

**Argentine tango through the lens of cynicism:**

**elements of disenchantment, pessimism, and rebelliousness in tango culture across its history**

**(1880-1955).**

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# **Abstract**

This thesis argues that melancholia, malcontent, and disillusionment are the main traits present in the poetry of tango lyrics and in the spirit of the dance. Moreover, it makes the claim that far from its popular and commercially successful representation, Argentine tango has a complex character which holds certain features that could be connected with a vernacular understanding of modern cynicism. Argentine tango can indeed be taken as a paradigmatic example of the influence of cynicism in Western culture. As a potential cynic expression, tango lyrics offered a harsh, embodied critique of the traditional moral values and institutions of Argentinian society.

This thesis claims that this popular expression presents a form of apathy, pessimism and potential social criticism that is usually overlooked, ignored, or dismissed in the bleached-out Argentinian cultural export as we know it today. The tango that was accepted by the local elites and recognised internationally, is usually portrayed as a genre of passion and exotic sensuality that, simultaneously, holds a moralist and conservative social discourse. In order to consider an alternative approach, the early history of tango deserves a thorough reassessment in order to foreground some of the more troubling and confrontational features of tango in its formative years.

This research will analyse tango in its different historical stages, exploring early tangos from 1880 to 1917, arguably defined as scandalous and cheerfully defiant, as well as the period known as tango-cancion from 1917 to 1955, in which melancholia, malcontent, and disillusionment becomes its archetype. These two early phases will be analysed through the lenses of ancient and modern cynicism respectively. This was also the period in which the co-option of tango began, a process that tamed it into a socially acceptable style of dance for the dominant elites in Argentina, Europe, and America.

In its conceptual underpinning, this study will take into consideration cynicism as a trans-historical idea that has seen multiple transformations. In doing so, it draws upon the works of Mazella (2007), Stanley (2007; 2012), Shea (2010) and Allen (2020) in particular, so as to draw out and reflect upon some of the divergent characteristics of cynicism in both in its ancient and modern iterations. This thesis argues that as a complex phenomenon cynicism exerts an influence in contemporary culture which extends far beyond the negative apathetic impact that is usually associated with. The analysis of Argentine tango offered in this thesis presents an exemplary case of such intricacy.

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# **Introduction**

This thesis argues that melancholia, malcontent, and disillusionment are the main traits present in the poetry of tango lyrics and in the spirit of the dance. Moreover, it makes the claim that far from its popular and commercially successful representation, Argentine tango has a complex character which holds certain features that could be connected with a vernacular understanding of modern cynicism. Argentine tango can indeed be taken as a paradigmatic example of the influence of cynicism in Western culture. As a potential cynic expression, tango lyrics offered a harsh, embodied critique of the traditional moral values and institutions of Argentinian society.

This thesis claims that this popular expression presents a form of apathy, pessimism and potential social criticism that is usually overlooked, ignored, or dismissed in the bleached-out Argentinian cultural export as we know it today. It offers an analysis of tango which also confronts dominant ideas concerning the nature of tango in its so-called golden age (1917-1955). The tango that was accepted by the local elites and recognised internationally, is usually portrayed as a genre of passion and exotic sensuality that, simultaneously, holds a moralistic and conservative social discourse. In order to consider an alternative approach, the early history of tango deserves a thorough reassessment in order to foreground some of the more troubling and confrontational features of tango in its formative years.

This thesis will analyse tango throughout its different historical stages, exploring early tangos from 1880 to 1917, arguably defined as scandalous and cheerfully defiant, as well as the period known as *‘tango-canción’* from 1917 to 1955, in which melancholia, malcontent, and disillusionment became its archetype. These two early phases will be analysed through the lenses of ancient and modern cynicism respectively. This was also the period in which the co-option of tango began, a process that tamed it into a socially acceptable style of dance for the dominant elites in Argentina, Europe, and America.

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In the following pages of this introduction, I would like to explore different options for dealing with the term cynicism, considered as an exceptionally complex concept. I will reject a straightforward ahistorical definition, instead taking into account its first conceptualizations in its origins and its subsequent development and use throughout history. I will start by describing the ways in which the term is commonly used in Argentina nowadays taking the example of a book of political commentary written for a wide audience, and then the example of a regular comic strip in a popular newspaper. I will also present a quick overview of the genealogy of cynicism from its ancient origins in Greece with Diogenes as its most recognised exponent, travelling by way of the early Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, and the dandies at the end of the 19th century, and ending with its current definition as a vernacular term usually associated with hypocrisy, self-egoistic interest, pessimism, and political apathy.

Finally, I will explain my own approach towards the concept and how I am planning to deal with a term that has such dissimilar characteristics and multiple interpretations. This task is essential in order to later use the term cynicism as a lens to analyse to tango as a cultural expression.

Cynicism in the context of Argentina

In Argentina, far from cynicism being a ubiquitous theme, explicit references to cynicism are comparatively rare in a country that somehow seems to present so many opportunities for the concept to thrive, considering the aspirations of the country as a leading power at the beginning of the 20th century, disappointed in its aims by a never-ending sequence of crises, corrupt governments, untrustworthy media and a society living in constant despair in which melancholy and nostalgia are the terms most commonly used for a self-portrait. Nonetheless, as I argue in further chapters, even if explicit references to cynicism are not particularly frequent, the influence of cynicism is widespread in Argentinean culture. For now, however, it is interesting to note in the two cases I present below, how varied and complex the term can be in its interpretation and application. The first case I present here is the book *El gobierno de los cínicos* (The government of the cynics) by Dante Palma, published in 2016 which analyses the political situation in the country with the newly elected government in that year (Palma 2016). The second example will be the comic strip, *Diogenes y el Linyera* (Diogenes and the Tramp [or hobo]), published without interruption in *Clarin*, the most popular newspaper in the country, having appeared every day since 1977.

*Cynicism and politics: Palma’s El gobierno de los cínicos*

In order to establish the relevance of this first point of reference and put it in context, it is worth mentioning the author’s background and his notoriety as an intellectual and journalist. Dante Palma is a professor in Philosophy, a doctor in Political Science, and an active journalist both on TV and radio. He became a controversial figure during his participation in the TV program ‘678’, a political debate programme broadcast on the national channel, in which he was openly supportive of the government of Nestor and Cristina Kirshner, in power from 2003 to 2015. Palma’s book *El gobierno de los cínicos* is a direct attack on the centre-right newly elected government in 2015, which was directly opposed to the one Palma embraced. The book introduces Palma’s political opinions, in which he claims to have an unbiased approach and uses cynicism as a philosophical and historical concept that validates and justifies his posture, reinforcing the prestige of the author’s formation as an academic.

Dante Palma proclaims that he is writing a book about idiots and dogs. In particular, he states that the book is about idiotic democracies and governments led by dogs. In both cases, he plays with words, using the terms with an implicit double meaning: He refers to idiots first in the original ancient Greek sense of the word when it was used to describe those who only cared for their private affairs without getting involved in public duties or in politics. A second, hinted but obviously pejorative meaning is in the air and this despicable sense is added to the picture described. The etymologically descriptive term deliberately mixes with the insult. A similar path is taken when describing the politicians in power as ‘dogs’. Those politicians are linked to and considered distorted heirs of ancient cynicism: Diogenes and those who followed him were known as dogs and the word cynic itself may well mean dog-like in one of its possible senses, derived from the Greek *kuon*, ‘dog’ (Branham, 1996). Once again, in this context, dog takes on a second and accusatory meaning in a vernacular sense and Palma intentionally plays with this dichotomy. Searching for the etymology of the different terms in ancient Greek and applying them to our modern society as a political accusation is a regular feature of the text and reinforces the double role of Palma as a respected intellectual and polemic political activist.

Palma begins the book by describing the ancient Greek cynicism of Diogenes, depicted with a sequence of curious anecdotes without much analysis, describing Diogenes as selfish and individualistic, strongly positioned against politics and democracy, rejecting the importance of words and communication, and refusing the value of living in society. These apparent traits are explored further in the book and are applied to describe the Argentinian political elite then in government. According to Palma, the current Argentinean government is selfish insofar as it appeals to individual prosperity over social improvement or social justice. He argues that it constitutes an attack on respectable politics and the values of democracy by the way the new party explicitly assumes that individuals involved in politics tend to seek personal enrichment. It implies corruption, claiming by contrast a non-political background among its already rich and economically satisfied members (successful businessmen, sportsmen and so on) and assumes their role as administrators rather than as politicians. Palma claims that the new political discourse of the centre-right government despises the value of so-called ‘real’ communication and rational debate as it bases its speech on campaigning and in government on ideologically empty slogans and the presumed effectiveness of short sentences spread through social media.

However, during his introduction to the ancient cynics, Palma stresses as well cynical themes, such as the courage to challenge the powerful, to question superfluous consumerism, to live with coherence between theory and practice, and to criticise a decadent society in the search for a freer way of life. These last features are the ones that the author considers lost in time and are completely absent in the behaviour of those in power. The actions by Diogenes and his followers are considered positively now, as manifestations of rebellion against a superfluous way of living, defying the powerful ones, as exemplified most famously in Diogenes’ encounter with Alexander the Great.[[1]](#footnote-1) Here Palma draws attention to how cynicism has actually been co-opted by some of the most powerful agents it might be expected to attack, such as politicians, media corporations, and big business. In his analysis, ancient cynicism, selfish but courageous, mutated into a modern form of cynicism that retains only what Palma sees as the negative attributes of the ancient philosophy and betrays the positive ones. This transformation is explained in a brief historical account and allows Palma to make an apparently straightforward parallel comparison with the current Argentinian situation. Besides his historical tale, Palma validates his understanding of cynicism by regularly quoting Peter Sloterdijk (a German philosopher I will describe further in coming pages), reinforcing the idea that present cynics have lost every form of defiance, adjusting to and sustaining the unjust society they deplore, and moving from a rebellion acted by a commoner to a situation of prepotency executed by the one in power.

Palma’s historical account ends up relating Diogenes’ cynicism to contemporary democracies. Palma finds in the new government the perfect example of cynicism in a modern, debased form. Comparing the ancient philosophy with current political affairs, he reinforces the contrast between a noble and earlier form of cynicism and the current cynical opportunism in Argentinean society.

Given that Palma writes in a colloquial language aimed at a broad audience, he does not attempt to create a disquisition about ancient or modern cynicism but uses his own particular interpretation as an attacking tool against his political adversaries; as an accusation of selfishness and hypocrisy on the one hand, and as a betrayal of every positive aspect Diogenes’ philosophy may have had on the other. The brave ascetism of the ancient cynic becomes the opulence of the rich; free, and courageous speech is transformed into lies, empty slogans and complicity with power.

With this brief description of the book, it is my intention to point out how complex and varied are the ways in which cynicism can be applied to the Argentinean present and how, even directed at a non-academic audience, the term suffers in the same text different appreciations and appropriations imbricated with so many features of contemporary culture. The term is taken both as an accusation of decadence and self-egotism, and as an insolent yet positive force of critique lost in time. The use of the term cynic as a charge against a decadent, selfish and aphetic society is not original, and I will make references to further examples later on in the following chapters. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing the way in which this widespread point of view and use of the term is introduced here by an academic who pretends to conceptualise and make a historical account of the concept but ends up reinforcing trivial stereotypes.

*Cynicism and humour: Diogenes y el Linyera*

The second example taken in this opening section is the comic strip *Diogenes y el Linyera*. This comic strip was drawn by Tabaré Gómez Laborde and written by Jorge Guinzburg and Carlos Abrelaya for *Clarín*, the country’s largest daily newspaper in 1977, and has been published without interruption ever since. The strip usually contains 3 or 4 vignettes and creates a small narrative in that space. The Hobo, never properly named, and his dog, Diogenes, are the main characters. They live in a big square in the capital city of Buenos Aires, without any possessions, begging for food in a vagabond life. The Hobo is always wearing the same ruined clothes, living in complete poverty and without any chance of changing his fate. He constantly speaks to his dog, who faithfully follows him but is incapable of speaking out loud. However, the dog’s thoughts always appear in the last vignette as a final fatalist reflection.



Figure 1. *Herencia* (Inheritance). Tabaré Gomez Laborde (p) and Guinzburg (w), published in Clarin. I have not yet sourced the precise issue and date of this cartoon, but it is likely that it was published between 1993 and 1996.

The reference to ancient cynicism appears evident in the naming of the strip itself and the presence of the iconic animal. It is reinforced by the similarities between the way of life of Diogenes the cynic and the characters in the comic, both sharing a simple life as beggars. In Figure 1, one might even be reminded of the famous anecdote in which Diogenes gets rid of his cup, as described in *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius[[2]](#footnote-2) (2018) who lived in the 3rd century C.E.

One day, after seeing a boy drinking with his hands, Diogenes threw away the cup he kept in his knapsack, saying: ‘A child has outdone me in frugality’. (Laertius, *Lives*, p. 276)

As with the original Diogenes, the Hobo drinks with his bare hands from the fountain in the park and so seems to duplicate the actions of his predecessor. However, far from being an application of the ancient philosophy in the current context, there are important differences that stand out and work to create a more ambiguous, historically aggregated version of cynicism.

In the first place, some scholars claim Diogenes’ humble life was deeply connected with his understanding of virtue. His deliberate self-impoverishment allowed him to directly engage with the values of a path strongly connected with nature (Stanley, 2012). Secondly, the lack of material possessions and ties with superficial standards granted him the chance to speak in complete freedom, without the need to respond or obey to anyone (Shea, 2010). Both features are fundamental in Diogenes’ philosophy, but in this strip, they are introduced with tensions and contradictions.

