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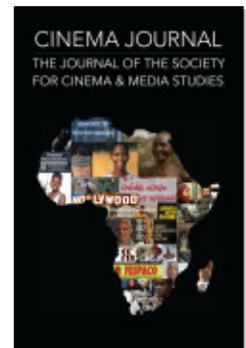
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The Tango on Broadway: Carlos Gardel's International Stardom and the Transition to Sound in Argentina

by RIELLE NAVITSKI

Abstract: Tango singer Carlos Gardel's international career, including his 1931–1935 appearances in seven Paramount musicals that helped consolidate an audience for Argentina's nascent sound film industry, exemplifies the role of emerging media technologies—radio, phonography, sound film—in the renegotiation of cultural hegemonies within and beyond the nation.

In July 1935, shortly after beloved tango singer and film star Carlos Gardel died in an aviation accident, *Variety* took the posthumous release of his film *Tango Bar* (John Reinhardt, 1935) as an occasion to ponder the anomaly of an internationally successful star who never conquered the American market. While the reviewer acknowledged that “songs by him, or films by him, have always been good in South America, Spain, and other Latin American territories,” he continued in puzzlement,

It is a bit hard for the average non-Latin to figure out just why. He was under average height and not too romantic appearing, according to U.S. standards. . . . But his past grosses tell their own story. One of his films made in Paris [likely the 1931 *Las luces de Buenos Aires*] cost about \$25,000 to turn out and brought in over \$400,000 in grosses. Which gives an idea. He had a lovely crooning type of voice and could sling out those pampas tunes [*sic*] in an intriguing manner. While he sings in this film, even those not understanding the language or particularly addicted to Gardel can appreciate his worth.¹

Marveling at the power of Gardel's voice, whose allure transcended language barriers, and his status as a demonstrably bankable star, yet expressing bemusement

1 Review of *Tango Bar*, *Variety*, July 17, 1935. Tango is an urban musical genre that originated in Buenos Aires, not in Argentina's interior. However, Gardel had recorded folk songs associated with rural life, especially in the early years of his career.

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Figure 1. This image of Gardel was published with the announcement of his death in the Spanish-language house organ *Nuevo mensajero Paramount*. *Variety* considered the star unglamorous by “U.S. standards” (courtesy of the New York Public Library).

at a figure who was rather unglamorous by “U.S. standards,”² the reviewer expressed an ambivalence that signals the contradictions of Carlos Gardel’s international stardom (Figure 1). In Argentina, he was considered the foremost singer of the tango, which was emerging as a dominant aspect of national culture during the 1910s and 1920s. In addition, the star played a pivotal role in the development of industrial film production in his adopted country, paradoxically without ever performing in a sound feature made there. Gardel’s appearances in seven musicals for Paramount between 1931 and 1935 have been cited as a primary impetus for a national film industry that would capitalize extensively on the appeal of the tango, though his influence was felt exclusively from abroad (with the exception of a series of short sound-on-film experiments in which he appeared in 1930).

Throughout Latin America and Europe, the singer gave high-profile live performances and radio broadcasts; his musical films produced a furor among Spanish-speaking audiences from Buenos Aires to Barcelona to New York, who often demanded that his musical numbers be rewound and re-projected. Yet Gardel’s performances gained him little cultural recognition in the country where Paramount was based and where four of his seven feature-length films were produced between 1931 and 1935. Despite his broad transatlantic, and at times translingual, appeal for audiences in Latin America, Spain, and France, Gardel has remained almost completely unrecognized in the United States, and the fanaticism the singer continues to arouse has mystified contemporary American commentators. In 1989, a *New Yorker* writer marveled at the incongruity of a Gardel commemoration held at the United Nations, wondering “whether there would be Prince commemorations in Buenos Aires sometime late in the 21st century.”³ Five years later, the *Los Angeles Times* took a similarly bemused tone while reporting on the quixotic quest of the “Comité Gardeliano de California” to have a star with Gardel’s name on it placed on Hollywood’s Walk of Fame.⁴

This puzzlement might be attributed to the fact that, despite Gardel’s ambitions to equal the popular success of fellow foreign-born Paramount player Maurice Chevalier, he never made films with English-language dialogue as the French singer

2 Gardel struggled with his weight; this reviewer also noted that “he was well in his 40s and showed it” in the Paramount musicals.

3 Richard Brookhiser, “Gardel,” *New Yorker*, August 21, 1989, 27.

4 Mathis Chazanov, “Fans of Tango King Want Star to Shine On,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 1994.

did.⁵ Nor did he ever reach Hollywood proper, except in the plot of *El día que me quieras* (The Day You Love Me; Reinhardt, 1935). Gardel's films for Paramount were all made in satellite studios constructed for the production of foreign-language versions (parallel productions which substituted foreign actors speaking translated dialogue for the original casts of Hollywood films, reusing sets and costumes) in the tumultuous years of the transition to sound film. In the Paramount studios in Joinville, France, on the outskirts of Paris, Gardel starred in three features—*Las luces de Buenos Aires* (The Lights of Buenos Aires; Adelqui Millar, 1931), *Espérame* (Wait for Me; Louis Gasnier, 1933), and *Melodía de arrabal* (Song of the Suburbs; Gasnier, 1933)—and one short, *La casa es seria* (The House Is Serious; Gasnier, 1932), now lost except for the soundtrack. In Astoria, New York, he made *Cuesta abajo* (The Downward Path; 1934) and *El tango en Broadway* (The Tango on Broadway; 1934), directed by Louis Gasnier, as well as *El día que me quieras* and *Tango Bar*, directed by John Reinhardt. Additionally, Gardel sang two numbers for the musical revue *The Big Broadcast of 1936* (released as *Cazadores de estrellas* in Latin America).

While recent interest in questions of transnationality in cinema has produced a few scholarly works examining the Gardel musicals as successful anomalies in the short-lived system of Hollywood foreign-language productions, they have remained virtually absent from industrial histories.⁶ Relatively little critical attention has been given to the phenomenon of foreign-language versions, which were undertaken to ease the barriers to international export that arose with the widespread adoption of sound film.⁷ As films produced in Spanish by Paramount with original scripts developed expressly to showcase the tango star, the Gardel vehicles fall outside the scope of work that does focus on the strangely mechanical cultural transcriptions undertaken by foreign-language remakes, which rarely made any effort to adapt the action or character types to the social context in which they would be shown.⁸ As American productions, Gardel's Paramount musicals receive only passing mention in histories of Latin American cinema. However, the minimal space devoted to the films is belied by the pivotal significance attributed to them. Argentine film historian Domingo di Núbila describes Gardel's musicals as a “decisive factor in the popularization of Argentine sound cinema,” and John King suggests they had “an enormous impact in Latin America, spawning a number of formula films in Argentina, using the

5 Simon Collier cites Gardel's desire “to appear on the English-language screen with the honors of Maurice Chevalier” and “to enter the bright lights of Hollywood,” as expressed by Gardel to the Buenos Aires newspaper *La nación*. Quoted in Collier's *The Life, Music, and Times of Carlos Gardel* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986), 249.

6 See Marvin D'Lugo, “Authorship, Globalization, and the New Identity of Latin American Cinema: From the Mexican ‘Ranchera’ to Argentinean ‘Exile,’” in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Anthony R. Guneratne and Wimal Dissanayake (London: Routledge, 2003), 103–125; and D'Lugo, “Early Cinematic Tangos: Audiovisual Cultural and Transnational Film Aesthetics,” *Studies in Hispanic Cinemas* 5, nos. 1–2 (2008): 9–23.

7 Two reference works that do address the foreign-language version are Harry Waldman, *Paramount in Paris: 300 Films Produced at the Joinville Studios, 1930–1933, with Credits and Biographies* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998); and Juan B. Heinink and Robert G. Dickson, *Cita en Hollywood: Antología de películas norteamericanas habladas en castellano* (Bilbao, Spain: Mensajero, 1990).

8 See Nataša Durovičová, “Translating America: The Hollywood Multilinguals, 1929–1933,” in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 138–153.

combination of comedy, melodrama, and good songs.⁹ Stating the case even more strongly, Eduardo Morera, who directed the singer in his experimental sound films of 1930, refers to Gardel's appearances on film as "the principal catalyst for sound cinema in Latin America."¹⁰

Gardel's popularity as a recording artist and radio star had helped naturalize the tango as an authentically national form.¹¹ In turn, his Paramount films provided effective models for nascent Latin American popular cinemas that capitalized on the appeal of local musical genres.¹² Within two years of the 1931 release of Gardel's first film for Paramount, *Las luces de Buenos Aires*, the studios that would become the top two players in Argentina's industry had each released a popular tango-themed film: Argentina Sono Film's *¡Tango!* (Luis Moglia Barth, 1933) and Lumitón's *Los tres berretines* (The Three Pastimes; John Alton et al., 1933). The narratives of Gardel's Paramount films would also be influential in their melodramatic treatment of the social oppositions of a nation with a large immigrant population that was economically and culturally polarized between urban capital and rural interior. Chronicling journeys from the countryside to the capital (*Las luces de Buenos Aires*) and from Buenos Aires to New York (*El tango en Broadway*), Paris (*Cuesta abajo*), and Barcelona (*Tango Bar*), the plots of the Paramount films mobilized desires and anxieties about geographic (and social) mobility that would be rehearsed in Argentine cinema for years to come. Though Hollywood had appropriated Argentina's preeminent tango star, this conjunction of music and themes would provide an opportunity for Argentine filmmakers to challenge the commercial dominance of American cinema in the domestic market and ultimately across Latin America.

