Tango as Exoticist Other in Hollywood Films:

The Poetics of Desire, and Violence

By Hannah Balcomb, University of Riverside, CA.

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OPENING VIGNETTTES

Scene 1: The camera opens on a pair of legs descending down the stairs, followed by a buttox, a torso, and finally a head. The woman crosses the room in a haughty manner; she does not acknowledge anyone, but calmly sheds her coat to reveal bare shoulders and a short, strappy dress. A man appears; he is tall, dark, and handsome–exotic. He carries himself with poise and strength, shoulders back, chest forward. The first piano chords ring out and, without speaking, the man and the woman begin to dance a provocative, smoldering tango brimming with sexual tension. The audience, a group of high school students, stare; they are entranced by these figures and their alluring dance.

Scene 2: A man in a restaurant begins to engage a woman he does not know in conversation. He invites the woman to dance. Hesitantly she explains that she does not know how to dance the tango and is afraid of making a mistake. The man assuages her fears, saying "No mistakes in tango…That's what makes the tango so great. You make a mistake, get all tangled up; just tango on." The woman, seduced by this tantalizing and freeing suggestion, agrees to dance. The two maneuver gracefully across the floor despite the fact that the man is blind and the woman has never danced tango before. The woman, moves cautiously at first, but is soon enraptured in the dance and begins taking risks with her body movements. Her flawless bun becomes unraveled as the man whips her to and from him with increasing passion and energy.

Scene 3: A husband and wife, who have been fighting, indeed trying to kill one another, rendezvous at a restaurant. A tango song begins and the man suggests a dance. The woman taunts her husband by suggesting that he does not have the skills for this. Angered, he grasps her by the hand so tightly that she winces, and he leads her to the dance floor. They begin to move, each staring at the other with an intense mixture of distrust and attraction. The husband leads his wife around the room with authority. At one point he clasps her in a strong embrace and smashes her up against a hanging mirror with such force that her body breaks the object and small pieces of glass splinter around the couple.

INTRODUCTION

The Argentine tango almost always appears in American Hollywood films in emotionally charged scenes laden with sexual desire, sensuality, and often violent passion like the ones presented in the three previous tango vignettes from Martin Brest's *Scent of a Woman* (1992); Liz Friedlander's *Take the Lead* (2006); and Doug Liman's *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005). These films capitalize on a long history of tango functioning as a signifier of the exotic in media and in theater.

In her discussions of tango and exoticism Melanie Plesch highlights the latent threat and excessive passion in representations of tango dance in film and identifies five connotations of the Latin American Other, or exotic figure: danger (and the allure of the outcast), the erotic-exotic, excess, homogeneity, and irrationality. She deconstructs the trope of the liberating Latin dance, in particular of tango, as a means to connect with desires, impulses, passions, violence, and organic functions.[1]

Building on her work, I will examine the ways in which contemporary directors Baz Luhrman and James Mangold have perpetuated the use of tango to evoke exoticist tropes of the Latin American Other and have modified this trend in their respective films *Moulin Rouge!* and *Knight and Day*. Like many Hollywood films, both *Moulin Rouge!* and *Knight and Day* use tango to draw on the familiar themes of the exotic Other as sexually alluring and dangerous. However, unlike in the opening vignettes of this paper in which the main characters engage in tango dance, in *Moulin Rouge!* and *Knight and Day,* tango frames the dramatic plot through a parallel rather than direct relationship to the lead characters.

In *Moulin Rouge!* the lead characters are not the dancers. Rather the scene constantly shifts back and forth between the tango dancers and the actions of the main characters. Thus, the violence of the tango dance appears as analogous to the violence within the plot and conveys the trauma that the actors are undergoing through referencing the music and dance.

Knight and Day takes the disassociation between the tango dancers as the protagonists a step further. In fact, *Knight and Day* does not even include a dance; rather tango music alone is used as an exotic backdrop to enhance the emotions of the main characters. The director's choice

[1] Melanie Plesch, "Latinamericanism: Some notes towards the deconstruction on of a discursive formation." (Paper given at the International Musicological Society, Rome, Italy, July 1-7,

of music here further provokes the viewer to consider various interpretations and even a possible element of irony or humor.