To begin with, the Hobo does not choose his poor and simple life. The lack of material comfort is not necessarily a willing act, but instead a fatalist destiny he cannot avoid or escape. In different examples, he tries to evade his condition but ends unavoidably in his indigent solitude. There are cases, as shown by the vignette presented above in Figure 1, in which the strain is even more interesting. The Hobo says in the first two segments: “Personally, I am worried about to whom I am going to give my inheritance, all I have, all my belongings: The happiness, the freedom, the love for each bush growing, the dew in winter nights, the bird song at sunrise, the smell of wet soil, the rainbow…” To which Diogenes replies in his thoughts: “So horrible it would be if no one appears to claim the inheritance.” In the first speech, the Hobo seems to sweetly reproduce ancient cynic ideals, glorifying the essential beauty of nature in contraposition to the usual inheritable goods. Here, like Diogenes of Sinope, the Hobo lives in a state of ascetism, rejecting a material life and living according to nature, free from material possessions and proud of his simple path to virtue. Interestingly, the one named Diogenes, that is to say the dog, is the character that ends up disregarding the Hobo’s ideals and dismissing the possibility of their existence in the modern world, explaining that this is the most likely reaction of our current society where no one cares for those aims. In most cases, the Hobo represents the naivety, the hope, the trust of cynicism, but Diogenes, the dog, always bares the truth and offers a pessimistic view of people and society. In this amalgamation of cynic notions, the comic strip transforms the deliberate pursuit of poverty into resignation before the inevitability of impoverishment. The cynic distrust of ideals is applied here as well to those goals set up by the Greek Diogenes, creating a form of cynicism inside cynicism.

The second aspect related to Diogenes presents here another twist: In the case of the Greek philosopher, his freedom to speak, his ability to speak the truth, his parrhesia was always manifested in an audible gesture, spreading his beliefs to everyone in Athens, aggressively and noisily. However, the dog of this strip, instead of warning and reacting against the naivety of his master, performs a silent message. Diogenes is portrayed as a dog who thinks his answer but cannot or does not want to say it out loud. In a way, this is part of the same impotence in connection with their poverty that I previously indicated. Their fatalist misery is made present here by the impossibility of communicating. There is no space for the truth to be heard and the Hobo seems to be condemned to keep on living in his delirium or his lies. The outspoken and fierce mockery of the Greek Diogenes has become sad acceptance and resignation. The dog represents here an ambivalent cynic, inverting the ideals of ancient cynicism, more in tune with its modern and corrupted forms but in a dissimilar way than the one introduced in Palma’s example. In Palma’s book, cynicism becomes hypocritical and selfish, executed by the ones in positions of privilege, whereas within this strip, cynicism is transformed into a powerless, passive, and introspective sense of unavoidable defeat.

Cartoon a cartoon of a person falling from a tree

Description automatically generated

Figure 2. *Navidad* (Christmas). Tabaré Gomez Laborde (2018), published in Clarin.

Following the same line of thought, we can focus on another exemplary case in Figure 2 in which the Hobo states: “Aah, such a beautiful Christmas we have just had, Diogenes! We ate, we drank, we sang, we danced with our friends. What else could we ask?” To which Diogenes replies to himself: “To keep on believing all of that was true…” Once again, the truth is not heard, and the dog’s thoughts are kept to himself. The Hobo happily continues living in a fake world and avoids any rebellion and reaction against his depressing reality. This situation resembles the one usually connected with a modern form of understanding cynicism, in which the cynic is aware of the falsehood of his ideals, or the impossibility of achieving them, but somehow behaves as if he believes in them and acts accordingly, keeping to himself his distrust. I claim that the comic strip then creates a complex and at times contradictory mixture of cynic ideas, ancient and modern.

Nevertheless, there is an aspect in this case that brings an important feature of cynicism to life, and it is relevant to identify: social criticism appears through humour. The questioning of the values of Argentinian society exemplified in the destiny of those characters is presented with sarcasm and satire. Referring to cases relating to events of the day in Argentina, the characters denounce the lack of values, or the existence of false values in that society and the strip becomes a parody of the Argentinean society during those difficult 40 years when it was published (Kalbermatten, 2015).

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To sum up, with the introduction of these two examples, the book by Palma and the strip *Diogenes y el Linyera*, we can already perceive the intricate way in which cynical references are introduced and the different interpretations and uses that appear as a result. Allusions to cynicism mix characteristics from antique Greece with our modern understanding of the term and the appellation is used as a political accusation, or as a satirical and humoristic commentary on our tragic social reality. I claim cynicism itself offered the writer and the comedian a particularly seductive quality for those multiple interpretations and uses to thrive. The term has suffered so many mutations and applications, creating a concept so difficult to define and hold in place, but equally attractive in order to create new and versatile variations, adapting to new contexts and valuable for endless purposes. In the following section, I will draw a brief account of some reasons that explain the possibility for the concept to mutate, the difficulties involved in describing it with precision, let alone defining it, and the opportunities it creates for analysis in this thesis.

The problem of defining Cynicism

Finding a workable definition of cynicism seems to be a challenging and almost impossible task in the face of the academic expectation to quickly clarify our position establishing the delimitations of the concept with which we are trying to deal. However, how can we disclose and rationalise the multiplicity of cynic versions and consequently their meanings? When trying to explain and detail the main characteristics that could define cynicism, I am suddenly surrounded by and playing with antonyms. Does cynicism imply ascetics living in poverty and renouncing wealth, or is a cynic the one who accommodates themselves to a materialistic society pursuing self-egoistic interest? Does a cynic speak plain and ‘pure’ truth, or are they hypocritical and deceptive? Are cynics loud outspoken and publicly active figures, or do they hide from the outside world retreating into their own fatalist pessimism? Are cynics elegant dandies, dialoguing with wit and clever vocabulary, or do they behave outrageously with provocative performances of scandal and shame? Is cynicism a movement of the masses, or the result of cultured intellectuals or an eccentric elite? Does cynicism have a transformative power, does it radically criticise dominant values, or is it just another complicit form of reassuring the status quo? This uncertainty begins to make some sense, however, once we consider the long history of cynicism and its transformation over the last 2500 years, in which the concept has been changed and manipulated in multiple ways with multiple purposes and multiple outcomes.

The difficulty when it comes to embracing these mutations of cynicism, whilst still retaining cynicism as a meaningful analytic term, is confronted to some extent by the partition of the term into two distinct vocables, probably the most accepted approach among scholars. Cynicism with a capital ‘C’ is reserved for the form related to the ancient philosophy of the Greeks, Diogenes and his disciples, whereas lower case cynicism is allotted to the modern or ‘postmodern’ versions of cynicism, where cynicism has become a colloquial term. I will try, later on in this thesis, to offer an alternative to this dichotomy and bring another way to conceptualise the term (and accordingly, I will not use a capital ‘C’ as a distinctive sign between its ancient and modern meaning of the term), but before doing so I would like to focus on the aspects that allowed this transfiguration of the concept to happen in the first place.

*Ancient cynicism defying understanding*

I will put the emphasis on three aspects related to ancient cynicism that I consider fundamental to understanding the difficulties faced in defining it and that I think are useful to explain its subsequent development and its heterogeneous manifestations up to the present day. These are: an absence of defined theory, unreliable sources, and its advocacy of opportunistic versatility.

Firstly, it would appear that cynicism was perhaps quite deliberately never presented as a precise theory or well delineated by a corpus of rules and prescriptions and there was never a well-established proper body of cynical knowledge. This likely absence of written or unwritten doctrine was by many considered to be a weakness and it was rejected for this reason from the pedestal of well-respected philosophies. An exemplary case is that of Hegel, who states in the last few pages of his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (1995):

There is nothing particular to say of the Cynics, for they possess but little philosophy, and they did not bring what they had into a scientific system… (p. 479)

In similar terms, almost 200 years later and without its negative implications, Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting (1996) affirms,

Philosophy produces itself mostly in theories and theoretical treatises. (…) Such a foundation of tradition and reception is absent from Cynicism, for it did not produce theories. (p. 329)

The exclusion of cynicism from the pantheon of renowned philosophy was particularly evident in the post Hegel era, when certain requirements were considered fundamental for a school of philosophy to be respected.

The denial of the cultivated forms in which some of those philosophies were established was not only linked with a rejection directed towards the conception of what a philosopher should look like and how a philosopher should act. It was intrinsically associated with their conception of virtue itself. A path towards virtue, in Diogenes and even more clearly in Antisthenes’ understandings[[3]](#footnote-3), didn’t require learning the highly complex reasoning of universal knowledge leading to wisdom. Rather it entailed a specific practice of renunciation and a life of freedom in tune with nature. Indeed, ancient cynics’ refusal to follow the path of intellectual culture was one of the aspects most used by its detractors[[4]](#footnote-4). Allen (2020) argues,

Their contempt was heaped on the idea that virtue must be based on canonical principles and should be cultivated in a rarefied atmosphere. For this they would famously be accused of attempting a “shortcut to virtue,” for undermining a set of pedagogic assumptions that underpin Western philosophy and its educational and religious legacies. (p. 25)

Regardless of whether it was due to a deficiency or to a deliberate decision by the early cynics, the lack of defined theory allowed multiple versions of cynicism to surface, each one of them claiming to be the heir to Diogenes’ example, without having the chance to confront any specific principle.

As a second reason for the proliferation of different versions of cynicism, it is worth stressing the fact that we have no direct texts from Diogenes, and it would appear that most if not all of his original teachings were shared by direct lived examples. This absence allowed for the retrospective construction of cynicism as a philosophy, with distortions and manipulations of the sources describing Diogenes’ life and his sayings. Therefore, it is impossible to assess the historical accuracy of the stories told about Diogenes and a certain degree of doubt about the veracity of each anecdote is always present, allowing idealisations and condemnations disregarding or adding elements to each of his sayings and anecdotes.

This constant retelling of ancient philosophers’ anecdotes, most notably assembled in Diogenes Laertius’ work already mentioned, was a common practice in antiquity and was not exclusive to cynicism (Branham, 1996). Nonetheless, this narrative tool becomes particularly distortive when these collected stories are the main source for a philosophical school. Branham (1996) goes even further, saying,

…while this practice was not confined to Cynics, it was one at which they excelled and that served admirably to propagate their philosophy in a culture that remained predominantly oral. The anecdotes lend themselves to the process of retelling and elaboration characteristic of an oral tradition. (p. 86)

Furthermore, and following again Branham’s observations, Diogenes himself becomes a fictional figure, moving beyond the limitations of his real actions and sayings and becoming a legend that absorbed his posthumously attributed anecdotes as part of his persona and philosophy. Interestingly, the fictional episodes involving Diogenes appearing as a character in numerous texts written long after his death are somehow enriching to his philosophy, bringing new edges to the construction of his symbolic figure, and modifying implicitly the corpus and definition of cynic philosophy.

Finally, as a third and last argument that helps to explain the changes to the meaning of cynicism throughout history, it is notable that there was an explicit advocation for adaptability and opportunistic flexibility within cynic thought and practice (Allen, 2020). This was tuned with the changes imposed by each context and specific social condition that justified each modification to cynic philosophy. This defence of plasticity was not only reinforced by the way Diogenes himself reacted to his misfortunes, but by the necessity to react against an always changeable target: his attacks were most notably against social conventions and moral values that, artificial as they were accused of being by him, were liable to mutate, requiring a different approach in their critique.

A brief historical account of cynicism

*From antiquity to the dawn of the Enlightenment.*

As pointed out by James Romm (1996) in his article *Cynicism before the Cynics*, elements present later on in cynic discourse can be traced outside the Hellenistic atmosphere and back into the culture of the barbarians (in Greek terms), namely the Ethiopians, Persians, and Egyptians, well before the Age of Pericles. In terms of its origins, however, when clear patterns of what could be identified as cynicism appear, I must refer to Diogenes of Sinope (ca. 412 – 323 B.C.E.) who is generally taken as the paradigmatic representation of ancient cynicism. According to Diogenes Laertius, he was the son of a banker and ended up exiled from Sinope and subsequently became a philosopher in the streets of Athens, challenging by his actions, his style of life and his sayings the conventions of the society of that time.

Diogenes’ radical break with the norms and conventions of the society of his time for which he is famously known, were part of his standing in the opposition between nature and culture, a regular topic of discussion in that period (Hadot, 2004). For Diogenes, animal life provided an ethical source of validation and the model upon which humans could reach virtue and happiness by realising their nature and pursuing a simplistic, ascetic, and self-sufficient style of living (Branham, 1996; Shea, 2010). This path could be achieved by rigorous self-discipline, both in social and physical terms, in order to reach freedom from artificial social customs and the temptation that arises from the commodities of social interaction, and to prepare for the unpredictable outcomes of human existence. As Diogenes regarded his contemporary Athenian society as fundamentally at odds with nature and its values corrupted and hypocritical, he actively challenged them in order to expose its artificiality to the world. That active rejection was not executed through rational disquisitions but instead by scandalous and provocative performances in public, both in rhetorical speech and corporeal acts to shock his audience and spread his convictions (Allen, 2020). Behind those scandalous outrageous acts, such as masturbating and defecating in public or spitting in the face of a host, all of them delivered with a strong dose of sarcasm, irony and mockery, there was the intention to disrupt the taboos of Greek society (Sloterdijk, 2015).

His displays hold a pedagogical purpose towards his spectators as an aggressive educator. He was militant as a public benefactor but, as a dog, through barking and biting his friends to warn them against an unvirtuous path (Foucault, 2011; Allen, 2020).