This suggestive but incomplete account of the effects of Gardel's Paramount musicals in Latin American film histories signals an affective overinvestment in the figure of the singer, a desire to claim the significance of his films for national culture in spite of their Hollywood provenance. Such rhetoric is also typical in descriptions of Gardel's musical career. In a voluminous array of biographies and cultural histories, he is discussed as both progenitor and embodiment of the tango, whose canonization as the national musical genre paralleled the trajectory of his career as a performer. Gardel's 1917 performance of the first *tango-canción* (tango-song), "Mi noche triste" (My Sad Night), which set bitterly nostalgic lyrics by Pascual Contursi to a *tango-danza* (a type of instrumental dance tune popular in the outlying suburbs and port areas of Buenos Aires), is considered a foundational event for Argentine culture. While the debut of "Mi noche triste" is often constructed as a revelatory leap in the genre's affective power, Pablo Vila has argued that, more than constituting a moment of innovation, it marks the tango's transition from a marginal cultural form to one that captivated

9 John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2000), 37; Domingo di Núbila, *Historia del cine argentino*, vol. 1, *La época de oro* (Buenos Aires: Editores del Jilguero, 1998), 107. Translations from Spanish-language sources are mine, unless otherwise noted.

10 Quoted in Julián Barsky and Osvaldo Barsky, *Gardel: La biografía* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2004), 495.

11 Donald Castro, "The Massification of the Tango: The Electronic Media, the Popular Theatre, and the Cabaret from Contursi to Perón, 1917–1955," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 18 (1999): 95.

12 See D'Lugo, "Authorship, Globalization, and the New Identity."

the middle classes.¹³ Similarly, Gardel's acting career is overwhelmingly described in terms of a personal virtuosity that reshaped national culture and commanded international attention. Following Vila's discussion of Argentine popular music as a hegemonic formation—that is, a cultural field constituted through a dynamic process of negotiation between class groups struggling for social dominance—I argue that Gardel's stardom cannot be reduced to the biography of an exceptional performer who served as a cultural unifier and ambassador. Rather, his career is inextricable from economic and technological developments in the cultural sphere—the availability of affordable phonographs and records, the rise of radio broadcasting, and the transition to sound film—and the uneven manifestations of these developments in centers and peripheries of cultural production. While the commercial success of Gardel's films helped stabilize Paramount at a time when it was buffeted by economic depression and the uncertainties attending the transition to sound, in Argentina it gave rise to hopes that a mass-mediated musical culture (forged partly through Gardel's popularity) could become the basis for a national film industry previously precluded by Hollywood's market dominance.

In order to account for the singer's unusual trajectory, I will situate his stardom within a transnational and cross-media history, reading the consolidation of Argentina's national culture on radio waves and cinema screens against a moment of technological rupture in the American film industry; this is a moment whose implications have yet to be fully explored by film scholars. One exception is Nataša Durovicová, who argues that the transition to sound is anything but an ephemeral, atypical period in Hollywood history; rather, she suggests that “[i]t is out of this very disturbance that the American cinema's relationship to the non-'American'-speaking world has emerged.”¹⁴ The repercussions of Gardel's Paramount musicals suggest that this relationship is more complex than one of unmitigated Hollywood dominance, demonstrating the (profitable) contradictions of an Argentine “national” culture that was consumed and (temporarily) produced beyond the country's borders. In evaluating the effects of Gardel's international stardom on sound film reception and production in Argentina, I will suggest the degree to which technological developments can provoke a renegotiation of cultural hegemonies within and beyond the nation, beginning with an exploration of tango culture and its imbrication with film production and reception in Argentina.

From Orquestas típicas to Phonofilm Shorts: Tango and Film Cultures in Buenos Aires. Gardel's rise to fame is inextricable from the tango's transition from the brothels and low-rent dance halls of Buenos Aires's immigrant districts to the cabarets and movie palaces of the urban center. This shift can be attributed to the rise of mass media and to changes in class structure, both of which reshaped Argentina's national culture in the first decades of the twentieth century. The sanitization and legitimization of the musical genre began around 1910, as wealthy customers arranged to dance

13 Pablo Vila, “Tango to Folk: Hegemonies and Popular Identity Construction in Argentina,” *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 10 (1991): 107–140.

14 Durovicová, “Translating America,” 139.

tango, first in private homes and increasingly in cabarets that sought to duplicate the sophisticated entertainment experience available on the Continent, attracting sons of the urban elites who had spent time abroad.¹⁵ In addition to developing a taste for European-style nightlife, these young oligarchs left behind tango steps and melodies among the foreign aristocracy, and within a few years a modified version of the dance was scandalizing Paris and New York.¹⁶ (It is worth noting that tango was already a hybrid form with European elements before it traveled back to the Continent. One of the musical genres from which it emerged was the Cuban *habanera*, itself a successor to the nineteenth-century *contradanza*, which had roots in French country dances and acquired a syncopated rhythm known as the *ritmo de tango*, likely from Afro-Cuban drummers who played in a polyrhythmic style.)¹⁷ The tango also enjoyed a vogue in Hollywood films, most famously in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, 1921), which showcased Rudolph Valentino's skills as a dancer and his exotic, transgressive masculinity, though the cultural authenticity of the film's presentation of the tango was dubious at best.¹⁸

In Buenos Aires, a city dominated by European immigrants that prided itself on its cosmopolitanism, this validation of a national form by European and American tastes was a significant development that paved the way for a broader acceptance of the form, especially among the middle classes.¹⁹ Gardel's popularization of the tango-canción, beginning in 1917, was also a factor. As this form of the tango lent itself more easily to being sung or whistled, its consumption was less wedded to the dance and the marginal space of the cabaret. The tango-canción was thus free to romanticize its marginal origins through lyrics that narrated the urban experience of the lower classes and were peppered with *lunfardo*, the Italian-laced argot of Buenos Aires's immigrant communities.²⁰ Despite the relative opacity of *lunfardo* slang for upper-class or rural audiences and for the tango's Spanish-speaking admirers abroad, the tango-canción's lyrical and narrative aspects were felt to imbue it with emotional qualities that transcended social and national boundaries. Tellingly, French reviewers of Gardel's Paris performances in 1931 felt that the emotional intensity of the singer's performances was enhanced by his use of Spanish, and they expressed doubts about his decision to include numbers sung in French in the program.²¹ Marvin D'Lugo suggests that the lyrical economy of the tango, combined with the popular consumption of gramophone recordings, constituted "a form of address that enabled new local audiences

15 Donald Castro, "Popular Culture as a Source for the Historian: Why Carlos Gardel?" *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 5 (1986): 148.

16 Blas Matamoro, *La ciudad del tango: Tango histórico y sociedad* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1982), 80–86.

17 Ellen Koskoff, ed., "Latin Caribbean Music," *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 3 (London: Routledge, 2000), 791.

18 See Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 150–198. Barsky and Barsky (*Gardel*, 655) point out the incongruity of Valentino's rural gaucho costume in the urban setting of the dance hall where he performs in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

19 Collier, *Life, Times, and Music*, 57–58.

20 Vila, "Tango to Folk," 112–115.

21 Collier, *Life, Times, and Music*, 180.

and those beyond Argentina to identify their own personal scenarios with the universal sentiments of nostalgia, displacement, betrayal, and loss that were at the heart of the lyrical tango.²² Gardel's national and international popularity was attributed to an innate ability to express these affective elements. Gardel's stardom worked to unify popular taste by simultaneously expressing and perpetuating the tango's themes of poverty, frustrated love, and longing for one's place of origin; even culturally distanced listeners could appreciate these themes, without translation.

The tango's transition from suburbs to city center, and from a marginal to a mass audience, was catalyzed in part by the criminalization of prostitution in 1919, which effectively shut down the portside red-light districts from which it had emerged. By 1929, a series of labor strikes had succeeded in winning concessions from the oligarchic government, including legislation that shortened working hours, promoting the rise of a new leisure culture that lessened the spatial divide between middle and working classes through the development of new entertainment districts along the newly widened Corrientes Avenue and in Plaza Once.²³ Strong links between the musical form and moviegoing practices in Buenos Aires were evident by 1924, when downtown movie palaces began to hire *orquestas típicas*, or house tango orchestras, to accompany film projections.²⁴ These performers were often a greater draw for spectators than the films themselves, especially for women, whose consumption of live tango performances in cabarets would have been discouraged as immoral.²⁵ By the time *The Divine Lady* (Frank Lloyd, 1929) premiered as the first talking feature screened in Argentina, the tango was ubiquitous in the city center, in the cinemas, and on the airwaves.