In this paper then I argue that while tango continues to be associated with eroticism and violent passion in Hollywood films, directors like Luhrman and Mangold have offered some new ways for this process to occur, in particular through their use of music. Luhrman has created a post-modern reconstruction of tango music through layering classic Argentine tangos with Western pop music. Even more significantly, Mangold has omitted tango dance from his film and has allowed the music, by itself, to function as a signifier of violence and sexual tension.

TANGO AND EXOTICISM

I will begin by providing some background on the history of tango and exoticization in popular culture as both of my examples are constructed in relation to this broader concept. Exoticism refers to the attraction to something foreign to our own time and space, and often involves attributing characteristics to a foreign place, person or art form that are often not realistic, but rather are the products of what the dominant culture desires the weaker one to be.[2] Importantly, as Jonathan Bellman argues, depictions of the exotic tell us much about the people who are doing the representing and very little about those who are being represented.[3]

Marta Savigliano traces tango's history as an exotic commodity for the international world. She notes that when tango was revealed to Europe in 1900s France, it fit into an existing

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[2] Gilles De Van, "Fin de siècle Exoticism and the Meaning of the Far Away," *Opera Quarterly* 11 (1995), 78.

[3] Jonathan Bellman, "The Magyars, the Turks, the Siege of Vienna, and the Turkish Style," in *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 25–45.

framework in which the rules of exoticism and the practice of appropriating Oriental as well as Spanish cultures for the consumption of Western European elites were well established. However, she continues, tango was a new kind of exotic with connections to both the under belly and the upper echelon of society, making it scandalous yet elegant, and provoking repugnance, acceptance, allure, and fear from members of French society. Tango, she writes, was the ideal exotic product; like the colonized, it could be controlled; yet it never lost its fiery passion and the allure of the dangerous Latin American Other.[4] Thus, she concludes it "fit and was colonially tailored to fit into the colonizer's desire to consume passion."[5]

Both Savigliano and Plesch note that Rudolph Valentino's violent depiction of the Argentine tango dancer in the 1921 silent film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* set a pattern for representing the Latin American Other and using tango to frame love triangle scenes in which the macho figure fights another man in order to gain his prize, the resistant, yet ultimately enraptured woman.[6] As tango traveled from the dance halls to musical theater and to Hollywood it continued to evoke the same exotic themes from centuries before. These themes include escapism often through sensual and irrational experience, the sexually available female, and the conquering of the Other.

Today, even in the absence of a competing male, tango scenes are brimming with sexual tension embodied through provocative movements, short skirts that seem to rise higher with each film, and the controlling push and pulls of the male lead. In many cases this explicit sexual desire transforms into something more sinister: violence or its precursor.

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[4] Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press. 1995), 82.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 134; Plesch, "Latinamericanism."

Tango as signifier of the violent, passionate exotic is also visible in contemporary operas and Western Broadway musicals. Donnalee Dox discusses how tango music and dance in *Man of La Mancha* provide the conditions for sexual assault and disguise the rape of Aldonza as an aesthetically viable subject for representation.[7] Aldonza the prostitute, after being temporarily mistaken for the beautiful and pious Dulcinea by Don Quixote, is overpowered and assaulted by a gang of muleteers who then force her to dance a violent tango. At this point, Dox observes, although Aldonza resists vehemently, she has been gagged, and her body cannot communicate "no" when the muleteers force her to dance.

Further, Dox continues, the tango dance style requires the actress to look sexy for the success of the image on stage. Thus, silenced by a gag, but forced to embody the physical role of seductress, Aldonza signals "yes" and "no" at the same time, and articulates through tango a commonly held myth that women secretly want to be overpowered sexually. Dox also notes that the sinuous harmonies in the music distinguish Aldonza as a "loose woman," and doubly eroticize her body as an exotic object and the focal point of interplay between violence and power.[8]

Having provided a brief overview of tango representations in popular culture and having established a pattern of exoticist themes I will now turn to an analysis of two films, Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!* (2001), and James Mangold's *Knight and Day (2010)*. Neither of these movies is about tango, Argentina, nor even, more broadly, Latin America. Indeed the tango scenes appear as cinematic non-sequiturs, or injections of the Other. However, in each film,

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[7] Donalee Dox, "Constructions of Rape: Two American Musicals." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 17(3), (1996): 210-238.

[8] Ibid., 230.

tango plays a pivotal role and evokes associations with the exoticist tropes explored earlier in this paper.