Sharon Stanley (2012) recognises in this ancient cynicism a double face that will haunt the history of the concept:

We may therefore identify both a negative and a positive project in Cynicism – the negative project, in relation to which we may begin to comprehend the usage of the term cynic in modern times, offered a stinging critique of contemporary Athenian civilization, with all its decadent luxury, hypocrisy, artifice, and endless multiplication of false needs. (…) Its positive project, in contrast, sought to give individuals a way out of the unhappy snares of civilization through a rigorous self-discipline that would train individuals to live in harmony with nature and to achieve the necessary conditions of happiness: freedom and self-sufficiency. (p. 9)

Both aspects coexist in ancient cynicism as the critical impulse is intertwined with the aim to lead men and women to a virtuous life in accordance with nature. However, detractors and followers of cynicism a-posteriori tended to deny, remove, or suppress one or the other in their appropriation of the movement. The subsequent history of cynicism can be presented as a consequence of that never-ending tension between unrelenting social critique and the cynic pursuit of a better life.

Between the 2nd B.C.E and 1st C.E centuries, the influence of cynicism appears to have declined (Branham, 1996). The impact of cynicism was revived during the Roman Empire, with some claiming that cynicism had a strong influence among early Christians (Matton, 1996; Foucault 2011). During this period, cynicism was discussed, revered, and idealised by many Roman aristocrats and even a pious emperor (Griffin, 1996; Krueger 1996). Among them, Diogenes’ example of living a simplistic life as a beggar was advocated as a pagan model of modesty, removing the elements of scandal and hostility (Billerbeck, 1996). Nevertheless, the philosophy was not only popular due to its praise of ascetism. Indeed, alternative forms of cynicism emerged in this context. One known to contemporary scholars as ‘street cynicism’, was more collective, popular, and practical and spread among the urban poor that engaged in incensed free speech that questioned social distinctions and the imperial order in its authoritarianism (Shea, 2010). Both Diogenes’ ancient cynicism and its variant as a street movement during the Roman Empire will be crucial in the analysis of tango in its origins in Part IV.

*From the Enlightenment to our present*

With the arrival of the Enlightenment, cynicism experienced an intricate revival that reintroduced its importance in philosophical discussions but opened up its final mutations into what we came to understand of the term in its modern version. The effects of this reconfiguration will have a deep impact in contemporary culture (Sloterdijk, 2015; Schreier, 2009) and will be crucial for the understanding of elements of pessimism, malcontent and nostalgia in the tango culture, in particular during the period known as *tango-cancion*, between 1917 and 1955. The relationship between Enlightenment and cynicism has been explored at length[[5]](#footnote-5) and has been crucial as a dividing line that brought into life the dichotomy of modern and ancient cynicism. I will briefly explore this period in order to discuss the influence of cynicism up to the present day. This will help set up my analysis of the place of cynicism in tango, considered as a symptomatic Argentinean cultural expression.

During the period of the Enlightenment, cynicism was creatively adapted and co-opted in various forms and, according to Allen (2020),

The Enlightenment can be seen as marking the final, major appeal to Cynicism as a philosophy in its own right, before Cynic philosophy was largely jettisoned and overtaken by its modern vernacular understanding. (p. 133)

To begin with, authors such as Wieland and D’Alembert praised Diogenes as an example of independence and freedom from prejudice. They celebrated his cosmopolitanism, his direct and fearless critique of tradition and authority, and his apparent defence of the autonomy of the individual. These ideals were all in tune with the spirit of the Enlightenment and the future slogans of the French Revolution (Niehues-Pröbsting, 1996). Diogenes was to an extent instrumentalised to fit in the elegant saloons, where rational discussion took place among the intellectuals of that time. In this context, most of the elements linked to shameless and dirty behaviour or an ascetic style of living were removed in this polished, ultrarational, rhetorical, and graceful version of the ancient philosophy. In this co-option, cynic ideas, as argued by Louise Shea (2010), were distorted in ways that ended up weakening its disruptive potential and diminished its relevance, allowing later philosophers such as the already mentioned Hegel, to subsequently treat cynicism as an insignificant philosophy (Allen, 2020). This was probably the last systematic idealization of cynicism which functioned as well as the last blow to an ancient militant philosophy.

A second use of the term cynic in this period involved the figure of Rousseau and was not applied to express admiration, but rather as a pejorative term to discredit Rousseau when he became an outsider among intellectuals of the Enlightenment (Mazella, 2007). Rousseau was, in his later stages of life, associated with the cynic’s worst possible features, viewed as misanthropic, rude, arrogant, irrational, immoral, and selfish. Elements in connection with falsehood and hypocrisy were added to his discredited description and also to the understanding of the term as used in modern times (Niehues- Pröbsting, 1996).

Nonetheless, a deeper distortion of cynicism was to appear in a third variant to be described here, namely the transformation of cynicism in *Rameau’s nephew* by Denis Diderot (Shea, 2010). In this imaginary conversation between a philosopher (*Moi*)and his nephew, both versions of cynicism seem to be in action simultaneously: an idealised ancient philosophy and a modern bitter and disillusioned modern cynicism (Stanley, 2012). In contraposition to the character of the philosopher *Moi*, the nephew seems to denounce the false and hypocritical society in which he lives and a corrupted culture among the Enlightened intellectuality. He nevertheless accepts that context as unchangeable and with complicity accommodates himself as best as possible for his own self-profit (Stanley, 2012). In accordance with the vernacular modern cynicism, the nephew barks criticism against a degenerated society but doesn’t rebel against it, and his critique becomes amusing and clever banter instead of courageous free speech (Allen, 2020).

As analysed by Niehues-Pröbsting (1996), with this oeuvre the project of the Enlightenment reflects upon itself, and cynicism provides a tool for self-criticism, by which the nephew’s speech becomes a questioning path towards the expectations and ideals they hold. This pessimistic cynic character exposes the dangers of excessive rationality, and his disenchantment is the result of the intrinsic tensions of the Enlightenment dream and its failure is the one that leads to this modern sense of the word cynic. It was specifically this element which triggered the work of Sloterdijk (2015) in his description of ‘Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness’ (p. 5).

It is argued that modern cynicism emerges in a more defined form as a result of the degeneration of the Enlightenment perceived first by philosophers from its own ranks (Diderot himself was one of the editors of the *Encyclopédie*) and by its own contradictions (Niehues-Pröbsting, 1996; Stanley, 2012). This particular vision became even stronger during the counter Enlightenment (and was particularly strong in England where the fear of the French Revolution made the attack against its ideals recurrent). Furthermore, it accused the representatives of the Enlightenment of being dishonourable and charlatan cynics in the modern sense (Mazella, 2007), taking Rousseau as its caricature while denouncing the failures of the project of the Enlightenment as an impossible and dangerous utopia.

Cynic transvaluation continued during most of the following century, not so much in philosophical debates but in literature and had profound effects on the development of Western culture (Schreier, 2009). Cynicism became a synonym for deliberate hypocrisy and strategic manipulation of an audience through the art of dissimulation and clever and false speech. Those new features which were attributed to a new way of being a cynic were already present by 1795 in the work of the Marquis de Sade (see Allen, pp. 144-150)*,* but took systematic shape during the late 19th century under the guise of Dandyism with Oscar Wilde as its most famous exponent. In this period, as stated by Mazella (2007),

…the post-rhetorical, post-Enlightenment intellectual’s act of persuasion could be stigmatized as ‘cynical’ in the sense of manipulating the feelings of the mass audience in a calculated and self-serving way. (p. 177)

With the example of Wilde, and the paradigmatic character of Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the cynic becomes an untrustworthy character, detached, and disillusioned with ideals and moral conventions but looking forward to adapting, enjoying, and thriving in a superficially fashionable society. I claim, however, that a more complex picture of cynicism is required to properly analyse these cases. This misanthropic and distrustful modern version of cynicism so commonly discredited had surviving elements from its ancient forms. For example, when considering the dandy’s aesthetic of life imposing, if implicitly, hostility towards contemporary values and an aggressivity by parody and sarcasm towards the more conventional ways of life.

This modern form of cynicism was analysed as a presence in the early works of Dostoevsky, namely *Notes from the Underground* in 1864, in which elements subsequently associated with nihilism and rational egotism are present (Niehues-Pröbsting, 1996; Foucault, 2011). This egotism and nihilism were, in this case, embedded in a secluded and lonely reflection, characteristics that became associated to our current popular understanding of the term cynicism.

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As briefly presented above, cynic history is rich in transformations and appropriations. Cynicism was constantly reinvented as a force of critique and controversy over time, with new actors in various contexts relating to its multiple meanings. In the above account I have only been able to illustrate a few key transitions in that long history. I hope that these moments have helped to show just how complex the cynic inheritance has become, reaching a level of complexity that will inform my subsequent analysis.

Borrowing a thought from Branham (1996),

While Cynicism as such disappears with classical antiquity, Cynicism as an ideological force and literary tradition has had a remarkable afterlife, and its consequences for Western culture are only beginning to be understood. (p. 18)

This thesis will work towards the discovery and enrichment of the understanding of these consequences.

Reading Argentinean tango through the lens of cynicism

I will argue throughout the course of this thesis, that cynic tradition is an ongoing cultural influence, not simply in the form of modern cynicism but as a critical and ideological force, dynamically present in popular cultural expressions. As explored in the previous section, cynicism in its multiple forms was a vibrant and vigorous force up to the French Revolution and continued in its various guises to impact on every Occidental society until our present. The use of the term as such may have been co-opted and has probably acquired the characteristics of the modern or postmodern sense in its everyday use today. However, the advantage of this study is to be able to explore under the lens of cynicism its multiple historical variations and diverse attributes, cultural expressions that are not necessarily referencing the word and its actual implications. In the words of Allen (2020),

The history of Cynicism is complicated too by the fact that the name is itself unreliable; to assemble a history around this term, to collect together all historical fragments and references to the words Cynic/Cynical/Cynicism, is to restrict that history to a word that has already been much abused and distorted. It might be better, indeed, to assemble a history of Cynicism around a broader set of militant themes. (pp. 68-69)

In this thesis, I will begin the work of writing the unrestricted history, or part of it, that Allen imagines. In fact, tango, as an Argentinean cultural expression that will be considered in this thesis is not claiming itself to be the direct or self-conscious heir of the cynic tradition. In contrast with the cases of the comic strip and Palma’s book in which the references to cynicism are explicit, there are neither mentions of cynicism in tango songs nor are there casual references to Diogenes or other cynic characters. Accordingly, the analysis of the world of tango through the scope of cynicism will not need to trace the explicit use of the term, but instead cynicism will be useful as a tool to analyse it in its critical potential, exploring the sign of discomfort and rebelliousness and its reaction against a dominant social discourse in Argentina during the first half of the 20th century.

As a potential militant discourse, tango will also be examined in the light of its co-option. Tango culture, regardless of its arguable capacity to incense moral codes and institutions, became an emblematic expression of national identity and is praised nowadays as the most important cultural heritage of the nation, featured in brochures for tourists and represented in commemorative days, events, festivals of everyday culture in Argentina. During the 20th century, I claim there was a process of co-option by which some of its critical power was reconfigured and its elements of scandal transformed, softening its critical impetus. This process of co-option, inversion, and idealisation is not foreign to the history of cynicism (Allen 2020), and, as that history demonstrates, co-option is never complete. Here, the versatility of the concept of cynicism, with its multiple manifestations and avatars, will allow for a less structured approach and will encourage the search for remaining signs of rebellion.

*A trip from the brothels to the Vatican City: Tango’s cynic peregrination.*

An understanding of tango through the scope of cynicism presents initial obstacles and dangerous temptations. To begin with, no academic essays have already suggested this conceptual association and tango has never been identified with any trend of cynicism except for casual references to specific themes in the lyrics (Montes, 2017). Furthermore, there is abundant literature about the history of tango (see, for instance, Matamoro, 1969; Salas, 1986; Gobello, 1999; Pujol, 1999; Varela, 2005; Benedetti, 2017), and the life of its interpreters, dancers, and composers (Azzi and Collier, 2002; Barsky, 2004; Pujol, 2017). There are, moreover, copious essays about its relation to gender (Archetti, 2003; Saikin, 2004), with race (Vila, 2000), and with politics (Ulla, 1966; Varela, 2016), and there are even numerous articles establishing the medical advantages of the dance with varied physical and mental conditions (Hackney and Earhart, 2010; Swindlehurst, 2020). However, philosophically or theoretically informed approaches to the analysis of tango are rare (Carella, 1956; Ferrer, 1999; Sábato, 2005; Borges, 2016).

In order to read tango though the lens of cynicism, I will explore tango as a dynamic entity that presented many faces in its history and experienced radical transformations.

In Part I, I will start by exploring the case of Enrique Santos Discépolo, one of the most renowned tango poets in Argentina between the late 1920s up to his death in 1951 and, I argue, the best exponent of the influence of cynicism in the culture of tango. Indeed, the analysis of Discépolo’s lyrics will introduce several features closely related to a widespread understanding of modern cynicism. By mentioning a systematic decadence in the story of tragic characters, Discépolo’s tango presents a disheartening depiction of the present, as being grim and dark, followed by the conviction that no redemption is possible. A strong sense of pessimism evolves from stories of betrayal and the unavoidable failures that tango characters experience in those songs, leading to a general distrust of men and women and a widespread disbelief in humankind. Discépolo’s songs denounce a prevalent hypocrisy in society, which is corrupted, and which has abandoned any moral code. Interestingly, those narrators advocate at times for strategical adaptability, whereas on other occasions they opt for an apathetic and disenchanted response. The cries and complaints that Discépolo’s characters state, use at times exaggeration, satire, and ridicule in order to display a humoristic style of social criticism. This initial introduction of Discépolo’s lyrics, despite contradicting any chronological order in this thesis, will allow the reader to perceive elements more straightforwardly in tango lyrics that not only contradict images of sensuality and passion so commonly attributed to tango, but as well could establish strong links with a vernacular understanding of modern cynicism.