The emergence of radio, and later sound film, helped make Gardel a national icon at the same time that the media worked to construct tango as a quintessentially Argentine musical form. His performances on the radio, which was rapidly becoming an affordable consumer medium by the late 1920s, were at once a strategic career move for the singer and a cultural coup for the broadcast companies. The exorbitant salary that Gardel received to appear on Radio Prieto beginning in 1926 signaled the importance of high-profile performers for the promotion of the emerging medium, as well as the economic opportunities its popularity would provide for musicians.²⁶ As Donald Castro notes, Gardel's musical recordings were among the most popular of their time, but they were accessible and affordable only to affluent, urban segments of the population. By contrast, radio could access a "respectable" female audience in the middle-class home. The medium was also penetrating the interior of the country, following the introduction of the tango by traveling theater groups that performed the

22 D'Lugo, "Early Cinematic Tangos," 11.

23 Tamara Falicov, "Argentine Cinema and the Construction of National Popular Identity, 1930–1942," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 18 (1998): 65.

24 Jorge Finkielman, *The Film Industry in Argentina: An Illustrated Cultural History* (London: McFarland, 2001), 94–95.

25 Florencia Garramuño, *Modernidades primitivas: Tango, samba y nación* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007), 210.

26 Castro, "Popular Culture," 152–153.

sainete, a comedic theatrical form somewhat analogous to vaudeville.²⁷ Radio greatly expanded the geographic and class base of Gardel's admirers, even as his established popularity raised the profile of the medium.

The production of a sense of cultural consensus through the consumption of popular radio broadcasts occurred concurrently with the intervention of emerging and expanding mass media. Tamara Falicov suggests that in this period "the media fostered a popular culture of 'common sentiments.' Local newspapers, the cinema, and radio helped to forge a collective identity amongst barrio inhabitants and began to link the working class and the petty bourgeoisie in the urban neighborhoods."²⁸ Falicov goes on to note the importance of popular industrial cinema, which interpellated the lower classes and functioned as a forum for social critique during the 1930s and 1940s, a period when the lower echelons of society were politically subdued.²⁹ Yet the industry that would produce such films was still an unrealized ambition as Argentina entered the 1930s.

In a preliminary effort to concretize this ambition a year after the Hollywood sound feature had made its debut in Buenos Aires, Eduardo Morera enlisted Carlos Gardel to appear in a series of short optical-sound films, each depicting the performance of a tango, waltz, or folk ballad. The simple structure and visual conventions of the 1930 shorts indicate both the technical constraints under which they were filmed and their close relation to the popular musical recordings and live performances upon which they were intended to capitalize.³⁰ This proximity is emphasized by a series of introductory dialogues between Gardel and the tango luminaries who helped pen his musical numbers: Francisco Canaro, Celedonio Flores, and Enrique Santos Discépolo.³¹ Though shot with an optical DeForest Phonofilm camera, the 1930 Gardel films are more akin to early Vitaphone shorts than to the sophisticated talking features produced by US studios, a type of production in which Gardel would soon begin to appear. (Charles Wolfe has pointed out that far from being merely "canned theater," many Vitaphone shorts elaborated a uniquely cinematic decoupage through multiple-camera shooting.³² Variations of shot scale do occur in the Gardel shorts, but their style is much simpler and their mode of production more rudimentary.)

Shot on a makeshift stage erected inside a converted garage belonging to Morera's employer, the prolific newsreel company Cinematografía Valle, the films' staging echoes the theatrical context of a live performance.³³ Gardel sings from a standing position or appears seated with two guitarists, directly facing the camera from within

27 Castro, "Massification of the Tango," 95.

28 Falicov, "Argentine Cinema," 66.

29 *Ibid.*, 61.

30 Eduardo Morera recalled that the camera had to be isolated in a glass box, while the walls were insulated with damp cloth to block out noise. Eduardo Morera, interviewed by Ariel Fontanet, "Gardel ganó las grandes batallas después de muerto," *La maga*, August 1–5, 1995, quoted in Barsky and Barsky, *Gardel*, 496–497.

31 Luciano Monteagudo and Verónica Bucich, *Carlos Gardel and the First Argentinean "Talkies"* (Chicago: Chicago Latino Film Festival, 2001), 114–126.

32 Charles Wolfe, "Vitaphone Shorts and *The Jazz Singer*," *Wide Angle* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1990): 58–78.

33 Mariano Calistro et al., eds., *Reportaje al cine argentino: Los pioneros del sonoro* (Buenos Aires: America Norildis Editores, 1978), 282–283.

a flat proscenium space. The sole departures from static framing come with a series of cuts from medium shot to close-up roughly midway through a number of the shorts. Only the earliest film, *Viejo smoking* (Old Tuxedo; Eduardo Morera, 1930), includes a cursory narrative. Simple alternations between a few camera angles elaborate the action and its setting: Gardel's character is about to be evicted from a cheap boarding-house, and he laments his situation in a brief dialogue with the landlady's servant and then in song, clutching a tuxedo jacket which he refuses to pawn, a symbolic item with strong upper-class connotations.³⁴

Even *Viejo smoking*, an experiment in synchronized sound that proved too elaborate to repeat, would have seemed crude by the standards of the Hollywood industry, where the transition to sound was well advanced by the end of 1930. The shorts' technical and formal primitivism reveals the undeniable technological lag between centers and peripheries of film production, as well as the idiosyncratic strategy used to bridge this gap in Argentina. The shorts belong to a self-consciously seminal moment for Argentine film production, when producers seized on the opportunity presented by cinema's new technological capacities to capitalize on the desires of a mass audience to hear and see the performers of tango. Like Gardel's genre-shaping performance of "Mi noche triste," the production of the 1930 shorts is discussed as a foundational moment for national culture, marking the end of sound film's prehistory in Argentina. In recruiting Gardel and other tango performers to make sound shorts for commercial distribution, Morera was gambling on the tango-canción as an aspect of national culture uniquely suited to draw a popular audience curious about film's developing capabilities.

Morera's shorts were early intimations of the privileged position tango culture would come to occupy in national attempts to consolidate a popular cinema audience, achieve a critical mass of production capital, and concretize an industrial infrastructure, goals which had eluded filmmakers in the silent period.³⁵ In an article on the shorts in the December 1930 issue of *Aconcagua* magazine, Morera is quoted as stating, "If these productions have the success that we hope for, by virtue of the popularity of the performers, then we will contemplate the realization of larger ventures, which at the moment would be too difficult and dangerous in every sense." The article's author adds, "[T]his could be the long-awaited opportunity for the formation of a true film industry in Argentina."³⁶ However, the immediate commercial impact of the 1930 shorts seems to have been minor; after they premiered as a group, the films most commonly preceded one of Gardel's foreign-made Paramount features, and *Viejo smoking* was paired with Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931).³⁷

Such a pairing would tend to blur the distinction between a domestically produced film and a Hollywood import, linking them through their musical content and star appearances rather than emphasizing their respective countries of production. In

34 Castro details the cultural associations of the *smoking* in "Popular Culture," 149.

35 Abel Posadas, Mónica Landro, and Marta Speroni, *Cine sonoro argentino, 1933–1943* (Buenos Aires: El Calafate Editores, 2005), 29–31.

36 Conrado E. Eggers-Lecour, "En la Argentina, se empieza a filmar verdaderas películas pariantes," *Aconcagua* 11 (December 1930), reprinted in Hamlet Peluso and Eduardo Visconti, *Carlos Gardel y la prensa mundial* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 1990), 137.

37 Monteagudo and Bucich, *First Argentinean "Talkies,"* 96–97.

addition, the production values of the Morera shorts would contrast less sharply with those of a Paramount musical starring Gardel than those of an English-language Hollywood film. Gardel's films for the studio were relatively cheaply and hastily produced; the staging of their musical numbers is Spartan compared to that of contemporaneous English-language productions. They often include only a few camera setups, and almost entirely lack chorus dancers or elaborately synchronized choreography. Referring to the most elaborate number in any of the Gardel musicals, *Tango Bar*'s "Por una cabeza," meaning "[lost] by a head" (an allusion to horseracing, one of Gardel's off-screen passions), a *Variety* reviewer notes that the director John Reinhardt "uses a line of girls in a couple of spots and a bit of production here and there," but also points out the reuse of extras in the same scene, which detracts from the effect.³⁸ Gardel himself dances the tango, with only modest skill, in just two films, *Cuesta abajo* and *Tango Bar*.