MOULIN ROUGE!: A TANGO COLLAGE

Through cinematic shifts, and musical layering, the tango scene in *Moulin Rouge!* explores the themes of desire for the sexually available female, irrationality, and aestheticized violence. The tango montage frames the climax of a dangerous love triangle between Satine the prostitute, Christian her destitute lover, and the Duke the potential benefactor.

A worker in the club, played by Puerto Rican guitarist and vocalist José Feliciano, narrates the situation with a strong, yet indistinct Latin accent, and clearly articulates the anger and distrust that Christian feels towards Satine. Despite the fact that she is a prostitute, Christian expects Satine to have the agency to turn down her suitor, now that she has found love. Christian has always known that loving Satine was dangerous, yet he now blames her for his disillusionment upon confirming that she is indeed an Other, a prostitute who must sleep with the highest bidder.

Inspired by jealous passion, Christian stands underneath Satine's tower and, through singing lyrics adapted to the Argentine tango "Tanguera," implores her not to deceive him and to believe him when he declares his love. Satine hears this declaration and impulsively rejects the Duke who upon discovering that Satine is in love with another man attacks her in a jealous rage and tries to rape her. Miraculously, a male servant intervenes to protect Satine and knocks the Duke unconscious.

This passionate and violent sequence is framed by two different tango renditions seamlessly interwoven in "El Tango de Roxanne." The first, sung and danced by José Feliciano,

is a tango rendition of The Police hit "Roxanne" in which a man declares his love for a prostitute. The second song is "Tanguera" by Mariano Mores, set with English lyrics. A tango dance is featured as well, in which the main female dancer is pushed, pulled, and shoved first into one man's embrace and then the next.

As the tango begins, Feliciano delineates the exotic tropes that I have highlighted in this paper:

> First, there is desire, then passion, then suspicion, jealousy, anger, betrayal, When love is for the highest bidder there can be no trust. Without trust there is no love. Jealousy, yes. Jealousy will drive you mad! [9]

As he speaks, Feliciano projects his feelings and the impact of each emotion—passion, suspicion, and anger—on his dance partner. He alternately pulls her close, shoves her away, savagely grabs at her wrists, or throws her into the arms of another man.

This tango dance is spliced with scenes of Satine and the Duke with each cut expertly choreographed so that the twists and turns of the dancer and the shots of the Duke attacking Satine coincide perfectly with the percussive breaks of the tango. As with the sexual assault of Aldonza in *Man of La Mancha,* violence against Satine is made aesthetically alluring and exciting through a pairing of the erotic movements of the tango dancer as she is flung from one man to the next and the short clips of Satine attempting to fend off her attacker. Although Satine is spared in the story, the viewer is left with the uneasy feeling that they have indeed witnessed a violent sexual assault through the tango itself.

In addition to association of the sexually available female, the exotic theme of the natural as opposed to the civilized is displayed in this scene as tango inspires irrationality in all of the

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[9] *Moulin Rouge!.* DVD. Directed by Baz Luhrman. 2000; USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

characters. Christian declares his love to Satine, who responds by ignoring her obligation as a courtesan and, quite irrationally, saving herself for love. Similarly, the tango and the course of events in this love triangle, incite the Duke into a rage in which he too becomes irrational; overcome by jealousy and passion, he lashes out violently against Satine for tricking him with her sexual wiles.

The use of the song "Roxanne" and the fact that this tango scene takes place in a brothel is also significant given that tango originated in Buenos Aires brothels. The piercing and sinuous chromaticisms of the violin in the tango also serve as musical signifier of the exotic. As much as tango has come to be a dance of the elite in the West, associated with high class, decorum and sophistication, depictions like the one in *Moulin Rouge!* act as mnemonic devices to recall the dance's sordid beginnings and the duality of the female Other as the sexually alluring yet also threatening figure.

Finally, the tango scene in the *Moulin Rouge!* exemplifies the tendency to lump all exotic others together indiscriminately. First, the ethnicity of Feliciano's character is ambiguous. While in real life Feliciano is a Puerto Rican, it would seem based on his heavy accent and his role as a tango dancer that he is to be read as Argentine in this film. However, this is never clarified and instead Feliciano just assumes the role of the overly aggressive interchangeable Latin male Other.