In Part II, I will introduce a chronological account of the historical changes that tango as a genre experienced between its origins and the end of its golden age around 1955. The objective of this section is to allow the reader to familiarise themself with the different events that altered the characteristics of tango culture, as well as to succinctly discuss dominant narratives about these historical transformations. The study of the genre will be organised in a three-stage analysis that will begin by focusing on its discredited origins in the suburbs of late nineteenth-century Buenos Aires up to 1912. By 1880, Argentina had ended the process of national unification under the presidency of Julio Argentino Roca, with the aim of the formation of a modern State and a modern society (Botana, 1977; Salessi, 1995). The birth of tango coincided with the government’s ambition to create a unified and well-organised state based on the introduction of national education and a progression to occidentalising the society. In that context, tango came to represent a dangerous moral plague, spread in the suburbs and in brothels, challenging norms with its erotism and explicit sexuality (Benedetti, 1917). The challenge tango presented to the social ideals and norms of that time was reinforced by the identity of its interpreters, most of them immigrants who attended brothels where the tango dance started in order to search for some comfort in their lives away from family and home. Tango’s music and instrumentation were the result of a cosmopolitan mixture of Italians, Polish, Spanish, and Afro-American immigrants coexisting in the city of Buenos Aires. In a nation desperate to find its own identity, desiring to create a nationalistic and cohesive historical account of its past, the popularity of a dance accused of bringing foreign elements to the spirit of the nation was seen as another attack to its hegemonic self-representation. The analysis of this period will be followed by a transitional process in which tango is reconfigured, with multiple attempts at regulation, interventions by the State and its institutions, and refinement by the appropriation of the dance in high-class circles, transforming the transgressive potential of the music and reconfiguring its role in society, allowing it to become one of the most revered expressions of national identity (Tallón, 1964; Liska, 2014). The playful cheerfulness and mischievousness of topics expressed by early lyrics gave place to a strong moral discourse that emerged in this transformation in a period known in the history of tango as ‘*tango-canción’* (tango song) inaugurated in 1917 with the first recording of “Mi Noche Triste” by Carlos Gardel. A final period, between 1924 and 1955 marked the golden age in tango culture, when its fame was well established and when characteristics associated with melancholy, malcontent, disillusionment, and disenchantment became the main features present in the poetry of its lyrics and in the spirit of the dance.

Part III will continue to analyse the presence of modern cynicism beyond the specific compositions of Discépolo, in order to suggest that those same features are common traits in tango culture. I will discuss the influence of cynicism in the period known as ‘*tango-canción’* that started in 1917 and ended in 1955. This task involved the consideration of multiple composers and compositions and will entail the discussion of a more varied set of scholars that have analysed tango as a moralist discourse (Valela, 2005, 2016; Conde, 2003, 2014). I argue that this so-called moral discourse is the very essence of cynical speech. Finally, I will discuss the relevance of melancholy as one key feature of tango lyrics in this period that connects directly with the idealisation of a past which plays a fundamental role in the perception of a disheartening present and a pessimistic conception of the future.

In Part IV, I will examine tango in its origins, from 1880 to 1917. The non chronological order in the organisation of this thesis is explained due to the role that the representation of tango in its origins had in the development of a dominant sense of melancholia that I analyse as a modern cynic manifestation in tangos between 1917 and 1955.

In Part IV, then, I will first explore those scandalising elements in the sensual movements of the dance, its exhibitionist tendencies, and the cheerful defiance tango presents in the face of social codes. In this case, a conceptualisation of bodily, transgressive cynicism presents an extremely useful analytic frame. In a manner that bears comparison to Diogenes’ scatological and obscene acts, the bodily features of tango were seen as deviant and disturbing. They were condemned by the media and government, and were rejected in every institution (Collier, 1992; Varela, 2016). This first stage will be understood as a more recent manifestation of the so-called street cynicism of the early Roman Empire when the Empire that was, in the words of Shea (2010),

…plagued by wandering troupes of men comprising largely members from the poorer strata of society who adopted cynicism as a popular philosophy for the disenfranchised and discontented. (p.5)

I don’t imply that street cynicism has passed forward through time to directly affect contemporary cynicism emanating from popular manifestations. However, I think that it provides an interesting case in which the scope of cynicism extends from the lowest strata of society to the elite and in the process gets transformed and distorted. Cynic elements present in the lyrics and culture of tango varied substantially in the transition from a popular and discredited dance into a well-respected iconic expression of the national identity. It is worth analysing such cynic elements in tango’s early period taking into consideration those characteristics of street cynicism that were perceived as dangerous and unsubordinated by the dominant class.

Finally, in Part V, I will specifically focus on the relationship between tango and education, in particular exploring how those cynic traits in tango from different periods implied a challenge to the Argentinean educational system. By the beginning of the 20th century, Argentina was trying to establish itself as a promising land, seducing immigrants with the illusion of a glorious destiny and redesigning its own identity. The development of public education and the construction of a cultural tradition was a fundamental task in order to provide prestige and distinctiveness to the country (Gerchunoff and Llach, 1998). In that specific context in Argentinean history, tango culture simultaneously played a part in challenging that construction and reinforcing it. With strategies and features analysed here under a lens that includes different branches of cynicism, tango as a cultural manifestation posed a critique and a questioning of the culture of the educated and the practices of education. Education here will be taken as a broad concept, implying confrontations with institutions, norms, and values of education, as well as challenges to those components that define the culture of the intellectual elite. Tango was considered a threat by the upper classes and as a vulgar manifestation of the masses recently incorporated to the democratic life of the nation. However, tango ended up being co-opted in order to become a proud cultural export once transformed and modified by the members of that same upper class that initially rejected it.

I will conclude this thesis, in the Afterword, by discussing if these explored elements of disappointment and pessimism in tango culture are necessarily a form of complaint that invite the listener to a pointless defeatism or if, alternatively, they provide possibilities for rebelliousness and social criticism. In fact, I argue that a simplified and exclusively negative understanding of some features in tango lyrics that I connect with cynicism, is part of the justification that explains why tango scholars, dancers and musicians tend to avoid references to those aspects and prefer, instead, to focus on tango as a romantic genre. It is this version of tango as sensual and passionate that is predominant around the world nowadays, and it is the one that avoids a careful analysis of what tango states in its lyrics. Furthermore, this version of tango disregards, even omits, tango’s own history, with its processes of transformation, co-option, and mutation.

It is worth adding that whilst I have been exploring this contradiction academically over the past few years, I have also experienced it as a tango dancer, musician, and dance teacher for the last 15 years of my life. I first started dancing tango in the early 2000s, at the peak of a tango revival that brought younger generations into the genre and the dance, through innovations with electronic tango and contemporary dance. Since then, I have been giving and taking dance lessons and attending innumerable tango social events, as well as tango concerts and festivals in Buenos Aires. I first became properly aware of the sensualised version of tango when I started teaching the dance abroad, first in New Zealand and then, since 2016 in Sheffield, UK. I automatically started to reproduce the stereotypical version of tango that implied glamour and sensuality, elegance, and passion. Since embarking on this PhD project, however, I have started to share among my students a deeper meaning of what tango could represent, interrupting dances to translate sections of songs, giving workshops about the history of the music and the dance, and organising spaces for debate about the nature of the dance itself, here in Sheffield and at international tango festivals. I hope, by the end of this thesis, to be able to invite the reader to rethink the nature of tango and, by doing so, reconsider at the same time, the influence of cynicism in the popular culture of Western societies and what the term means, and could potentially imply, when removed from stereotypes.

# **Part I. Discépolo: a case study in cynicism****.**

*Introduction*

Part I of this thesis aims to analyse the oeuvre of tango composer Enrique Santos Discépolo as an artistic expression that contains several features correlating with a cultural phenomenon that is usually and broadly defined as ‘modern cynicism’. Discépolo was one of the most famous poets and composers of the period in which tango’s popularity was at its peak, and the period in which the lyrics and, accordingly, the importance of the composers took particular importance in tango culture (1920-1955). Furthermore, Discépolo is usually considered as the figure who introduced a more complex (or at least varied) set of ideas and concepts in tango lyrics. Indeed, Discépolo is arguably one of the most renowned tango writers and his songs were recorded by the most famous orchestras and sung in plays and movies by the most important singers of that period (Galasso, 1967). I claim that an exploration of Discépolo’s lyrics through the lens of cynicism may bring a reconfiguration of what tango lyrics suggest and transmit as part of a particular ethos, and, by extension, that it may offer an opportunity to think again about the dominant values and emotions spread in Argentinean popular culture, at least between the 1920s and the 1950s.

My decision to focus on the specific case of Discépolo as the starting point for this section of the thesis could surprise the reader and may indeed subvert the traditional order that recommends starting at the level of the general and moving later to the particular. However, I think it is useful to begin by confronting commonplace and romanticised perceptions of tango by launching straight into a specific example of Tango lyric negativity, in the work of Discépolo. Indeed, I consider that in Discépolo’s compositions it is possible to find the most striking manifestations of modern cynicism. These arguably cynic characteristics can be seen in the following themes that may be found in Discépolo’s work: the grim, pessimist and decadent representation of the world where all illusions end in disappointment; a systematic depiction of the hypocritical behaviour of every character in his songs which reinforces the meanness and cruelty of mankind; a portrayal of a depressive perspective of the future when no alternative is possible and in which the only possibilities are to isolate or to accommodate to defeat in a selfish survival approach; and, a spread of a general distrust in institutions, values and moral codes. Those elements usually associated to modern cynicism are not exceptional or occasional lines in Discépolo’s tango. Instead, I contend that Discépolo’s entire production is subsumed by a modern cynic mentality.

As stated, this starting point will prompt the reader to confront and contradict a widespread and dominant conception of tango culture associated with passion and glamour that tends to be particularly popular in Europe and United States in more recent periods. The contrast between the romantic, sensual, and erotic representation of tango, dominant in Hollywood and modern television programs where tango dance is sexualised and made exotic (Savigliano, 1995; Cara, 2009) and the narratives in the lyrics of Discépolo is particularly striking.

I consider Discépolo to be indicative of a broader cynicism which infused tango at that time, and that, although Discépolo is perhaps the most remarkable example of that phenomenon, he is not an exception. Consequently, once Discépolo’s connection with modern cynicism has been already demonstrated, I will move on into tango culture analysed from a broader scope.

# Chapter 1. Discépolo’s lyrics as an expression of modern cynicism.

The study of tango under the lens of cynicism in its modern and ancient forms has, as I stated in the introduction, never been explored in any kind of detail before. The rare occasions in which the term is mentioned in relation to tango always imply a vague use of the concept as a direct synonym of scepticism or pessimism. This seems to be the case in the study conducted by Julie Taylor (1998), entitled *Paper Tangos,* in which several features usually associated with a vernacular understanding of modern cynicism are present. In other cases, the consideration of elements that could correlate with modern cynicism in tango are only taken as one of many facets of that cultural phenomenon. Jorge Gottling (1998), for instance, considers in his book *Tango, Melancólico testigo* [Tango: Melancholic Witness]*,* that the theme of scepticism is one among many recurrent topics in tango lyrics. More explicit is the case of the research by María de los Angeles Montes (2017) in which she explores the perception of the meaning behind the tango lyrics that dancers create. She researched for four years the ways in which tango dancers in the city of Cordoba, in Argentina, perceived and interpreted the meaning of a varied set of tango lyrics that were popular in events for social dancing in that region. She conducted interviews in which the participants were asked to listen carefully to certain songs and discuss later their impressions and the way in which those lyrics reflected their understanding of tango culture. Montes covered in her study different issues such as the representation of the figure of the mother, and the concept of romance, sexism, and violence against women. In that study, one chapter named “El cinismo tanguero” [The cynic tango] (p. 342) discussed the presence of a cynic (in its modern sense) message in several tango lyrics. She questioned her participants’ reactions when asking them to directly reflect on and interpret their meaning and the level of representativity that a grim and pessimist description of reality have in the culture of tango. Interestingly, most of the dancers interviewed in her study rejected the importance of those elements of despair, pessimism, and hypocrisy and instead they preferred to retain sensations of romantic nostalgia even if they were not explicit in the lyrics Montes provided. Montes indeed recognises that cynicism has a place in tango, and in her study challenges and reflects upon the perception of her participants. However, I claim that she is herself quite exceptional among scholars. It is indeed that attitude of her participants of rejection or obliviousness towards those features connected with modern cynicism that I think are widespread among historians and academics related with the tango culture. I would like to suggest here as an opening gambit that this denial reflects a desire to negate those disheartening and pessimistic features that are strongly connected with modern cynicism, rejecting those disagreeable aspects that may threaten to diminish the value and importance of tango in the Argentinean cultural identity.