Most strikingly, Gardel's performance of the immensely popular tango "Volver" (Return) in 1935's *El día que me quieras* is nearly as simple as the Morera musical shorts in terms of staging and is introduced with as little narrative justification (Figures 2 and 3). In the scene, Gardel stands alone against a railing, with a rear projection of a bobbing ocean horizon behind him, his eyeline at a slightly oblique angle. (By contrast, in the Morera shorts, Gardel and his guitarists look directly into the lens.) The only prelude to his vocal performance is a pair of rhythmically spoken lines ("to return . . . to depart again, as always, leaving behind my heart"). The three-minute sequence is composed of only four shots of the singer, alternating between medium-long shots and medium close-ups. Gardel's reported refusal to synchronize his onscreen movements to a previous recording of his voice—he insisted that music and image be recorded simultaneously³⁹—may partially account for the extreme simplicity of this sequence. Yet it may also suggest Hollywood's unwillingness to invest in high budgets for films that would, with few exceptions, only be screened overseas, regardless of their demonstrated profitability in those markets.⁴⁰



Figures 2 and 3. Two simple camera setups are used for Gardel's climactic number "Volver," performed aboard the ocean liner in *El día que me quieras* (Éxito Spanish Productions / Paramount, 1935).

38 Review of *Tango Bar* (*Variety*).

39 Barsky and Barsky, *Gardel*, 711–712.

40 Cinemas that screened Spanish-language films did exist in the United States, most notably in New York and Los Angeles. For a discussion of the latter case, see Colin Gunckel, "The War of the Accents: Spanish Language Hollywood Films in Mexican Los Angeles," *Film and History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 325–343.

The theatrical character of the sequence also evokes the unusual mode of spectatorship that these films solicited in Latin America and elsewhere, especially at premieres, at which audiences repeatedly demanded that Gardel's musical numbers be rewound and shown again, interrupting the narrative progression of the films' melodramatic plots. *Nuevo mensajero Paramount* reprinted an enthusiastic telegram describing the 1934 premiere of *Cuesta abajo* at a Buenos Aires theater: "DELIRIOUS PUBLIC APPLAUSE INTERRUPTED SHOWING THREE TIMES TO REPEAT SCENES WHERE GARDEL SINGS. SUCH ENTHUSIASM HAS RARELY BEEN SEEN HERE." The article goes on to claim that such a response to Gardel's films had in fact already manifested itself in "Bogotá and other South American capitals."⁴¹ A similar telegram was printed after the Buenos Aires premiere of *El tango on Broadway*, stating that the screening was stopped three times for such repetitions.⁴² These glowing reports are clearly promotional; Paramount may have exaggerated the rarity with which such interruptions occurred during film presentations in Latin America; given the dearth of reception studies for this period, it is difficult to confirm Paramount's claims. Yet the recurrence of interruptions after Gardel's musical numbers suggests an unusual, and unusually intense, audience relationship to the films.

This mode of consuming a musical number is somewhat akin to replaying a phonograph record or demanding an encore at a live performance. It operates on the unit of the song rather than the cinematic sequence (which would tend to become inseparable from its relationship to other scenes, whether musical or nonmusical, in an effectively "integrated" musical), suggesting the extent to which Gardel's stardom as a recording artist and radio performer continued to inform audience reactions to his films. *Nuevo mensajero Paramount* focused on this dimension of Gardel's performance, observing in 1933 that "[i]t is not necessary to state that the marvelous voice which has made Carlos Gardel one of the best-selling recording artists of Latin America is heard frequently in the new songs of both *Espérame* and *Melodía de arrabal*."⁴³ This form of spectatorship does not necessarily suggest a naive audience unequipped to comprehend or enjoy narrative sound film; rather, it indicates an impassioned, yet critical, response to the cultural incoherence of films employing Argentine songs, dances, and slang but produced by an American studio shooting in France or on Long Island. Confronted with representations experienced as inaccurate or inconsistent, spectators selectively focused on the emotional and cultural authenticity of Gardel's musical numbers. *Nuevo mensajero Paramount* reprinted a suggestive review of *Las luces de Buenos Aires* from Barcelona's *El mundo deportivo* which stated that "Gardel realizes a decisive triumph, especially in the tango from the tavern ["Tomo y obligo," meaning "I drink and oblige (you to drink)"], the one which for the feeling that he puts into it, produces in the auditorium an indefinable sensation which reaches the very depths. This tango is the definitive element of the film which imbues it with a formidable

41 *Nuevo mensajero Paramount*, October 1934, 147.

42 *Nuevo mensajero Paramount*, April 1935, 7.

43 *Nuevo mensajero Paramount*, January 1933, 3.

power of attraction.⁴⁴ Audience demands for cinematic “encores” suggest that these affectively charged vocal performances were experienced as transcendent moments that redeemed indiscriminate mixtures of cultural elements. In 1934, Homero Manzi, a tango lyricist and harsh critic of Gardel’s Paramount ventures, lampooned audiences’ susceptibility to the singer’s musical numbers:

[Gardel’s] first film *Las luces de Buenos Aires* was an absurd thing, where they played gaucho melancholy against a French pampa. . . . However, it was enough for Gardel to sing “Tomo y obligo” for the film to have a triumphant run throughout the whole Spanish-speaking world. The same thing happened with *Melodía de arrabal*, where two tangos saved a thousand meters apparently filmed in Marseille cantinas and streets of a geographical origin hard to determine.⁴⁵

This emphasis on emotionally stirring musical performance rather than the visual spectacle of elaborate production numbers would persist, signaling both economic limitations on musical productions for the Latin American market (whether produced in the context of the fleeting Hollywood foreign-language production or the nascent film industries of Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil) and the affective power attributed to popular song, especially when delivered by an established recording star. This phenomenon prefigures the broad popularity of later Argentine and Mexican musicals across Latin America, where their cultural content was experienced as at once exotic and recognizably authentic.⁴⁶ Gardel’s musicals may have set a precedent for such transcontinental consumption of Latin American musical cultures on film; they certainly demonstrated the tango star’s massive transnational appeal, grounded in the sentimental power of his vocal performances.

From Buenos Aires to Paramount. Celebrated as the innovator, synthesizer, and ambassador of Argentine culture, the expressive qualities of Gardel’s face and voice are often described as having a strangely organic relationship to the musical form. Simon Collier, Gardel’s most comprehensive English-language biographer to date, writes, “His richly emotional voice and his deep rhythmic sense were clearly tailor-made for such songs [as ‘Mi noche triste’].”⁴⁷ Similarly, historian Arthur Tienken describes Gardel as “the vessel and forger, so to speak, of a sentimental climate common to the Latin mentality. The emotional intensity of his renderings, his unique treatment of the lyrics coupled to that incomparable voice, made him into a much-beloved idol during his life.”⁴⁸ Though his language is strangely ethnocentric—describing a continent-wide, rather than a national, appeal—Tienken’s description succinctly evokes Gardel’s imagined status as a figure of cultural synthesis and class consensus. This

44 *Nuevo mensajero Paramount*, January 1932, 14.

45 Homero Manzi, “El error de Gardel,” *Revista micrófono*, September 20, 1934, reprinted in Peluso and Visconti, *Carlos Gardel*, 334.

46 D’Lugo, “Authorship, Globalization, and the New Identity,” 102–107.

47 Collier, *Life, Times, and Music*, 65.

48 Arthur Tienken, “Carlos Gardel: Fifty Years Later,” *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 7 (1988): 309–310.

idealization finds its correlate in the singer's demonstrable popularity across economic strata and geographic divisions in Argentina, as well as abroad.