The dances themselves also mix Argentine tango with Spanish flamenco. The intricate circles the dancer in *Moulin Rouge!* makes with her hands above her head as well as the *taconeos*, stamping with the heel, and *zapateo*, stamping with the foot, are more characteristic of

Spanish flamenco than of Argentine tango.[10] These conflations of tango and flamenco in highly erotic scenes convey the centuries old idea that Spanish dances and dancers are arbiters of a restrained passion, which as Savigliano notes, is recognizable "even today when the world show business industry chooses to offer a strong, passionate, dancy dish to its exotic-hungry public."[11]

KNIGHT AND DAY: INVERTING THE EXOTIC SIGNIFIER

While the majority of tango scenes in movies actually include a tango dance it is worth considering if and how tango music (without the dance) can be used to signal these same exotic themes of unbridled passion, allure, and fear in film narrative solely through audition. My final analysis is of the film *Knight and Day*, an action-comedy in which a young woman, June Havens, becomes entangled in a plot by the FBI to eliminate Roy Miller, a dangerous yet intriguing renegade spy. The tango scene takes place on a plane in which Miller kills six agents while Havens, who as yet is not aware of Miller's occupation, is in the bathroom preparing to seduce the alluring stranger she has just met.[12] The song "Santa Maria (de Buen Ayre)" by the contemporary Paris based Argentine group The Gotan Project, is played in the background as Miller is stalking and eliminating his enemies and as Havens is primping in the bathroom.

This scene both continues the trends discussed throughout this paper and modifies them. As in *Moulin Rouge!* tango is used to frame an encounter in which violence and sexual desire are conflated and the cinematic shifts contrasting Havens applying lipstick and provocatively

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[10] Skiera, Ehrenhard. "Castanets and Other Rhythmic and Percussive Elements." in *Flamenco: Gypsy Dance and Music from Andalusia*, ed. Claus Schreiner (New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 1990), 151.

[11] Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion,* 88.

[12] *Knight and Day*. DVD. Directed by James Mangold. 2010; USA: Twentieth Century Fox Distribution.

pushing up her breasts in preparation for seduction, and the image of Miller fending off his attackers and violently vanquishing them, implicitly weave together these themes.

However, this scene also transforms the use of tango as an exotic signifier in a few important ways. In a refreshing gender twist, the aggressive male is not subjugating the female in *Knight and Day*; rather, it is the all American female Havens who pursues Miller the exotic spy. Thus the Other, the object of desire in this scene, is not female but male. Further, the violence that occurs is not between a man and a woman and does not articulate sexual desire.

Further, there is no dance: or rather there is no tango dance. Upon closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that a different type of choreography, that of the fighting between Miller and his assailants, has been set to the tango music. The punches fit the musical accents and each time Miller fumbles and drops his weapon it is perfectly timed with the natural break in the tango rhythm. This timing creates a comical or even parodical interpretation in which the overt synchronization of action and music dilutes much of the violent tension. Tango music in this scene also foreshadows the romance that is to flourish between Havens and Miller. Thus tango music plays the role of the omniscient author, sonically predicting the future and also reminding the viewer that this is after all just a film, and we need not take the display of hyper masculinity between Miller and his assailants so seriously.

What is most notable about the use of tango in this scene is the absence of an actual tango dance. Indeed while many directors have used tango to signify the exotic it is always through the combination of dance and music. In *Knight and Day* it appears that the signifier of tango as dangerous Other has become ingrained in Western imagination to such an extent that it no longer needs to be constructed through a dance scene, but rather can be conveyed solely through audition. Indeed, Mangold's choice to use tango in this scene could be read as a highly

sophisticated way of drawing on tango's history in film as the exotic, alluring and dangerous Other and inverting this meaning.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have analyzed the constructions of the Other through tango in contemporary Hollywood films. While I have demonstrated that in general the same exoticist themes as those established during the colonial and postcolonial 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries continue to this day, I have also highlighted a few ways that the directors of *Moulin Rouge!* and *Knight and Day* have shifted these trends both through the way they use tango to analogously frame the main action and through their innovative use of music. In particular, *Knight and Day* offers a compelling new model for tango music without dance to convey particular emotions and to potentially invert exoticist themes in a comical manner. Considering that *Knight and Day* was released only three years ago, it will be interesting to see if this use of tango music in film is a new trend or simply an anomaly.

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