The specific case of Discépolo, however, is more complex. Academics, writers, and journalists present a more varied reaction when considering those features that I will connect with modern cynicism and the explicit reference to that term when alluding to Discépolo’s work. In fact, in the specific case of studies exploring the work of Discépolo it is indeed possible to find recurrently the term ‘cynic’ or ‘cynical’ when describing certain aspects of his lyrics by diverse scholars, biographers or even journalists both contemporaneous to his life or in posthumous analysis (Galasso, 1967; Matamoro, 1969; Jakubs, 1984; Conde, 2003; Varela, 2005; Pujol, 2017). In most of those cases, nevertheless, the term is used as a vague adjective, reinforcing the familiar use of the term with ambivalent meanings related to the combination of pessimism and resignation and the need to adapt to a broken world. There have been no attempts to link the concept in its philosophical and more complex meanings and this is, in part, the task of the current chapter. There is, however, a significant exception. Nestor Luis Cordero’s essay “Cuando Discépolo se puso a ladrar” [When Discépolo started to bark] in his book *Veinte siglos no es nada* [Twenty centuries mean nothing] (2011) focuses exclusively on the connection between the poet’s work and the philosophy of cynicism. Cordero’s exploration, however, centres the analysis exclusively in a comparison between elements of ancient cynicism and some of Discépolo’s lyrics, and makes a direct comparison between Discépolo and Diogenes. The book is aimed at a non-specialist audience and, accordingly, the analysis of both the poems and the ancient philosophy is quite succinct and necessarily superficial.

As mentioned above, the attribution of pessimism in Discépolo’s universe is undeniable and the hypocrisy and disappointment present on his characters is dominant and is not a topic of contestation among scholars and biographers exploring his work. The interpretation of those features, however, is the centre of the debate. Blas Matamoro developed an influential version according to which Discépolo’s work was just part of a hiatus in the historical progression of tango culture. In his book *La Ciudad del Tango* [Tango City] (1969) Matamoro stresses the dominance of a narrative based on a moralist prescription in accordance with the values of the upper class in the lyrics of tango during the period called t*ango-cancion [Tango song]* between 1917 and 1950. The case of Discépolo appears as representative of a specific ‘interlude’ in the development of the genre, that he defines as ‘*La mishiadura’* [‘the impoverishment’ in Argentinean slang] in which tango suffers the consequences of the social, economic, and political crisis of the time creating a set of depressive topics exclusively attributed to the drama of the context. In concordance with Matamoro’s perspective, Gustavo Varela in his more recent studies (2005; 2016) attributes Discépolo’s style to the exceptional circumstances of the crisis during the 30s, in which Discépolo interrupted the narrative tendencies of tango although he kept in the background the same prescriptive and moralist emphasis of the tango lyrics[[6]](#footnote-6) in the period inaugurated in 1917 with “Mi noche triste*”[[7]](#footnote-7)* [My sad night*].* Varela (2016) states, referring to the chapter in which Discépolo is at the focal point:

The economic crisis of 1930 and its social and political effects will create a moment of discontinuity towards the interior of the tango cancion. A more intimate and enclosed poetry will be elaborated by a new generation of writers. However, despite those differences, the moral discourse will continue being the base, more hidden now, on which the new lyrics will continue to be created. (p. 114, m.t)[[8]](#footnote-8)

Osvaldo Pelletieri’s considerations makes this claim of Discépolo’s exceptionalism explicit by stating,

An absolutely exceptional and unique case out of the strict system of the tango Carreiguista[[9]](#footnote-9) is Enrique Santos Discépolo, transgressor of almost every rule of the genre (…) It is evident that the literary system of tango does not adapt to this kind of transgressive and revulsive text. (Pelletieri quoted in Conde, 2003, p.58 m.t)

The three authors, Matamoro, Pelletieri and Varela recognised the presence of a pessimist portrayal of the society and use the term cynic as an occasional adjective to describe his lyrics. However, they claim that in that respect Discépolo represents a historical exception, specifically tuned with the social and political crisis of 1930s Argentina.

An alternative interpretation implies understanding Discépolo’s pessimism not as a sign of despair but instead as a denunciation of the social crisis of his time. His first biographer, Norberto Galasso (1967) argued that Discépolo’s tangos were a fierce criticism pitted against the social order prior to the Peronism[[10]](#footnote-10) from the mid-1940s. According to Galasso, Discépolo was writing political tangos that were simultaneously condemning the injustices of his time and campaigning for change. Galasso even claims that Discépolo stopped writing tangos as soon as the social conditions of the lower classes started to improve in the late 1940s. Following that perspective, Oscar Conde (2003) and Héctor Benedetti (2017) consider Discépolo’s songs as politically motivated. Both authors perceive his work as Discépolo’s concern for the social condition of the economically and socially marginalized in society. In these authors, explicit references to the term cynicism are quite uncommon.

A third group of writer links Discépolo’s work with his artistic and literary influences, in particular in connection with the works of Luigi Pirandello and a movement called “Teatro Grotesco” [Grotesque theatre] and simultaneously stresses the relevance of his personal life experience as direct causes that may explain his grim descriptions of social life within his lyrics. This is the case of the biography written by Sergio Pujol (2017) and of the analysis by Horacio Ferrer (1999).

Finally, I would like to point out that there has been one more explicit association between Discépolo and the concept of cynicism. Some journalists contemporaneous to the time he was writing the tango lyrics, used the term as a complaint, and a way of disqualifying his work. Domingo Casadevall (1957), for example, accused Discépolo’s lyrics of creating a wave of relativism and of putting in danger the values of the people of the lower classes. The most influential version of this approach was the book by Lara and Roncetti de Panti *El tema del tango en la literatura Argentina* [Tango as a topic in Argentinean literature](1961) in which the authors stated that in Discépolo’s work,

…beat a grim pessimism in the depths of his philosophy, shining with cynicism that make him the Lucretius of our days. (Quoted in Galasso, 1967, p. 183, m.t)

Indeed, with the exception of Cordero (2011), most writers tend to either silence or condemn those features that could correlate with our current perception of modern cynicism. I will discuss the implications of this denial later on but as a first stage in this Part I, I will start by arguing for a connection between Discépolo’s art and elements present in a varied range of definitions related to modern cynicism.

In this Part I, in order to justify that connection between Discépolo’s art and modern cynicism I will present and analyse some of his lyrics in order to demonstrate the coherence in the pessimist universe of Discépolo’s creations, focusing mainly on the lyrics which became a popular success and remained present in the culture of tango well after Discépolo’s death. I will consider his tangos as an artistic entity, and even if I am not going to turn a complete blind eye to the social and political context, at least I will not explain away the negativity of these lyrics by viewing them as a mere expression of the difficult circumstances or the personal tribulations of their author. It is undeniable that most of the tangos considered here were written during a 30-year period by when the socio-economic and political circumstances of the country and city of Buenos Aires were substantially modified (Gerchunoff and Llach, 1998) and during which the life experiences of Discépolo were equally transformed. However, I will deliberately approach his oeuvre as a continuum despite those contextual differences in order to fortify the claim that the spread of cynicism in the Argentinean popular culture does not obey to the specificity of a particular historical context, but it is, instead, the result of a cultural influence that goes through the century and affects a multiplicity of artistic manifestations.

*Referencing an ambivalent term: contrasting definitions of modern cynicism.*

During the course of this section, there will be a frequent use of the term ‘modern cynicism’. However, as already mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, both its ancient philosophical form and its modern counterpart resist codification and avoid being defined in a restricted way. It is not possible to formulate a brief statement that could nail down our understanding of ancient or modern cynicism. In this initial part, I will begin by focusing mainly on the understanding of modern cynicism, both in its vernacular and academic formulation. Ancient cynicism and other manifestations of the concept throughout the history of its mutations will be left behind in the pages that follow but will be considered in depth in Part IV in which I will explore its relationship with tango in its origins. In any case, it is my intention in this Part I to put the emphasis on Discépolo’s work rather than attempting to clarify the meaning of modern cynicism as such. Accordingly, I will take the liberty of considering and appealing to a varied set of definitions from contrasting points of view. This will, at times, create some conflicts and possible contradictions between the versions of modern cynicism presented here. Each academic or journalist defines modern cynicism in different ways and consequently it varies the depiction of the way in which modern cynicism manifests and influences Western societies. I will argue that a multiplicity of features frequently attributed to modern cynicism are present in Discépolo’s lyrics and, once this statement is sufficiently proven, I will claim that in his songs a more complex version of cynicism is manifested, one that includes some characteristics of ancient cynicism that are usually ignored or considered as outdated in the analysis of contemporary culture.

I will incorporate as points of reference, sources depicting the nature of modern cynicism as varied as: strict definitions from Dictionaries and Encyclopaedias, portrayals of cynicism displayed in YouTube videos for a wide and non-specialized audience, as well as a range of academic perspectives on this topic. The latter group I briefly introduce here and categorize according to the tripartite division between (1) those academics who explicitly reject any positive influence of modern cynicism and call for cultural remedies, (2) those who accept the inevitability of this cultural phenomenon and recognise up to a point some valuable elements that need to remain part of the Western civilization, and (3) a final and much smaller group who are less judgemental regarding the consequences of modern cynicism, and do not automatically reject its influence in contemporary societies or even seek to redeem, or rescue specific elements of cynicism, with that redeemed cynicism then circumscribed to specific conditions as an open alternative for a more radical criticism of their society.

In the first group, I include descriptions of modern cynicism from academics and writers that explicitly condemn cynicism, warn readers against its devastating effects in their culture, and provide recommendations for its eradication as a negative influence. I will reference authors such as Wilber Caldwell in his book *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream* (2006) and his lamentation of the spread of cynicism typified in connection with disbelief and disillusionment in American society. Caldwell defines modern cynicism as a “numbing venom”, and as “an insidious and unyielding aggressor” (p. xii). His analysis of the relation between cynicism and disappointment will be considered in this section. At the same time, the description provided by Jeffrey Goldfarb in *The Cynical Society* (1991) will be discussed in which the term is presented as a widespread illness, closely linked with absolute relativism that afflicts institutions, values and traditions, and that puts in danger the culture of democracy in America. Goldfarb stresses two elements in the description of cynicism that are going to be particularly relevant in this chapter: the centrality of individuality and selfishness and the silent acceptance of the existing order, both by alienation and complicity and by impotence and resignation. Finally, the work of Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (1997) similarly presents modern cynicism as a pathology, closely related with a postmodern character that ends up alienated from society and retreats from political engagement. For the purpose of this section, Bewes’ analysis regarding the obsession with authenticity and the detachment from the man or woman from his/her own subjectivity will be particularly relevant in the examination of Discépolo’s tangos.

For the second group I will include the works of those academics that similarly condemn modern cynicism but accept it as inevitable and explore alternatives to temper its negative effects. This, for example, is the approach of Ronald Arnett and Pat Arneson in their *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age* (1999) in which they address cynicism as a threatening blind force in our era that erodes fruitful dialogue and induces narcissistic and selfish behaviour. However, these authors recognise this cultural phenomenon as unavoidable in our modern times and attempt to find a sense of pragmatic hope with a minimum of civility and some communicative engagement in order to mitigate its destructive effect and to fortify the democratic tradition. Despite the negative connotations, these authors do not fully reject all the elements that constitute what they define as modern cynicism and claim that cynic behaviour could be valid and useful but only on limited specific occasions. A similar approach is taken by David Hiley in *Doubt and the Demands of Democratic Citizenship* (2006) and his conception of modern cynicism will be considered in this section as he stresses those elements that link cynicism with scepticism and criticism. These forces of disbelief, the author argues, present a challenge to the formation of a solid and healthy democratic system, and should be controlled but without a complete dismissal of cynical tendencies. Once again, according to the author, certain elements of doubt should be accepted but in a restricted and non-radical format. Furthermore, Keyes, in *Seeing Through Cynicism* (2006) mourns the lost active engagement in what used to be cynical critique in Diogenes’ times and contrasts modern cynicism with its ancient counterpart. He depicts the modern cynic as one who obsesses with the unkind motivations of others. According to Keyes, such a character fears to be perceived as naïve and distrusts others as a way to protect themselves. Two additional writers in this subgroup will provide a depiction of modern cynicism that will be considered in the following pages: Donald Kanter and Phillip Mirvis in their book *The Cynical Americans* (1989) consider how cynicism appears and manifests in the workplace and is presented as a response against a world of deceit, as a safeguard reaction that allows adaptability, an element that will be displayed in several segments of Discépolo’s lyrics and will deserve attentive analysis. The authors in this group, then, believe that there are aspects of modern cynicism that could be redeemed if its more negative, and corrosive aspects are reigned in. They might either see aspects of modern cynicism as a potentially useful critical force, or a source of adaptability, a survival mechanism, perhaps, that can serve a positive function in small doses.

In the final and third group, I will reference the works of David Mazella (2007) and Ansgar Allen (2020) that explore the development and transformation of the concept of cynicism through history. Mazella, in his book *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (2007)*,* conducts a genealogical study of the concept and its uses from its Greek origins to the dandies of the late nineteenth century, showing how the concept has served alternative political and rhetorical goals in a diverse range of contexts. By this historical investigation which focuses mainly on British history, Mazella provides a less dichotomic version of ancient and modern cynicism which allows him to consider the concept of modern cynicism as a much more complex category, enriched by each one of its tergiversations and mutations and indeed, perceives that it could open up possibilities of intervention not limited to strict definitions or delimitations. Allen, in his book *Cynicism* (2020), equally rejects an idealization of a primitive cynicism or a defenestration of the modern one and is opened to consider its specificities and peculiarities in each epoch by focusing his research on the implications of cynicism in its connection with education. Allen neither forces a precise definition of cynicism nor regrets the impossibility (as he claims) of ever encapsulating it. He acknowledges the obscure, contradictory and imprecise identity of the term and embraces that characteristic considering it to be one of its major strengths, rejecting its submission to an intellectual discernment. By embracing all definitions and descriptions of the term simultaneously though not uncritically, I likewise attempt to reject its codification. Both authors provide a less judgemental understanding of modern cynicism that may allow me to reconsider the lyrics of Discépolo under a brighter light.