While such understandings of Gardel's career problematically construct the singer as a locus of a pure and universal expressivity, his successful tours of Spain and France, beginning in 1923, along with his film and radio career in the United States, give the construction of his appeal as "universal" some measure of historical support. Similarly, the massive popularity of Gardel's recordings across Latin America and Europe were taken to indicate both Argentine culture's irreducible specificity and the worthiness of its global diffusion. Gardel's director Eduardo Morera stated, "I believe that although the public always appreciated and praised him for being a good singer, Gardel triumphed fundamentally because he had lived in France. The Argentine always respected a triumph in Paris more than one on Calle Boedo [a Buenos Aires entertainment district]. If Carlitos had only lived here, one would have said: 'How well could he sing if he lives around the corner from my house and I see him in the café every day?'"⁴⁹

The singer thus became indispensable to the imagination of a national culture that could aspire to an international profile, one capable of bridging the social gap between the immigrant working class of European origin and the Europe-oriented oligarchy of Buenos Aires. Gardel's stardom also crystallized fantasies of class unity in a society that remained rigidly stratified, despite the fact that wealthy men who frequented cabarets and immigrant dockworkers might be whistling the same tango. According to Pablo Vila, the increasing taste for tango among middle- and upper-class audiences in the 1910s and 1920s created a sense among the lower classes that their experiences and cultural forms were acknowledged and appreciated by those in power.⁵⁰ In a similar vein, Blas Matamoro refers to a "tango of the agreement," an expression of the liberal-democratic consensus achieved with the dominance of the Radical Party over both the oligarchy and the anarcho-syndicalist currents manifest in Argentine political culture.⁵¹

This tenuous accord became strained in conditions of economic depression, and in 1930 it was shattered with the successful military coup against Hipólito Yrigoyen, which initiated *la década infame*, an "infamous decade" of military rule, fraudulent elections, and political repression.⁵² Yet, even in these uncertain conditions, Matamoro writes that Gardel's star persona functioned as "the very personalization of the 'agreement,' the illegitimate child of an immigrant French washerwoman, who rose socially from the humble suburb [*arrabal*] to international society, recognized not only by the Argentine oligarchy but also by kings and the European nobility, and who, with his promotion, vindicated all those who were not able to ascend, succeeding for them symbolically."⁵³ Like accounts of Gardel's virtuoso performance style, Matamoro's analysis both describes and duplicates the manner in which Gardel's biography passed

49 Morera, "Gardel ganó las grandes batallas."

50 Vila, "Tango to Folk," 120.

51 Matamoro, *La ciudad del tango*, 73–76, 94–96.

52 David Rock, *Argentina, 1516–1987: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 210–214.

53 Blas Matamoro, trans. and quoted in Vila, "Tango to Folk," 126.

into the cultural imagination. His personal charisma and vocal mastery are credited with rendering the tango truly expressive, popular at home and respected abroad. The singer's popularity across class and national boundaries permits his commentators to subsume renegotiations of national culture and international media markets to his personal trajectory, to some extent obscuring the vexed processes by which the tango became a hegemonic formation.

Just as Gardel's stardom hastened the mass diffusion of radio, and thus of tango culture itself, it would be pivotal in the expansion of a sound film industry shaped by popular music in Argentina. The quickly produced Gardel vehicles were the most profitable component of Paramount's strategy to recapture its hold on foreign markets, which had become precarious with the introduction of sound film. Experiments with dubbing were hampered by technological limitations and differences in dialect. Because the dubbed dialogue in most Hollywood foreign-language versions was spoken in Castilian-accented Spanish, which sounded distinctly foreign to Argentine moviegoers, South America manifested a continent-wide preference for subtitling, despite low literacy rates in many nations.⁵⁴ The dubbing process promiscuously combined bodies and voices from different cultures, and author Jorge Luis Borges famously complained in 1932 that "Hollywood . . . by means of the malignant art called dubbing, proposes monsters that combine the illustrious features of Greta Garbo with the voice of Aldonza Lorenzo" (the real name of Don Quixote's love interest, whom he addresses as Dulcinea, in Cervantes's novel).⁵⁵ By emphasizing the grotesqueness of fusing the undistinguished voice of the anonymous dubber with the recognizable face of Garbo (equated with Quixote's careless choice of a coarse peasant girl to embody his romantic ideal), Borges's criticism supports Nataša Durovicová's suggestion that the foreign-language versions register an initial resistance to the "synthetic 'transnational' body" created by combining an actor's image with a dubbed voice speaking another language.⁵⁶

Historian Jorge Finkelman notes that the introduction of the competing, and perhaps less intrusive, practice of subtitling in Argentina, at the 1929 premiere of *The Broadway Melody*, failed to counteract the widespread perception of Hollywood's talking pictures as an overt cultural threat. He cites the lyrics of the 1932 tango "Por culpa del cine" (It's the Fault of Cinema), which laments the "fashion for speaking in English" and the tendency of "those who used to whistle a tango" to "go around dancing a foxtrot."⁵⁷ The coming of sound cinema not only ousted orquestas típicas from the cinemas but also boosted the sales of the American popular music heard in the films at the expense of tango recordings. This musical influence made itself felt in Gardel's career as well; never exclusively a tango singer, he also recorded foxtrots and shimmies beginning in the early 1920s, and he even cut a popular Spanish-language version of *The Divine Lady's* title waltz.⁵⁸

54 Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 98.

55 Jorge Luis Borges, quoted in Barsky and Barsky, *Gardel*, 512.

56 Durovicová, "Translating America," 148.

57 Finkelman, *Film Industry in Argentina*, 127–129.

58 *Ibid.*, 118.

Hollywood's attempt to circumvent opposition to English-language sound films through foreign-language productions was short-lived. Although adopted by all the major studios by 1930, foreign-language versions were quickly losing ground to the practice of dubbing by 1932.⁵⁹ A limited number of films in Spanish continued to be made, most notably at Paramount and Fox, but by the next year Paramount began to shift its production policies, and the Joinville studios were transformed into a dubbing operation.⁶⁰ As Ruth Vasey has argued, in the unfavorable economic climate of the Depression years, foreign-language versions generally produced unsatisfactory returns on their modest economic investments since they failed to satisfy audiences expecting the technical fluidity and star performers of English-language Hollywood films.⁶¹

Within this system, Gardel's films were unique in several ways. While most of Hollywood's Spanish-language productions were based on English-language originals, with recycled sets and scripts translated into "standard" Castilian Spanish, the Gardel vehicles were based on original scenarios and featured dialogue spoken in "the Hispano-Argentine language," as Gardel's first contract specified.⁶² However, the Gardel vehicles were not exempt from the processes of cultural mixing and homogenization at work in other foreign-language Hollywood productions. As Marvin D'Lugo has emphasized, Gardel's lyricist Alfredo Le Pera worked to purge Gardel's films of lunfardo, eliminating excessively local verbal content that would be difficult for some audiences to understand and that might tie the films too closely to the Argentine context.⁶³ The Spanish-language remakes made by Paramount in Joinville were often poorly received in Argentina, but Gardel's films were profitable throughout Latin America. New York's Spanish-language daily *La prensa* reported that *Las luces de Buenos Aires* had earned close to a million dollars in its first year of release throughout Latin America and in select markets in the United States.⁶⁴ By Paramount's estimation, revenue from *Melodía de arrabal* had surpassed that of *Las luces de Buenos Aires* by mid-1933, and Gardel's New York-produced films would prove more profitable still, especially in the wake of his premature death.⁶⁵

Despite the popularity of his films, Gardel's future at Paramount was at times uncertain because of the studio's financial instability. Gardel had first begun contract negotiations with Paramount in 1931, at the height of the studio's foray into foreign-language production, and with the assistance of the Chilean director of *Las luces de Buenos Aires*, Adelqui Millar, and the film's scriptwriters, Manuel Romero and Luis Bayón Herrera, he managed to reach an agreement.⁶⁶ Though the film was a relative box-office success, Paramount was in dire financial straits in 1932, and the studio delayed

59 Gaizka S. de Usabel, *The High Noon of American Films in Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 92–96.

60 Waldman, *Paramount in Paris*, xi–xiii.

61 Vasey, *World According to Hollywood*, 96.

62 Collier, *Life, Times, and Music*, 179; see also Gunckel, "The War of the Accents," 334–336.

63 D'Lugo, "Early Cinematic Tangos," 16.

64 Finkelman, *Film Industry in Argentina*, 179; *La prensa* (New York), December 28, 1932.

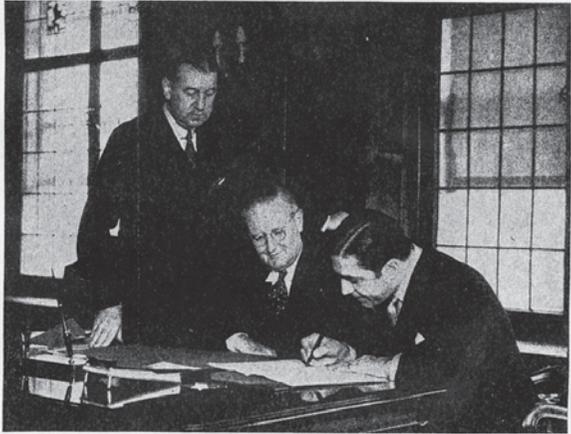
65 Collier, *Life, Times, and Music*, 197.

66 *Ibid.*, 173–180.

CARLOS GARDEL FIRMA CONTRATO PARA FILMAR DOS NUEVAS OBRAS

EL cinematógrafo hispanoparlante está de plácemes! Y con el cinematógrafo hispanoparlante, los señores Exhibidores de los países de habla castellana. No es para menos. La noticia de que Carlos Gardel ha firmado contrato para presentarse en dos nuevas películas, que formarán parte del programa de la Paramount, es de aquéllas ante las cuales tiene que sentirse entusiasmado hasta el más flemático.

