in Astoria. Their action is confined to a single country: Argentina in Las luces de Buenos Aires (The Lights of Buenos Aires, dir. Adelqui Millar, 1931) and Melodia de arrabal (Suburban Melody, dir. Louis Gasnier, 1933), and Spain in Espérame (Wait for Me, dir. Gasnier, 1932), a rather incongruous location that caused the film to become Gardel’s least popular with audiences. Yet as Currie K. Thompson has noted, these earlier musicals similarly focus on social oppositions and moral polarities coded in spatial terms (1991, 25–27). Las luces de Buenos Aires traces the journey of two sisters from the interior to become entertainers in the capital, where they fall victim to the loose morals
of modern urban life. Anselmo, played by Gardel, arrives to retrieve Elvira (Sofía Bozán), with whom he is in love. He fails, but two of his gauchos associates lasso her during a performance onstage and return her to the provinces and Anselmo’s embrace, a stereotypical vision of rural rubes in the city that aroused reviewers’ ire (Peluso and Visconti 1990, 142, 169). By contrast, in *Melodía de arrabal*, Buenos Aires’s entertainment districts promise redemption from a marginal existence. An incorrigible gambler, Gardel’s character Roberto is redeemed by the good intentions of a genteel piano player (Imperio Argentina) and goes on to become a nationally prominent tango star, in an explicit parallel to Gardel’s rise from humble origins to celebrity. As in the case of *The Jazz Singer*’s Al Jolson, the plots of Gardel’s films often echoed certain aspects of the tango singer’s biography. As Marta Savigliano suggests, they produce a sense that the singer was “playing himself” and thus invited fans to confuse the character with the flesh-and-blood Gardel (1995, 65–66). In *Espérame* and *Cuesta abajo*, this impression is strengthened by the fact that the characters played by the singer share his first name.

This double image of Gardel as melodramatic film character and real-life performer increased the currency of Gardel’s Paramount films across the Spanish-speaking world. The films’ massive popularity and the emotional response they stirred suggest the power of his performances to overcome the sense of cultural distance or dissonance created by the often incoherent mixture of accents and dialects among the Spanish-speaking actors employed by Paramount, and their reception in the many countries to which the studio exported its Spanish-language films (Navitski 2011, 37). While Gardel’s lyricist Alfredo Le Pera worked to purge the songs and dialogues of his films of the *lunfardo* slang specific to marginal populations of Buenos Aires (D’Lugo 2008, 16), the singer’s musical numbers were hailed as providing an emotional authenticity that redeemed the films’ low production values, mixture of actors from a variety of nations, and occasional plot absurdities. A review in Barcelona’s *El Mundo Deportivo*, reprinted for publicity purposes in the Spanish-language house organ *Nuevo Mensajero Paramount*, asserts that “Gardel realizes a decisive triumph, especially in his rendition of the barroom tango from the tavern (i.e., *Tomo y obligo* [which literally translated means ‘I drink and expect you to drink with me’]). The emotion Gardel infuses into this tango had wide appeal for audiences, who were moved to tears by it. This tango is the definitive moment of the film and it gives it its forceful emotional appeal” (quoted in *Nuevo Mensajero Paramount* 1932, 14). Similarly, Argentine tango lyricist Homero Manzi, who was generally quite skeptical about Gardel’s collaboration with Paramount (which he suggested was depriving the developing Argentine cinema of its biggest potential star) wrote in a review of *Melodía de arrabal* that only “two tangos saved a thousand meters of celluloid apparently filmed in Marseilles cantinas and streets of indeterminate geographical region” (quoted in Peluso and Visconti 1990, 334).

As the *Nuevo Mensajero Paramount* proudly announced, at the premieres of his films in several Latin American cities, the audience demanded that the projectionist rewind the film after Gardel’s musical numbers and replay them as many as three times (*NMP* 1934, 147; *NMP* 1935, 7). This mode of film consumption can be seen as a kind of celluloid encore, one that evokes the feel of a live performance (where the audience can demand an encore from the performer), or the on-demand playback of the gramophonic record (Navitski 2011, 36). The audience’s outpouring
of enthusiasm for these tango films suggests the excitement produced by the simultaneous reproduction of Gardel's voice and image, but also the pleasures of a mechanical repetition that is not in conflict with, but in fact supplements, the incomplete but still compelling effect of his presence.