Finally, one central author will be used as a fundamental building block in this coming analysis: The work of Peter Sloterdijk in his book *Critique of Cynical Reason* (2015) and his description of modern cynicism will be applied as a constant reference, not only for the richness of his analysis but as well because of its influence in subsequent studies and its impact in the way in which the term is perceived nowadays. Indeed, the German philosopher wrote his masterpiece in 1983 and in a few months more than 40,000 copies were sold making it one of the best sellers of philosophy books of the year (Huyssen, 2015). Sloterdijk reacts in the book against what he perceived to be the rise of political disillusionment as a result of failing meta-narratives or traditional ideologies and the lack of social alternatives in western societies after the revolts of late 60s. In his analysis, he linked cynicism and resignation describing a pessimist mindset tuned with the ideological conservatism of the 1980s, a mindset responsible for assuming that any transformation to the status quo is impossible. His analysis reinforces the dichotomy between ancient and modern cynicism, famously splitting the concept of cynicism in two with opposed characteristics. Furthermore, he sets a specific time when the partition happened, as a direct result of the failures of the Enlightenment during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In one of his most quoted phrases, Sloterdijk states, “Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernised, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has laboured both successfully and unsuccessfully” (2015, p. 5). According to Sloterdijk, the failure of the Enlightenment in producing a fair, equal, and free society allowed the development of a form of disillusionment that brought apathy, indifference and opportunism based in a bad faith and mistrust of others. The confidence that Enlightenment thinkers at times expressed in the project of reason, the liberal economy and democracy were utopic ideals that, in Sloterdijk perspective, crashed systematically during the nineteenth and twentieth century and forged the psychological profile of the modern cynic.

In close relation with Sloterdijk’s analysis, I will introduce and reflect upon two iconic moments in the transformation of our modern understanding of cynicism: firstly, the double mutation of the term signified in Jean Jacques Rousseau’s works and in particular as a result of the publication of his *The Confessions* (1953)and secondly, the configuration of a new kind of cynic analysis and behaviour present in *Rameau’s nephew* (1966) by Denis Diderot. In this domain, I will heavily rely on the analysis of those literary pieces by Mazella (2007), Louisa Shea (2010), Sharon Stanley (2007; 2012) and Allen (2020) in order to develop the analytic frame for reading Discépolo. I claim that exploring Discépolo’s lyrics under the lens of those two transformative figures in that specific convulsive context of the Enlightenment, will provide a new angle from which to think and understand the cultural influence of cynicism.

*Discépolo’s lyrics: ‘the tango philosopher’.*

Discépolo, born in Buenos Aires in 1901 to a family of Italian immigrants, was not only the author of famous tangos, but as well an actor in theatre and cinema, a composer, playwright, screenwriter, and filmmaker. After his success in theatre and in particular as a consequence of the popularity of his first tangos in the late 1920s, he became a popular star, regularly appearing in the news and on radio programs. He actively collaborated in the formation of a labour union of musicians and songwriters and was an explicit supporter of the Peron’s government by regularly performing in a radio program of that time “Digo lo que pienso” [I say what I think] with monologues that damaged part of his popularity as an artist (Galasso, 1967). He was undoubtably a celebrity of his time, appearing regularly in magazines and newspapers. He was publicly known in Buenos Aires and in tango scenes around the world and even recognised by Juan Domingo Peron as the poet of the nation (Pujol, 2017).

Verses from some of his most iconic songs became part of the vernacular vocabulary of contemporary Argentinean society, his phrases provided a name to television shows even 40 years after his death, and fragments of his tangos were graffitied on the walls of the streets of Buenos Aires during the social crisis and the protests of 2001[[11]](#footnote-11). His songs are still among the most listened to and danced in tango events of nowadays and new versions of his tangos are still recorded regularly by musicians of different genres in Argentina, Spain, and Brazil. His fame spread in Buenos Aires and beyond the universe of tango (versions of his lyrics in a Rock and Pop style were popularised by Los Piojos, Hermetica and Calamaro during the 1990s) and his name became even an adjective ‘discepoliano’ in Argentinean slang (Pujol, 2017). Regardless of his fame and intricate style,I argue that his lyrics are the best exponent of the influence of the modern meaning of cynicism in the culture of tango, in which it is possible to find clear elements that could correlate with definitions suggested by academics dealing with the concept, or even in connection with its vernacular use nowadays.

To begin with, I will explore the presence of a modern sense of cynicism in Discépolo’s lyrics by focusing on the following aspects: In Chapter 2 I will consider the sense of pessimism as a result of disappointment and systematic and inevitable failure in the experience of his characters. In Chapter 3 I will explore the distrust of the other and a strong sense of the ubiquitous individualism and egotism of humankind. This grim presentation of humankind will thereby imply the challenge to the authenticity of society and the consequent sense of its falsehood and hypocrisy. In Chapter 4 I will address the individual responses to this disappointment in the form of isolationism and defeatist accommodation. Even if each aspect can be found in most of Discépolo’s compositions, I will address them in turn by focusing on two or three illustrative lyrics for each of those 3 points in which those characteristics are more evident.

It is important to remember that the use and inclusion of these elements usually attributed in connection with definitions of modern cynicism do not imply that I consider modern cynicism exclusively in those terms. Indeed, a central part of my argument consists of rejecting a univocal form of cynicism presumed present in our contemporary culture where, instead, as I argue, aspects of so-called ancient and modern cynicism coexist, as well as elements that resulted in the transformations which occurred to this movement of thought through the centuries. For schematic and analytic purposes, I think it is worth providing an analysis based on already existing definitions of cynics in its lower-case sense to begin with. I will build on the works of scholars with such varied approaches as Sloterdijk, Shea, Stanley and Bewes among many others, in order to allow a subsequent analysis in which alternative conceptions of the history of cynicism may be equally considered.

I will leave for Part V of this thesis, a consideration of the distrust directed at institutions, metanarratives and in particular the suspicion directed at the field of education present in Discépolo’s songs. This topic, as well as the analysis of the specific slang used in his songs that, I claim, directly challenge the educational project of a unified national language, will deserve a lengthy analysis of its own.

I will now start by addressing those elements that may allow me to establish a connection between modern cynicism and Discépolo’s lyrics by combining specific verses of his songs and characteristics of what is usually described as cynicism in its lower-case form.

# Chapter 2. Ode to pessimism: nostalgia for the past, disappointment with the present and a disheartening future.

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| --- | --- |
| El mundo fue y será una porquería, ya lo sé… | The world was and will be filth, I already know… |
|  | (Discépolo, “Cambalache”, 1934) [[12]](#footnote-12) |

Regardless of the disparity in topics and styles of Discépolo’s lyrics, arguably the one constant in all of them is a dark, grim and pessimist description of the reality surrounding the narrators. This pessimist tone appears in those tangos with a sarcastic and parodic style such as “Chorra” [Thief] written in 1929 and “Victoria” [Victory] from 1931; as well as in those in which predominates a social criticism of the society such as “Yira, yira” [Turning around] from 1930 and “Cambalache” [Bazaar] from 1934; and in tangos focusing on romantic tragedies as “Esta noche me emborracho” [This night I get drunk] from 1928 and “Malevaje” [The mob] from 1928. The negative outlook of these lyrics equally refers to economic situations as in “Que vachaché” [What’re you gonna do?] from 1926, emotions and sentiments as in “Uno” [Oneself] from 1943, or the decadence of moral values as in “Que sapa, señor” [What’s up, mister] from 1931. The present tense in which the singer describes his sorrows and pains, is systematically tragic, and he either cries for his economic or romantic misfortunes or criticises the fallen society as a whole. The latter examples, “Yira, yira”, “Cambalache”, and “Que sapa señor”, probably offer a more explicit element of condemnation of the world in every possible aspect. “Cambalache”, written in 1934 and considered his most well-known composition, is probably the most evident exposition of his unpleasant evaluation of human nature and society. The twentieth century is described in the verses of the song as “…a display of insolent malice…” in which we all live “…sunken in a fuzz and in the same mud…” and where the ethical distinctions are no longer valid:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Hoy resulta que es lo mismo | Today it is the same |
| ser derecho que traidor! | to be decent or a traitor! |
| Ignorante, sabio, chorro, | To be an ignorant, a wiseman, a pickpocket, |
| generoso o estafador! | a generous person or a swindler! |
| Todo es igual! Nada es mejor! (…) | All is the same, nothing is better! (…) |
| Si uno vive en la impostura | if one lives in a pose |
| y otro roba en su ambición, | and another, in his ambition steals, |
| da lo mismo que sea cura, colchonero, | it is the same if it is a priest, a mattress maker, |
| rey de bastos, caradura o polizón… | a king of cubs, a cad or a tramp… |

Even further, the title of the song itself, “Cambalache”, can possibly be translated as a bazaar, meaning, a second-hand shop with an anarchic display of random items for sale, all mixed together without any order. As argued by Matamoro (1969), in Discépolo’s songs society is ruled by an individualistic obsession with material utilitarianism and the allegory of this bazaar expresses the idea that every moral value can be measured with an economic price (this idea will be repeated in several of his other compositions that I will consider below). The song indeed enumerates a sequence of characters all assuming equal value in this chaotic society, including a Priest (‘Don Bosco’), an Argentinean founding father (‘San Martin’,) followed by a famous French conman from that decade (‘Sacha Stavinsky’), a prostitute (‘La Mignon’) or a Mafia boss (‘Don Chicho’) and makes explicit the meaning of the metaphor:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Igual que en la vidriera irrespetuosa | Like in the disrespectful window |
| de los cambalaches | of the bazaars, |
| se ha mezclao la vida | life is mixed up, |
| y herida por un sable sin remache | and wounded by a sword without rivets, |
| ves llorar la Biblia junto un calefón. | you can see the Bible crying next to a boiler. |

Referring to this unusual last image, Pujol (2017) argues that it implies the use of the pages of the Bible as toilet paper, hanging in public toilets with a nail caricatured as a decadent sword, with a total banalization of both respectable symbols (the bible, and the sword) in the Argentinean society of that time. According to Pujol’s research, at the beginning of the twentieth century, public toilets in Argentina used to have a pocket version of the Bible in order to stimulate morally good reading for the masses. In Pujol’s account, when users in need could not find toilet paper, they used to transform the sacred pages for a more mundane and scatological use. At the same time, the ‘sable’ is a very specific word in Argentinean Spanish that refers to a sword that refers to the independent wars and the heroes of the nation. In the song’s verse, Pujol interprets the mention of the sword as a metaphor for those nails that kept the Bibles in the toilets hanging in the wall, thereby mocking both symbols of pride and honour. Those symbols, I argue, should not be viewed as moral undertones persisting in the lyrics (as Galasso, 1967, argues) because they are put in a context of a fetid atmosphere where they become ridiculed and derided.

I will present further examples of this dark description of Discépolo’s reality and the society in which he lived, but it is important to point out that so far, however, it is still possible to relate those elements with the speech of a fervent moralist, a reformist or an advocate of social realism, with each characteristic so predominant in the artists of Buenos Aires in those decades.[[13]](#footnote-13) Indeed, all of those characteristics were attributed to the lyricist by Galasso (1967) in his biography of Discépolo that became a strong reference for further studies. There is, however, a crucial difference that may reinforce the connection with modern cynicism as a way of contesting alternative conceptualizations: The future as it appears in Discépolo’s descriptions offers no opportunity for redemption or improvement. The fate of each of his characters and the destiny of the society itself is always as dark as the representation of the present. It is particularly that negativity in relation with the possibility of a better future that is the most controversial in the works of Discépolo and one of the most relevant reasons for the censure of his critics. In that respect, the words of Mazella (2007) are eloquent by referring to the reservations provoked by modern cynicism:

Cynics are feared because they threaten the public with a genuinely worrying prospect, a future without hope of meaningful change. At the very least, cynics foresee a future in which individuals have little chance of fixing their problems or improving their conditions in life or at work. (p. 4)

Indeed, a disheartening future and the impossibility of individual or social action in effecting the positive transformation of the status quo is central in the definition of a current tendency of cynicism, at least in the understanding of several scholars, in particular for those (unlike Mazella) who are direct opponents and critics of cynicism. Caldwell (2006), for instance, regrets the cynic refusal of any possible solution to a cruel, although accurate and at times necessary depiction of American society, a refusal which assumes that any alternative is naïve and unrealistic. Furthermore, worrying about the (perhaps understandable) unavoidable political disengagement of the American public, both Hiley (2006) and Goldfarb (1991) warn against the lack of answers provided by a cynic distrust in ideals that results in an incapacity to react against the unjust structure of our society. They claim that such cynic distrust strengthens and thereby reinforces a pessimist self-fulfilling prophesy. This characteristic of modern cynicism is traced by Stanley (2007) to the description of Parisian society during the Enlightenment which appears in Diderot’s satire “Rameau’s nephew”. Stanley takes this as the starting point in the development of our understanding of modern cynicism, in which the cynic nephew describes the moral failings around him but views the prevalence of hypocrisy as inevitable.

Returning once again to the lyrics of Discépolo in the first verses of “Cambalache” already quoted at the beginning of this chapter, the use of the future tense in “[the world] will be filth…” works not so much as a prophesy than as a declamation of an irreparable condition. But this conception of a damned fate is even clearer in the verses of his song “Yira, Yira” written in the days before the coup d’état in 1930 led by José Felix Uriburu that inaugurated a period of political instability which went on to last until 1945.