Entre los aficionados al cine, tanto de la América Latina como de España, el anuncio de que Carlos Gardel, el aplaudidísimo intérprete de "Cuesta abajo," prepara dos nuevas películas despertará sin duda prometedora expectativa (prometedora muy particularmente para las taquillas); porque las legiones de admiradores con que cuenta el Rey del Tango a ambos lados del Atlántico esperan, y no sin fundamento, que cada vez que la Paramount presente a Gardel en la pantalla sea para demostrar que el muy popular cantante y actor sudamericano es hombre que logra siempre, no sólo hacer cumplida justicia a su fama, sino aumentarla.



Un momento histórico para la cinematografía en castellano es el que nos muestra este grabado: Carlos Gardel, el espléndido actor de "Las Luces de Buenos Aires," "Cuesta abajo" y otras películas que han recorrido en triunfo los teatros del mundo hispanoparlante, firma nuevo contrato en presencia de don John W. Hitch, Jr., de la Paramount, y de su abogado don Eugenio Sperry.

Figure 4. The *Nuevo mensajero Paramount* touts Gardel's contract for *El día que me quieras* and *Tango Bar* (courtesy of the New York Public Library).

several months before approving the production of *Espérame*, *Melodía de arrabal*, and the short *La casa es seria*, all to be directed by Louis Gasnier, who had made *The Perils of Pauline* and *The Exploits of Elaine* for Pathé in 1914. The industry's waning interest in foreign-language productions may have contributed to Paramount's sometimes tepid attitude toward its bankable star. Even after *Melodía de arrabal* topped the success of *Las luces de Buenos Aires*, Paramount had its doubts about Gardel and, more broadly, about the feasibility of continuing production specifically for Spanish-speaking markets.

Paramount was placed in court-ordered receivership in January 1933. In grave economic trouble, the studio sold its Astoria facility before briefly going bankrupt in 1935.⁶⁷ In the first months of 1934, it was unclear how this would affect Gardel's plans to shoot further films in New York, where he had already agreed to do a series of radio broadcasts for NBC. The singer even approached Fox during this period, but was unable to secure the \$50,000 fee he requested.⁶⁸ Gardel's renewed negotiations with Paramount were ultimately more fruitful, culminating in a March 1934 contract for two films, with an option for four more; *Cuesta abajo*, *El tango en Broadway*, *Tango Bar*, and *El día que me quieras* would all be completed in New York. Negotiated with the help of Le Pera, the contract made Gardel head of his own production company, the Paramount subsidiary Éxito Spanish Productions.⁶⁹ The studio publicized the contract in *Nuevo mensajero Paramount*, an announcement that seems to have marked a shift in their marketing of Gardel (Figure 4). Publicity for his first three feature films in *Nuevo mensajero Paramount* had emphasized female costars such as Gloria Guzmán

67 I. G. Edmonds and Reiko Mimura, *Paramount Pictures and the People Who Made Them* (London: Tantivy Press, 1980), 196–205.

68 Collier, *Life, Times, and Music*, 222.

69 Barsky and Barsky, *Gardel*, 674–675.

and Imperio Argentina, who had already appeared in Spanish-language remakes of English-language productions. But after signing the contract, Gardel was billed as “among Spanish-speaking film actors, the most popular and the biggest draw for audiences” and “the actor and singer whose primacy in terms of popularity on the Spanish-language screen no other can dispute.”⁷⁰

This increased focus on Gardel, who began to appear more frequently on the cover of the house organ, indicates the degree to which Gardel’s appearances for Paramount in New York were a mutually beneficial arrangement. In a canny bit of cross-promotion, the studio indirectly reaped the benefits of the hit recordings of musical numbers from his films, while he gained increased exposure and income as an international film star.⁷¹ Ironically, Gardel’s value to Paramount would be definitively confirmed after his sudden death in June 1935, in a plane crash in Medellín, Colombia, while on a Latin American tour to promote his Paramount films and RCA Victor recordings. The fans that flocked to pay tribute to Gardel by seeing *El día que me quieras* and *Tango Bar* would make these films two of Paramount’s most profitable Latin American releases to date. An internal United Artists document devoted to Argentina points out that “Paramount would have had a very disastrous year in 1935, if it had not been for the untimely death of Carlos Gardel, considered the ‘Bing Crosby’ of the Argentine. . . . Since his death, the value of his pictures has increased so tremendously, that perhaps 30% of Paramount’s 1935 business can be traced directly to his pictures.”⁷² This impressive figure surpassed the revenues of Paramount’s top two English-language box office successes in Latin America.⁷³

Gardel’s value to the studio was thus belatedly confirmed, but his cultural legacy was in a sense left hanging in the balance. His biographers, along with film historians, have continued to speculate on whether he would have progressed to English-language films and conquered the American market, or returned to Argentina to film in the burgeoning industry. The singer’s truncated narrative of international travels and triumphant returns found expression in the popular cinema his Hollywood career simultaneously stimulated and overshadowed.

Narratives of Exile and Return: Gardel’s Paramount Musicals and National Tango Films.

The 1931 release of Gardel’s first Paramount feature, *Las luces de Buenos Aires*, was not only understood as an exciting development in Gardel’s international career, but also considered, through a strange cultural displacement, to be a milestone for Argentine film culture. In addition to drawing unprecedented popular audiences, the film “served as a [technical] example for all who had the idea of sound film without records between their ears.”⁷⁴ Gardel’s appearance in *Las luces de Buenos Aires* led his former musical partner and business manager, José Razzano, to declare that “our tango

70 *Nuevo mensajero Paramount*, June 1934, 91; July 1934, 99.

71 Collier, *Life, Times, and Music*, 229.

72 United Artists, “Report on South America,” November 29, 1935, quoted in de Usabel, *High Noon*, 96.

73 *Ibid.*, 96.

74 Claudio España, *Medio siglo de cine: Argentina Sono Film* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Abril, 1984), 31.

and our songs should be the basis of the Argentine sound film. . . . The audience in our theatres is not satisfied with the music of American waltzes and foxtrots. It's necessary to offer them something characteristic, which more easily reaches the emotions."⁷⁵ Answering this call, *¡Tango!* premiered in 1933 as the first domestically produced feature with synchronized dialogue and optical sound. Florencia Garramuño suggests that the film's producers sought to institute a "star system" based on the Hollywood model, featuring popular tango singers Libertad Lamarque and Azucena Maizani.⁷⁶ The fact that the 1933 premiere of *¡Tango!* took place by special arrangement in a theater contracted to show only Paramount films bears out this conjunction of dependency and opportunity in the relationship between Hollywood cinema and the nascent Argentine film industry.⁷⁷

A second optical-sound feature, *Los tres berretines*, was first screened a few days after *¡Tango!* Based on a comedic sainete production of the same name (and starring the same performer, comedian Luis Sandrini, who delivered his lines with a humorous stutter in most roles), *Los tres berretines* owed more to a national theatrical tradition than to Gardel's Hollywood musicals.⁷⁸ Yet its popularity also depended on the fact that films drawing on tango culture (one of the title's "three pastimes") had broad audience appeal. While some commentators objected to the adaptation of a theatrical production as uncinematic, or rejected the eminently popular content of the film, a review of *Los tres berretines* in the Buenos Aires daily *La prensa* insisted that "[w]e must recognize the value of this native production . . . which reveals that in this country it is possible to make films worthy of being exhibited not only in downtown theaters—closed until now to this type of production—but also overseas."⁷⁹

As the first films of the two most significant studios of the industry's "golden age," Argentina Sono Film and Lumitón, *¡Tango!* and *Los tres berretines* clearly have symbolic significance for national film history. Their success indicated the extent to which tango films could attain financial solvency by interpellating a popular audience with formulas partly modeled on Paramount's successful Gardel vehicles. Though he perhaps overestimates the studio's influence, Harry Waldman thus seems partially justified in writing that "[a]fter Gardel's death in 1935, Argentina, often emulating Paramount's production style, became a prime exporter of musical comedy throughout the continent."⁸⁰ The Argentine film industry was expanding rapidly, though its tango films still faced competition from Paramount. In 1934, Homero Manzi speculated with a touch of paranoia that studio executives were rushing the production of Gardel's films because they were concerned about competition from Argentina Sono Film's third production,

75 "Gardel trae de nuevo el sabor de la canción porteña," *La nación*, September 13, 1931, reprinted in Peluso and Visconti, *Carlos Gardel*, 162.

76 Garramuño, *Modernidades primitivas*, 213.

77 España, *Medio siglo de cine*, 36.

78 Claudio España et al., eds., *Cine argentino: Industria y clasicismo* (Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2000), 41.

79 "Es buen aporte a la cinematografía argentina *Los tres berretines*," *La prensa* (Buenos Aires), May 20, 1933, quoted in España, *Cine argentino*, 48.