In conclusion, and foregrounding the relationship between emotional excess and sound technology in Gardel's career, I would like to end with a discussion of Fernando Solanas's 1985 film *Tangos: The Exile of Gardel*. Solanas's film chronicles the lives of political refugees in France who are staging a hybrid musical and theatrical performance they refer to as a *tanguedia*, a fusion of tragedy (*tragedia*), comedy (*comedia*), and tango. Gardel "appears" in a scene in which two exiles are frantically trying to reach a creative collaborator in Buenos Aires. A threatening figure (who later identifies himself as Enrique Santos Discépolo, a renowned tango lyricist in the first decades of the twentieth century) approaches the booth but merely offers to fix the malfunctioning telephone, which begins to emit "Rubias de New York" as soon as a connection is established. After the phone call is truncated by the still unreliable connection, leading the exiles to despair, the bright headlights of an automobile approach, and an actor playing Gardel, appearing only as a silhouette, exits the car accompanied by the shadows of several other musicians. He then "performs" his classic tango "Anclado en Paris" ("Stuck in Paris"), whose lyrics express a fear that death will preclude a return to Buenos Aires, which is heard on the sound track but not synchronized to the lips of the partially visible performer. While the tango's subject matter dramatizes the exiles' entrapment, the sudden manifestation of Gardel's ghostly figure also suggests the nomadic nature of a national culture that circulates internationally by means of sound reproduction technology. The spectrality of this "live" performance is emphasized by Gardel's final "appearance" in the film, during which the liberator San Martín converses with one of the Argentine exiles and Gardel sips a mate while "Volver" plays on a record in the background. This diegetic use of music divorces the performance from the body of the performer, visualized on screen as a spectre. Circulating by means of the telephone and the gramophone, Gardel's phantasmatic figure is resurrected bodily in Solanas's film through the intervention of cinema.

In her interpretation of Solanas's 1980s films, Kathleen Newman suggests that the appearance of the figures of Gardel and San Martín signals nostalgia for the nation itself. In her view, the national culture invoked by Solanas, a leading Peronist militant in the 1960s, has been invalidated as a basis for political action by the state-sponsored violence and disastrous neo-liberal economic policies of the last military dictatorship (Newman 1993, 242–47). While Newman's reading of Solanas's use of Gardelian iconography in the context of re-democratization is incisive, Gardel's posthumous appearances also speak to the broader contradictions of his career and of Argentine national culture itself. The processes of "cultural colonization" at work in Argentina's self-conscious cosmopolitanism and Hollywood's attempt to manufacture national culture abroad are both exemplified and undone by Gardel's international stardom. While the singer's appropriation by a Hollywood studio indicates the historical and continued dominance of the United States in international media markets, the reception of his Paramount musicals indicates how emerging media technologies can produce a countercurrent to this largely unidirectional circulation of cultural forms. The Gardel films helped create an
Argentine cinema audience that imagined itself as national in its consumption of tango-themed musicals, and thus bolstered ambitions to create a domestic film industry. In addition, Latin American spectators' enthusiastic response to Gardel's musical numbers suggests that a privileged sense of emotional authenticity is made possible by sound recording technology's simultaneous disavowal and inscription of spatial and temporal distance. Gardel's movements across continents and social classes are intertwined with the irrational affective repercussions of media technologies, which make possible the emotionally charged repetition and replay that have perpetuated the singer's legacy into the present.

Notes

1. This discourse has been questioned in recent scholarship emphasizing the social determination of sound reproductions, which makes it impossible to conceive of an "original" sound event outside of the recording situation in which a "copy" is produced. See Sterne (2003) and Lastra (2000).

2. The most relevant change in the life of arrabales was the decriminalization of prostitution in 1919. For the paradigmatic example of these nostalgic accounts of the life of the arrabales, in the guise of a biography of the titular poet, see Jorge Luis Borges's Evaristo Carriero in Obras Completas I: 1923–1949 (2007).

3. The most influential statement on this dynamic of national culture made in the context of cinema is Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World" (1997), which calls for the eradication of films on a classical Hollywood model, as well as productions influenced by European art cinema and its focus on individual bourgeois consciousness, in favor of a radically transformative "Third Cinema."

4. Aldonza Lorenzo is the "real" and very unromantic-sounding name of Don Quixote's Dulcinea in Cervantes's novel.

5. Emerging film industries in Mexico and Brazil would adopt similar narrative formulas, creating the musical genres of the comedia ranchera, an idealized view of rural life that featured popular songs in traditional styles, and the chanchada, which grew out of the samba culture diffused by radio and Carnival, in the mid-1930s.


7. In the film, the spoken portion of Gardel's performance is "Volver. Para volver a partir, como antes, dejando el corazón"; the lyrics cited are "Volver, con la frente marchita, las nieves del tiempo platearon mi sien / Sentir, que es un soplo la vida / que veinte años no es nada." Lyrics by Alfredo Le Pera.