The first stanza describes once again a dramatic situation that will be repeated with variations in the stanzas to follow:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Cuando la suerte que es grela | When fate, just like a woman[[14]](#footnote-14), |
| fayando y fayando | cheats you again and again, |
| te largue parao; | and leaves you in the lurch… |
| Cuando estés bien en la vía | When you are for good on the street, |
| sin rumbo, desesperao; | without aim and in despair… |
| Cuando no tengas ni fe | When you have neither faith, |
| ni yerba de ayer, | nor yesterday’s yerba mate |
| secándose al sol. | drying off in the sun[[15]](#footnote-15)… |

My translation here of the verbal tense in simple present cannot fulfil the implications in Spanish and probably a coexistence of present and a future tense could make more sense in this context. In the song the use of the present form of the subjunctive in Spanish infers in this case not only the present tense but a future likely to come. Etymologically, the tense comes from the Latin language that did not have a future tense as such and instead used the subjunctive allowing the introduction of the concept of possibility as well. It works as a prediction that is reinforced by the chorus of the song by the explicit use of simple future in the Spanish version:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Verás que todo es mentira. | You will understand that everything's a lie. |
| Verás que nada es amor, | You will understand that there’s no love, |
| Que al mundo nada le importa, | that the world doesn’t care, |
| yira, yira. | keeps turning… turning… |
| Aunque te quiebre la vida | Even when life breaks you down, |
| aunque te muerda un dolor, | even when pain eats you up, |
| no esperes nunca una ayuda | don’t expect any assistance, nor a helping hand… |
| ni una mano, ni un favor. | nor someone’s favour. |

An interesting point appears in here by the interpellation of a listener that hears the sorrow and receives the warning. The use of the second person (‘Vos’) was already a common feature in previous tango songs (Barreiro-Armstrong, 2003) in which the woman either is accused of betrayal, advised about the dangers of a licentious life, or a friend is cautioned of the dangers related to emotions and sentiments. But in this case, it is a warning that does not suggest escape or expect change. It is a demonstration of the conclusion that the experiences of the narrator allowed him to arrive at. Arguably, it is this invocation to share the narrator’s disbelief and disappointment which demonstrates the dangerous potential of a cynic approach. As Mazella (2007) reflects:

What makes such moral redescription seem so dangerous, however, resides in the cynic’s ability to persuade others of such reductive views and spread the contagion of disbelief widely enough to threaten the entire political system. (p.7)

In Chapter 4 I will expand on the analysis of the individual responses to this disappointment in the form of isolationism and defeatist accommodation in tango lyrics, but it is worth pointing out that those reactions are justified and fed back by the certainty of a future without alternatives that I am presenting here.

The last point I will address in relation to the issue of pessimism is related not with the dark present or the unalterable future but with the past: The condemnation of the world and of the other humans around the narrator is, in Discépolo’s lyrics, always triggered by a disappointment in the past, by the effects of a prior systematic failure, or derives from the experience of repeated betrayals. In most of the narratives of Discépolo’s lyrics there is a starting point in which the character is full of ideals, expectations, and trust in moral values and in the honesty of the people, but everything ends up letting him down.

The most notorious example appears in the song “Tres esperanzas” [Three hopes] written in 1933. In the song, there is once again the confession of a painful present and a hopeless future: “I can’t make another step, dumb soul of mine, I feel destroyed…” “I have terror for what is to come” and indeed the narrator suggests that the only solution is to commit suicide[[16]](#footnote-16), but the song focuses on the path by which his hopes and expectations became frustrated. The chorus says,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Tres esperanzas tuve en mi vida, | I had three hopes in my life, |
| dos eran blancas y una punzó. | two were white and one red. |
| Una, mi madre, vieja y vencida, | One, my mother, old and surrendered, |
| Otra la gente y otra el amor. | Another one the people and the last one the love. |
| Tres esperanzas tuve en la vida. | I had three hopes in my life. |
| Dos me engañaron, | Two cheated on me, |
| y una murió. | the last one died. |

Julio Mafud (1966) sums up with these words the stereotype of his characters:

Enrique Santos Discépolo in his work incarnates a hero that is opposed to the triumphalist and successful man. It is indeed the absolute opposite of a hero (…) Life, in its vertiginous path has demolished the humans he portrays. Discépolo’s heroes or antiheroes always accumulate in their souls all the human impossibilities and inhibitions. They are eternally persecuted. But they are not persecuted by a man, a cop, an enemy. They are persecuted by the world. (p. 65, m.t)

It is through their experience in that world that all faith and belief end up shattered, allowing the characters to realize their initial naivety and become bitter sceptics. In contrast with the previous two songs considered above, there is indeed in “Tres esperanzas” a temporal narration in which the singer expresses in the short lapse of two minutes a transition from a hopeful start, the realization of the falsehood of those expectations, and a perspective of a suicidal future. Presented in a melodramatic and concise way, and with the passing of time rendered in personal experience, the narrator loses his innocence and recognises the failure of his beliefs. In a stanza that follows the previous one it says:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Me he vuelto pa’ mirar | I turned my eyes back, |
| y el pasao me ha hecho reir… | and I laughed about my past… |
| Las cosas que he soñao, | The dreams that I had, |
| me cache en dié, qué gil! | damned me, I have been so naïve! |

Among those blaming modern cynicism for its negative implications concerning political activism, Arnett and Arneson (1999)stress a description of a cynic as the one who is incapable of trusting another as a result of a projection of their disappointment and disillusionment onto social relations. As a result, they claim, the cynic ends up detached from social interaction. In that respect, Stanley (2007) states,

This reading of contemporary political malaise recognizes an important facet of cynicism apart from the analysis of its formal content: cynicism tends to arise from the ashes of shattered faith. In order to be disillusioned, one must harbour illusions to begin with. (p. 403)

The explanation and justification of the witty bitterness as a result of a life of personal failures and disappointments is omnipresent in descriptions of modern cynicism. It can even be found in short cartoon on the YouTube channel, The School of Life (2016), describing in three minutes “What do cynical people really want”, where the narrator describes the cynic as a fragile human inflicted by a wound, a psychological trauma that resulted as a consequence of an event somewhere in the past when someone seriously disappointed them. It is a dominant interpretation, I claim, that rejects the figure of the cynic, while at the same time positions such a character as weak and as a victim. The cynic’s behaviour, according to this description, is a protection against future possible deceptions and a shield against possible pain, reducing the chance of been taken off guard. Interestingly, the School of Life’s interpretation argues cynicism is a protection against future dissatisfaction but, at the same time, claims that cynicism is also a response to prior disappointment. This latter representation of cynicism, even if simplified and misrepresented by this YouTube channel, is in part present in the analysis of some scholars. According to many contemporary examinations of cynicism, disappointment is indeed a building block in the construction of modern cynicism: Mazella (2007), Shea (2010) and Stanley (2012) each explain the development of cynicism as a modern cultural phenomenon, by tracing the effects and reactions that resulted in the failures of the project of the Enlightenment.[[17]](#footnote-17) Furthermore, Sloterdijk (2015) reflects on the broken society of the Weimar Republic following the defeat in the First World War and the end of an era by when the cynical thought first emerged as culturally dominant, warning simultaneously about the mindset in his present during the 1980s triggered by disillusionment of the rebellious movements of the 1960’s (Huyssen, 2015).

Returning once again to the tango lyrics, besides its occurrence in “Tres esperanzas”, this temporal sequence of disappointment in the past and disbelief in the present can be found in numerous songs of Discépolo (and it is indeed one of the most repetitive narrative themes in most of the tangos of that period between 1917 and 1955 as I will explain in further chapters). It appears in “Chorra” written in 1928 and in “Soy un Arlequín” [I am a harlequin] from 1929: the first is sarcastic in tone and the latter is infused with deep sentimentalism as it describes the suffering of the narrator as a consequence of the betrayal of his lover. Far from a romantic portrayal, love as a sentimental act in the oeuvre of Discépolo is a catalyst that only provokes despair. Noemí Ulla (1966) argues that,

…love fundamentally rules the existence of the man in Discépolo’s world and the romantic clash annihilates him, destroying him for any other plan.” (p. 115-116, m.t)

In “Chorra”, the woman, taking advantage of his romantic ideals, stole the narrator’s money leaving him in the streets with the last two verses of the song saying “The thing that really angers me is having been so naïve” whereas in “Soy un Arlequín” the character introduces himself as a clown-like figure, singing and dancing to hide his sorrow because of his failure trying to redeem a woman who ended up betraying him nevertheless:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Me engañó tu voz, | I have been conned by your voice, |
| tu llorar de arrepentida sin perdón. | crying regrets, and asking forgiveness, |
| Eras mujer… | You were a woman… |
| Pensé en mi madre y me clavé! | I thought about my mother, and I stabbed myself. |
| Viví en tu amor una esperanza, | I lived in your love a hope, |
| la inútil ansia de tu salvación… | the useless desire of your salvation, |
| Cuánto dolor que hace reir! | So much pain now that makes me laugh! |

In both songs there is a nostalgia for the lost innocence, cruelly turned into ashes as a result of the narrator’s interaction with the social world, represented in all those cases in the figure of the dangerous woman, the woman who betrays. A similar tale is repeated in “Uno” written in 1943 in which the character confesses he is incapable of loving anymore because of a previous affair that left him in complete despair. Interestingly, here the story is told in first person again, but the title makes that singularity a universal trend: it is the disappointment of everyone.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Uno va arrastrándose entre espinas | One drags himself through thorns, |
| y en su afán de dar su amor, | and in his eagerness to give love, |
| sufre y se destroza hasta entender: | one suffers and is destroyed until he understands: |
| Que uno se ha quedado sin corazón… | That he has been left without a heart… |

The similarities with Sloterdijk’s (2015) description of a modern cynic are striking:

Thus, the new, integrated cynicism even has the understandable feeling about itself of being a victim and of making sacrifices. Behind the capable, collaborative, hard façade, it covers up a mass of offensive unhappiness and the need to cry. In this, there is something of the mourning for a ‘lost innocence’, of the mourning for better knowledge, against which all action and labour are directed. (p. 5)

As already introduced, the presence of a character methodically doomed to failure has been acknowledged by most of the scholars analysing Discépolo’s work as well as his biographers. However, this feature tends to be justified as a result of his own personal failures or frustrations (his father was not able to fulfil his expectation as a professional musician and shared his frustration over his family; a humble childhood surrounded by the poverty of the city; becoming an orphan when he was ten; being betrayed by his wife or rejected by his friends) as portrayed at times by Pujol (2017), Galasso (1967) or Raúl Alberto March (1997). Alternatively, that representation is blamed as a result of the specific social conditions of the country during the 1930s and accordingly his lyrics are understood as a rebellious denunciation of the social injustices of that time. That is the case made by Conde (2003) that recognises “…the presence of a character always walking against the direction of the world, a perpetually cheated, an unfortunate, and inexorable failure” (p. 58) (m.t) but equally interprets that this character is manifesting a revolt against their betrayal and the abandonment, usually incarnated in the character of the woman.

Against such dominant interpretations, I will seek in my analysis to avoid reducing Discépolo’s lyrics to biographical explanations, nor do I want to present them exclusively as a symptom of very local social conditions, specific only to the 1930s in Buenos Aires. Instead, I would like to relate them to a broader current of cynicism in tango, and by extension, in early 20th century Argentinean culture.

# Chapter 3. Modern cynicism and hypocrisy.

Up to this point, I have outlined specific elements usually associated with modern cynicism that are present in a varied range of tango lyrics written by Discépolo. So far, I have put the emphasis on a pessimist description of the reality in the tango songs, based on a temporal analysis: A starting point in the past with illusions and hopes; a sequence of disappointments due to the cruelty of the world that creates a painful, lonely, and pathetic present; and a depressing perspective of the future when no solution is possible, and an even more decadent scenery is to be expected.

I would like to centre the attention now on those reasons behind the systematic disappointment that the narrators of Discépolo’s tangos tend to experience. One of the fundamental aspects that explain the failures, frustrations and disenchantments is the meanness and unkindness of the ones surrounding the protagonist. He is betrayed, lied to, and abandoned. The characters the narrator encounters in most of the songs are never to be trusted: they are hypocritical, selfish, and manipulative. In Discépolo’s universe, there is a depressive assessment of human nature and a gloomy representation of all the actors in the society. However, the traitors that are depicted are not exceptional and unique antiheroes. In fact, their betrayal is extrapolated to the behaviour of the society as a whole.

This is the facet of Discépolo’s lyrics that I will now explore in this section. It has become one of the key features of what is understood as modern cynicism, both in a vernacular sense and by academics dealing with the term. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Llanguage* (online version, 2023), for instance, starts by defining the cynic as “A person who believes all people are motivated by selfishness” and then as “A person whose outlook is scornfully and habitually negative” whereas The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (online version, 2023)states that cynical implies “a person who believes that people only do things to help themselves, rather than for good or sincere reasons” and “a person who does not believe that something good will happen or that something is important”.

By exploring the transformation in the meaning of cynicism into its modern form during the period of the Enlightenment, Stanley (2007) brings an even more explicit reference to this feature:

… the cynic offers a decidedly grim evaluation of human nature and society. Through the constant practice of unmasking, the cynical imagination takes the old theatrum mundi insight that all men are actors and gives it the most socially pessimistic interpretation possible: society is an elaborate con game in which all the most savvy social actors wilfully deceive and manipulate one another in the pursuit of their own private ends. (p. 390)

In Stanley’s analysis, the Enlightenment sets in play the project of persistent unmasking and thereby opens up the possibility that reason starts to treat everything and everybody with suspicion, as potential attempts to cheat and misrepresent reality, a task that reason itself must permanently unmask. I will address that conception of reason as a crucial building block of our current perception of education and what it means to be educated in further chapters, but it is worth pointing out here the link established by Stanley between the power of reason and the artifices of lies and disguise. In fact, Stanley’s analysis borrows from Sloterdijk’s (2015) exploration on the ‘theory of deception’ (p.29) by which the modern rationale implies the recognition of the opponent as clever and capable of falsehood and, consequently, implies the need to be constantly aware of deception and in a constant attitude of suspicion.