80 Waldman, *Paramount in Paris*, 121.

Riachuelo (Brook; Luis Moglia Barth, 1934), starring Sandrini.⁸¹ While it is difficult to determine whether the Hollywood studio really had a clear enough understanding of film production in Argentina to factor it into their marketing strategy, they would have been right to be nervous about *Riachuelo*: the film was Argentina Sono Film's first substantial commercial success.⁸²

Currie K. Thompson suggests an even more direct link between Gardel's international film career and early sound productions in Argentina, going so far as to interpret the narrative of *¡Tango!* as a possible allegory for Gardel's personal trajectory and as an expression of the Argentine public's desire for him to resume cultural production within the borders of the nation.⁸³ The rather schematic plot—a young singer (Alberto Gómez) seeks fame in Paris and falls in love with an accomplished tango performer (Libertad Lamarque), but finds happiness only when reunited with his old sweetheart (Tita Merello) in Buenos Aires—does evoke Gardel's international wanderings. As Thompson points out, it also bears a striking resemblance to the later Gardel vehicle *Cuesta abajo*, though the counterpart to Lamarque's character, played by Mona Maris, is portrayed as a perverse femme fatale rather than an ambitious performer. It would be reductive to suggest a direct relationship between Gardel's career and the narrative trope of return that Claudio España calls the “*vuelta al pago*” or “*regreso al hogar*,” which has multiple antecedents in Argentine popular culture, including silent films, popular novels, nostalgic *gauchesca* poetry, and tango lyrics.⁸⁴ However, it is striking how consistently Gardel's films draw on and perpetuate the circulation of imagined cultural trajectories. Fantasies of movement across class and geographic boundaries, tempered by an eventual return to an authentic place of origin, were central to Gardel's persona, complicating his status as an icon of national culture and suggesting the eminently transnational character of Argentine culture itself. This ambivalence leads Marvin D'Lugo to consider Gardel's career as exemplary of the “‘transnational,’ diasporic, nomadic and ‘reterritorialized’” strain of the tango identified by Ramón Pielinski in contrast to the tango culture produced and consumed domestically.⁸⁵ Projected by means of emerging mass media, Gardel's performances moved national and foreign audiences, seeming to bridge class and cultural difference. Yet these oppositions reassert themselves in a critical understanding of Gardel's career that excavates the lingering tensions inherent to an apparent cultural consensus.

If Gardel's popularity codified a version of national culture invested in the tango's hybrid origins and cemented a tenuous class “agreement,” his films revolve around narratives of personal reconciliation and upward mobility. In the Paramount musicals, economic inequality and personal immorality are the stuff of intrigue, not social critique. As is customary in Hollywood films, heterosexual love transcends class

81 Homero Manzi, “El error de Gardel” (1934), reprinted in Peluso and Visconti, *Carlos Gardel*, 334.

82 Finkielman, *Film Industry in Argentina*, 162–163.

83 Currie K. Thompson, “Remaking Buenos Aires: Argentine Film from ‘Tango’ to ‘Kilómetro 111,’” *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities* 21, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 24–25.

84 The word *pago* connotes a gaucho's home base; *hogar* simply means “home.” España, *Cine argentino*, 31.

85 D'Lugo, “Early Cinematic Tangos,” 10.

distinctions, geographical displacements, and (before full enforcement of the Production Code in 1934) criminal acts, to the delight of popular audiences. Argentine scriptwriter and film critic Ulyses Petit de Murat suggests that, beyond the virtuosic qualities of his musical numbers, “Gardel also reached a popular sensibility with his love stories, delivering an opportune and well-deserved blow, or embracing Mona Maris or Rosita Moreno in an effervescent ecstasy of love.”⁸⁶ At the same time, Gardel’s features inscribe personal narratives within tropes of geographic and social opposition that would have a long life in Argentina’s industrial cinema. Drawing on both Argentine and Hollywood models, tango films insistently opposed a point of personal origin (the unsophisticated rural interior or humble neighborhood) with an urban or foreign site associated with ultramodern decadence, a formula that proved surprisingly popular and persistent. Despite the rather simplistic binaries they establish, Thompson argues that the endurance of these oppositions indicates their resonance within formations of national identity.⁸⁷

In Gardel’s first feature, *Las luces de Buenos Aires*, the entertainment districts of the capital are depicted as dangerously sophisticated, compared to the simple agricultural life of the interior. Structuring films from *Nobleza gaucha* (Gaucho Nobility; originally released in 1915, remade by Sebastián M. Naón in 1937) to *Kilómetro 111* (Mario Soffici, 1933), the threat of an urban environment to female sexual purity has a long history in Argentine cinema.⁸⁸ This reactionary subtext is obvious in the penultimate scene of *Las luces de Buenos Aires*, in which Elvira (Sofía Bozán), who has traveled to Buenos Aires to exploit her singing talents and is about to be kidnapped and seduced by an unscrupulous admirer, is lassoed by two gauchos and returned to the country to be reunited with her lover, Anselmo (Gardel). Reviewers understandably objected to the scene as inauthentic and embarrassing. Miguel Paulino Tato (pseudonym Néstor), the film critic of Argentina’s *El mundo* newspaper, noted in 1931 that the film “had our flavor to it,” but felt that the aforementioned scene, “because of the transcendence which it gave its falsehood, stopped being a mere detail and became an intolerable fault.”⁸⁹ The scene’s absurd exaggeration of stereotypes of rural life was clearly the primary source of audiences’ disappointment, and may also have indicated the extent to which the ending foreclosed the film’s fantasies of geographic and social mobility. However, Florencia Garramuño suggests that the triumph of a patriarchal rural order does not entirely undo the mingling of opposites exemplified by Gardel’s performance of “Tomo y obligo,” a number which drew the attention of the reviewers discussed above. In this sequence, set in a saloon, Anselmo (who has up to this point sung only folk songs associated with the country, just as Gardel did in the early years

86 Ulyses Petit de Murat, quoted in Barsky and Barsky, *Gardel*, 734.

87 Thompson, “Remaking Buenos Aires,” 25.

88 *Ibid.*, 25–27.

89 Néstor (Miguel Paulino Tato), review of *Las luces de Buenos Aires*, *El mundo*, July 13, 1931, reprinted in Peluso and Visconti, *Carlos Gardel*, 142. The conservative Tato became an infamous censor during the last military dictatorship (1976–1983). The Buenos Aires newspaper *La nación* declared that “his time as the face of the Censorship Board is remembered as the worst in its history for Argentine and foreign cinema.” “Miguel Tato, aquel increíble señor Tijeras,” *La nación*, February 28, 1999.



Figure 5. An advertisement for *El tango en Broadway* in the *Nuevo mensajero* Paramount emphasizes both Gardel's impeccable tuxedo and the lights of the Great White Way (courtesy of the New York Public Library).

act of moral recuperation. In *Cuesta abajo*, Madrid becomes a site of personal and financial ruin for Gardel's character, also named Carlos, who is reduced to partnering with rich women in tango dances to support the unfaithful Raquel (Mona Maris). To find happiness, he must return to Buenos Aires to reunite with the innocent girl he left behind in the barrio (Anita Campillo). *El tango en Broadway* presents New York as a site of glamour and dissipation in a more humorous vein (Figure 5). Gardel plays a nightclub owner whose miserly uncle has come to inspect his business practices. After many comic misadventures, the rich relative succumbs to the charms of the city's entertainment district and decides to remain in New York. However, Argentina's Creole culture continues to have an inexorable appeal for the protagonist. Gardel opens the film by serenading a group of blonde dancing girls with the fox-trot "Rubias de New York" (Blondes of New York), but reserves his love for an Argentine singer played by Blanca Vischer (who was in fact of Guatemalan origin), expressing his longing by singing the tango "Soledad" (Solitude) from a balcony.

The conflation of geographic and social mobility with a heterosexual romance between star performers was hardly a novel strategy for Hollywood, but it took on

of his career) condemns his traitorous love with a tango, ironically enlisting a musical genre associated with the moral corruption he decries.⁹⁰

In *Cuesta abajo*, *El tango en Broadway*, *El día que me quieras*, and *Tango Bar*, morally inflected geographic oppositions take on an international scope, with settings in Spain, France, and the United States, as well as on transatlantic ocean liners (nearly the entire running time of *Tango Bar* takes place on such a vessel; an ocean liner also figures more briefly in *El día que me quieras*). These locations reflect what Simon Collier refers to as the "international thrust" of the films, which were targeted to a geographically scattered Spanish-speaking audience.⁹¹ According to Julián and Osvaldo Barsky, Gardel clearly understood Paramount's desire to market the films to "all Spanish-speaking countries," as he put it in a private letter; Gardel argued with scriptwriter Le Pera over his insistence on creating a purely *porteño* (Buenos Aires) atmosphere.⁹²

Gardel's Paramount films tend to code geographic and cultural leaps as dangerous and construct a return to one's place of origin as an

90 Garramuño, *Modernidades primitivas*, 218–224.

91 Collier, *Life, Times, and Music*, 241.

92 Barsky and Barsky, *Gardel*, 710–711. This account conflicts somewhat with D'Lugo's suggestion that Le Pera is primarily responsible for the homogenized, transnational manifestations of tango culture in the Paramount musicals.

uniquely Argentine inflections in Gardel's Paramount films. Like many discussions of Gardel's career, *Melodía de arrabal* figures the tango's transition to respectability through the narrative of a single individual. An inveterate gambler as well as a talented singer, Roberto (Gardel) vows to reform under the tutelage of an innocent music teacher (Imperio Argentina), who is grooming him for a musical career. Making the leap from the low-rent cafés of the outskirts to the lavish stages of the downtown entertainment district, Roberto's ascent is nearly halted when he is blackmailed by a former partner in crime (Jaime Devesa) and subsequently becomes involved in the blackmailer's accidental death. The eleventh-hour intervention of a police officer whom he had once rescued (Manuel París) allows him to make his debut as a legitimate musician and to retain the affections of the respectable middle-class teacher. The more lighthearted *Tango Bar* inverts this paradigm. Traveling on an ocean liner, Ricardo (Gardel) meets a singer (Rosita Moreno) who is the unwilling accomplice of an unscrupulous thief. He becomes disillusioned by her refusal to atone for her actions, but at the end of the film he protects her from the police and accepts her romantically.

Economic distinctions, like past criminality, pose only minor obstacles to romantic fulfillment in Gardel's Paramount films. In *Espérame* (the singer's least popular feature, which perhaps suffered from being incongruously set in Spain), Gardel plays the son of a penniless landowner who must literally sing for his supper. During his performance at a masked ball, he meets an aristocratic girl, Rosario (Goyita Herrero), whose family is similarly destitute. Once they manage to discover each other's identities and social status, he rescues her from a marriage of convenience to a rich, dishonest man. In *El día que me quieras*, Gardel's character, Julio, is the one being forced into a loveless engagement, intended to cement one of his father's business agreements. After being disowned, Julio marries a dancer (Rosita Moreno), who falls mortally ill when she returns to the stage to support their young daughter. Julio steals money from his father to pay for a doctor, but to no avail. The story continues years later in Hollywood, after a montage of newspaper headlines indicates that Julio has become a famous tango singer and film star under an assumed name (to avoid punishment for the theft of his father's money). Having just inherited a fortune upon his father's death, Julio returns to Buenos Aires and facilitates the union of his daughter (also played by Moreno) with a wealthy businessman's son by revealing his true identity and the justification for his criminal act.

These melodramatic fantasies of romance, fame, international travel, and upward social mobility seemed to capture the popular imagination of audiences in Argentina, provided that a certain cultural accuracy and coherence was maintained in the films. As noted above, *Las luces de Buenos Aires* was lambasted for its penultimate scene of kidnapping by lasso; *Espérame* was criticized for portraying peasants attired like Argentine gauchos in the Spanish countryside; and *Melodía de arrabal* was faulted for its French-looking cafés and nondescript streets. The specific irritation expressed by Argentine audiences indicates the ambivalence produced when elements of national culture come to circulate in flows of unequal international exchange. While many Argentines were eager to consume Gardel's musical performances, they were also obliged—since they lacked the technological and economic capacity to refute them—to consume representations that seemed inaccurate or simply inadequate. Contemporary commentators

also seemed keenly aware of the economic threat (as well as the latent opportunity) posed by Gardel's Paramount films. Manzi wrote in 1934,

Another error of Gardel's is to go to France or New York to make films, which doesn't even benefit him economically. In these films he has to act in arbitrary settings, and with insignificant artists that reduce the impact of his actions. . . . Gardel is retarding the progress of the national cinema, since by contracting him, foreign filmmakers are withholding from us the biggest-drawing Spanish-speaking star. This is because the Yankees know that the center of Spanish-language filmmaking is inevitably going to pass into our hands.⁹³

Gardel and Le Pera, who wrote all but one of Gardel's scripts, also expressed frustration at the inauthenticity of the films they made in the Hollywood studio system and the scant preparation and shooting time they were granted—often just two or three weeks.⁹⁴ Barsky and Barsky state that Gardel was anxious to avoid the cultural inconsistencies and technical defects of the Joinville films in his New York productions, but economic constraints, the dearth of Spanish-speaking performers in New York, and a series of cultural miscommunications intervened.⁹⁵ Le Pera complained in a private letter about director John Reinhardt and Paramount's production practices:

El día que me quieras is, or was, the finest film we ever made. Once the script was approved by Paramount, it was the usual: the struggle with the director who doesn't understand anything and falsifies the situations, dehumanizing them or turning them into circuses. Struggling valiantly we managed to obtain an interesting unity for the film, in spite of the director. Then came the inevitable: the massacre of the editing. That's where Creole films die. Dialogues amputated, entire scenes disappeared.⁹⁶

Following a personal appearance at the New York premiere of *Cuesta abajo*, which served as the grand opening of the exclusively Spanish-language cinema Teatro Campanor, Gardel told journalist Mary Spaulding, "Our second film [in New York], *El tango en Broadway*, is much better, and won't be exposed to the same mutilation as *Cuesta abajo*." Despite this optimism, Spaulding wrote, "we agreed that our cinematography will not bear the fruits that it should, until we have complete financial independence: until we can 'walk alone,' without American protection, which imposes on us directors ignorant of our language and our spiritual psychology."⁹⁷

Financial independence in film production, which would always remain precarious, was beginning to develop in Argentina by 1935, when the film industry had expanded sufficiently to produce thirteen films, twice the output of the previous year.⁹⁸

93 Manzi, "El error de Gardel," 334.

94 Barsky and Barsky, *Gardel*, 687.

95 *Ibid.*, 670.

96 Letter to Miguel Angel Moreno, March 24, 1935, trans. and quoted in Monteagudo and Bucich, *First Argentinean "Talkies,"* 104–105.

97 Mary Spaulding, *Carteles*, August 1934, reprinted in Peluso and Visconti, *Carlos Gardel*, 331.

98 Di Núbila, *La época de oro*, 97.

There are signs that Gardel was considering a return to filmmaking in Argentina; a few months before his untimely death, the singer had signed a contract with the Lumitón film studio to appear in a film written by Manuel Romero, the scenarist of *Las luces de Buenos Aires*.⁹⁹ The singer still had an option to appear in additional films with Paramount, and his attempts to learn English during his time in New York suggest he planned to appear in English-language films for the studio, perhaps including the 1935 film *Rumba* with George Raft and Carole Lombard.¹⁰⁰ However, in Spanish-language accounts, the Lumitón contract is taken as a sign that Gardel's frustrations were leading him to abandon Hollywood for good. Like the 1930 shorts, the 1935 contract has taken on an overdetermined status in Argentine film histories.¹⁰¹ Gardel's defection from a national film industry, the first full-scale sound productions of which owed so much to the tango culture in which he was a central figure, seems to demand a recuperative gesture. The attention given by Argentine film historians to his forays into national film production—tentative in the first case, unrealized in the second—suggests a historical and abiding attachment to Gardel as national icon, a perception at once integral to and in conflict with his international career.

In sum, Gardel's artistic trajectory suggests the tensions produced in the articulation of national culture within and beyond the nation, and in the context of emerging mass media that had far-ranging and sometimes unpredictable effects. His film career was a somewhat unlikely product of uneven developments in the transition to sound film, both in Hollywood and in Argentina. As an experimental solution to the problem of the sound film in international markets, the foreign-language production was short-lived, hindered by economic depression and then superseded by subtitling and dubbing. At the same time, foreign-language productions did provide Gardel with an opportunity to move into a new medium and to gain greater international recognition on the strength of his voice. By contrast, the experiments in national sound filmmaking to which he lent his prestige could not satisfy these ambitions.

The singer may have posthumously kept Paramount afloat during 1935, but his films did little to prolong the era of foreign-language productions. Gardel's emotionally charged vocal performances seem to have prompted audiences to forgive the promiscuous mixture of cultural elements which characterized his musicals for Paramount, but they were less charitable toward similarly incoherent Hollywood foreign-language versions that lacked such prominent stars. Yet, as the success of *¡Tango!*, *Los tres berretines*, and *Riachuelo* indicates, the musical formulas and narrative models proposed by Gardel's films proved viable without the singer's appearances, which nonetheless worked to consolidate the national audiences that made industrial production possible. This consolidation, evoked in retrospect in Latin American film histories, takes on symbolic dimensions; it permits the imagination of a national audience united by the figure of Gardel. The singer's career thus illustrates the ironies of Hollywood hegemony, and the hegemonic functioning of mass media in general, shedding fascinating light on the vexed and complex processes by which culture comes to imagine itself as national. *

99 Ibid., 108.

100 Barsky and Barsky, *Gardel*, 722.

101 See di Núbila, *La época de oro*; and Monteagudo and Bucich, *First Argentinean "Talkies."*