*Omnipresent lies: the disciplined believer and the impossibility to trust again.*

In order to illustrate these characteristics in the works of Discépolo, it is worth starting with the already mentioned tango “Chorra” written in 1927 with lyrics and music from the poet. By the time of his first performance on stage, in 1928, the fame of Discépolo was building up, and the song soon became a popular success. In the song, a male narrator lashes out at his previous lover and blames her for stealing from him everything that he considered valuable: not only all his money and possessions but his capacity to love, his innocence, his positive feelings. He accuses her of misleading him and lying, of simulation and of a deliberate use of a mask in order to defraud him, leaving him in bankruptcy and with a broken heart. Some of these ideas appear already in the opening lines…

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Por ser bueno, me pusiste en la miseria, | For being nice, you drove me into misery, |
| me dejaste en la palmera, | you left me hanging from a palm tree, |
| me afanaste hasta el color. | you even stole my colour. |
| En seis meses me comiste el mercadito, | In six months, you bankrupted my little market, |
| la casiya de la feria, la ganchera, el mostrador… | the stand at the fair, the hooks, the counter… |
| Chorra! … Me robaste hasta el amor... | Thief! You have even stolen my love. |
| Ahura, tanto me asusta una mina, | Now, a woman scares me so much, |
| que si en la calle me afila, | that if one approaches me on the street, |
| me pongo al lao del botón. | I hide behind a cop. |

The first words of this song already reinforce the idea that the story is not describing a rare and uncommon sequence. The swindle was possible and even caused by the naivete of the narrator, unaware then of the dangers of feminine trickery. The specific actions of one amoral character are projected, at least to begin with, onto womankind. Just a few verses after, once the con has already happened, the protagonist adopts a new attitude, escaping from other women, assumed to be as dangerous and deceptive as the one he first addresses. Hernando (2002) considers this lyric in similar terms,

The woman’s hoax is based in this equivalence between the goodwill and the stupidity of the man, and the latter is as well caused because he ignores the women’s [presumed] nature: he should have known that the woman is a dangerous hunting animal. (p. 1034, m.t)

The betrayal and the abandonment of the lover by another are undoubtedly one of the most repetitive topics of all in tango lyrics in its historical development since, at least, 1917 (Carella, 1956; Gobello, 1999; Taylor, 1998) and indeed similar narratives are present in numerous songs written by Discépolo. Conde (2003) states,

In Discépolo’s world, nothing can be expected from the people and nothing from love. To betray and to cheat are a constant feature. (p. 65, m.t)

It would be worth illustrating this depiction of betrayal with some examples. In “Martirio” [Martyrdom], written in 1940 with the music composed by the same author, the protagonist declaims,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Solo, despiadadamente solo! | Alone, ruthlessly alone! |
| Mientras grita mi conciencia tu traicion. | While my conscience shouts your betrayal. |

Or in “Sin palabras” [Without words], written in 1945 with the music composed by Mariano Mores, some verses repeat a similar cry,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Esta música va a herirte, | This music will hurt you, |
| donde quiera que la escuche tu traición… | wherever your betrayal may hear it… |

As stated before, however, the perfidy is not only performed by the lost lovers. In the already mentioned “Tres Esperanzas” from 1933, its generalization is made explicit:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| La gente me ha engañado | People have cheated on me, |
| Desde el día en que nací. | Since the day I was born. |

The narrators in Discépolo’s tangos warn against the widespread presence of deception in society as we have observed in “Cambalache” and in “Yira, yira”. The protagonists are always suspicious of the other. The message is this: trust no one, be aware of the selfish nature of everyone surrounding you. Once again, a portrayal of a modern cynic is hence reinforced. In the words of Stanley (2007),

This cynicism reduces all social roles, from idealistic crusaders to cunning criminals, to this most base self-interest. The archetypal cynic cannot abide any appeal to shared values, any statement of love or virtue, without bitter incredulity and scepticism. (p. 389)

Discépolo, indeed, fulfils the generalisation of distrust by taking one step further in comparison with the narratives of the tangos before him. He includes one actor performing betrayal that is usually portrayed as honourable and incorruptible: the mother (Gottling, 1998). In “Desencanto” [Disenchantment], written and composed by him in 1937, the disappointment reaches that most sacred figure,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Oigo a mi madre aún, | I still hear my mother, |
| la oigo engañándome, | I hear her cheating on me, |
| porque la vida me negó | because life refused me |
| las esperanzas que en la cuna me cantó. | the hopes that she sang as lullabies. |

Taylor (1998) in her analysis of tango lyrics considered from a broad spectrum, reaffirms Discépolo’s version, and underlines the omnipresence of betrayal,

…such a man returns to search for his mother and the values he deserted along with her when he was seduced by the city and its women. Ironically, the mother to whom entire tangos sing homage is in fact the first of the women to betray a man, by her insistence on ideals that can never apply to reality outside her tiny home in the remembered barrio [neighbourhood]. (p. 6)

However, in Discépolo’s tangos (and I will argue that up to a point in many of the tangos after 1917), the focus is not set on the story of the disappointments and the narrations of the calamities that the narrator experiences. Instead, the focal point is always the subjective perception of those events by the protagonist. It is the psychological effect and the emotions that those failures create in the protagonist which form the centre point of the tango plots. In fact, the cynicism that I claim is present in this genre, tends to be manifested in the consciousness of the narrator, at a personal and individual level, even if it is later on extrapolated as an inescapable facet of Western civilization[[18]](#footnote-18). All betrayals and abandonments are always described in the tangos I am considering as events occurring in the past, but whose emotional and psychological effects continue and develop into the negativity, pessimism and distrust that is directly connected with our modern understanding of cynicism. In similar terms, as a precondition that allowed the diffusion of the modern cynic mentality, Sloterdijk (2015) reflects upon the conservatives of the nineteenth century who, after observing the decadence of the French Revolution and its advancement into the terror and the war, created a negative image of human beings. He states that, according to the idiosyncrasy of the conservatives,

… the human nature, set loose here and now, deserves no optimism or glowing phrases (…) human beings behave egoistically, destructively, greedily, unwisely, and asocially. (p. 54)

An interesting example can be analysed by considering the tango “Uno”, written by Discépolo in 1943 with music composed by Mariano Mores. In the song, the protagonist confesses to a lover-not-to-be that he is now incapable of loving again. In his speech, he declares that he was once full of hopes and ideals but suffered tragic disappointment in the painful betrayal of his first romance. He expresses the wish to forget and to be able to trust again but recognises that his experience made that impossible. In this version, he does not claim to be wiser but instead to suffer as a punishment the inability to believe and hope again. He finishes the song with the following lines,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Si yo tuviera el corazón, | If I had the heart, |
| el mismo que perdí, | the heart that I lost, |
| si olvidara a la que ayer, | if I could forget the one that yesterday |
| lo destrozó, y pudiera amarte, | destroyed it and if I could love you now, |
| me abrazaría a tu ilusión | I would embrace your illusion, |
| para llorar tu amor. | to cry your love. |

The last line reinforces even more the consequences of his experiences. He is left empty-hearted and acknowledges his condition as a painful life-sentence that his failures have determined.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Vacío ya de amar y de llorar | Empty already after loving and crying |
| tanta traición. | so much treason. |

As in the stories of Anton Chekhov, that strongly influenced Discépolo (Pujol, 2017), the fulfilment of happiness is never achieved and establishes a sense of closure with pathetic bitter characters left without hopes and desires. In Discépolo’s “Uno”, the narrator’s first love story is broken by betrayal and that event has a lasting effect and destroys and hurts the now impossible second romantic story, leaving the woman addressed by the protagonist suffering and disappointed as well. A chain of distrust is then set, and the first experience determines that even if there is a desire for believing again, it is not possible.

Discépolo’s tangos, as shown in this section, and in correlation with our vernacular understanding of modern cynicism, systematically present humans as deceptive and exclusively motivated by self-interest. His characters suffer the experience of betrayals that create a deep psychological effect which leads to incredulity towards others and motivates them to act with selfishness as well. Finally, that sensation of distrust is spread as the narrators end up warning the listener of their stories against naiveite and promote a radical sense of scepticism in society.

*The strategies of deception and the training of mistrust.*

Returning once again to the song “Chorra”, it is possible to perceive that the stress is definitely put on the hypocritical behaviour of the woman who betrayed the narrator. Conde (2003) recognises that in this exceptionally clear example, the emphasis of the song is put on the lies of the woman. According to Conde, the description of the pain of the abandoned man and his sorrow as a victim of a romantic failure is presented here in order to reinforce the warning against the strategies of deception of such a dangerous woman. Varela (2016) has equally expressed the omnipresence of pretending as a regular behaviour in every tango character. Typically, a young woman betrays an innocent lover, and she is at some point cheated by a ruffian or punished by the passing of time. In another frequent theme, the people in the tango songs try obsessively to move from the suburbs to the centre of the city, to show off, to pretend a prosperity that never consolidates. Here every character is displayed as a marionette unable to rebel against its destiny, despite the disguise that each may use each time (p. 67). Varela (2005) argues that in each of those stories, a tragic ending reinforces a moral message that rejects any form of imposture[[19]](#footnote-19). I argue, instead, that the reprimand of falsehood and the demonization of hypocrisy are in fact central elements that reinforce the presence of cynicism and the inescapable social phenomenon of pretence as central features of these songs.

Despite my own disagreements with the approach taken by Bewes (1997) in his negative evaluation of modern cynicism[[20]](#footnote-20), I concur with his interpretation by which our modern culture expresses a fixation with authenticity, present in political life, in most of the dominant artistic forms of representation, and in marketing. It is, according to Bewes, this never-ending tension-obsession between the accusations of hypocrisy and the demands for sincerity and authenticity that reinforces a climate of cynicism. I will discuss this posture at length when analysing tango in its golden age in general terms, but in the case of Discépolo’s “Chorra”, the situation described is quite different: The lies and hypocritical actions are rewarded with success, and the innocent and naïve narrator is punished by the clever con,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Hoy me entero que tu mama, | Today I find out that your mother, |
| “Noble viuda de un guerrero”, | “Noble widowed of a warrior”, |
| es la chorra de mas fama | is the most famous thief, |
| que ha pisado la treinta y trés! | that set foot on the 33rd precinct. |
| Y he sabido que el guerrero | And I have known that the warrior, |
| que murió lleno de honor, | who died full of honours, |
| ni murió ni fue guerrero | didn’t die, nor was a warrior, |
| como me engrupiste vos. | as you lied to me. |
| Está en cana prontuariado | He is in jail booked, |
| como agente ‘e la camorra, | as a hit man of the mafia, |
| profesor de cachiporra, | professor of truncheon |
| malandrín y estafador. | scoundrel and swindler. |

Naturally, in this description of the fake posture, the values of lineage, wealth and patriotism are mocked by the witty deceiver. Intertwined with the sensation of distrust towards the lover, all the values that the society hold sacred are threatened. The tension and discordance between the pretension and the reality here are introduced as extreme and absurd opposites, and both contrasting positions end up described as ridiculed and laughable. The dangerous woman deliberately uses a mask and plays a role in order to deceive for the sake of her selfishness and indeed, the narrator concludes with the song with a sharp statement that works as a wise conclusion and as a warning/advice to the listener:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Lo que más bronca me da, | What really pisses me off the most, |
| es haber sido tan gil. | is to have been so stupid. |

As if Stanley (2007) were to be analysing this song, instead of describing the building blocks of modern cynicism, she states,

The lesson learned from this unending game of unmasking might dissolve all social bonds in a fog of mistrust and suspicion. In this fog, the logic of cynicism becomes particularly seductive: in this corrupt world, it reasons, no one and nothing can be trusted. Everyone wears a mask beneath which naked, brutal self-interest calculates and plots. (p. 389)

*The ingenuity of the protagonist: the victim.*

There is another regular characteristic that appears systematically in the narrators of Discépolo’s tangos that deserves special attention: They tend to be self-described as innocent and naïve, fragile, and exposed to the evil of the ones surrounding them. They are methodical sufferers that understand the cruelty of the world always a little bit late. Their innocence, however, is lost after confronting systematic disappointment and experiencing the lies of others and they end up transformed into disbelievers that approach the world with distrust. That initial description of the narrator, clashes with the ones who behave with hypocrisy and who betray and reinforce the contrast between the two possible stages in life: a presocial naïve condition, and a disenchanted pessimist selfishness once life has been experienced and suffered.

This, indeed, is the case in the recently considered “Chorra” but that transition from naivety to pessimist selfishness is equally present in most of his compositions (“Esta noche me emborracho”, “Soy un arlequín”, “Yira, yira”, “Tres esperanzas”, “Martirio” [Martyrdom], “Infamia” [Infamy], “Uno” or “Canción desesperada” [Desperate song]). As stated before, some of his biographers (Galasso, 1967; Pujol, 2017) justified these features in those characters as a sign of an autobiographical confession of Discépolo’s own sufferings and disappointments in life. In parallel, the same authors stress the relevance of those honest martyrs in order to claim that Discépolo’s lyrics offer a decisive accusation levelled against the moral failings of his time, a rebellious denunciation of the hypocrisy and malice of the world around him by expressing the true values Discépolo believed in via the voice of his innocent narrator, which is delivered, of course, in first person. This approach indeed seems to fall into a frequent fallacy, where the author of a work is confused with its narrator. This analysis is particularly strong when considering his tangos during the crisis of the 1930s. Galasso (1967) states that Discépolo was revolting against the decadence of the political and social order of that decade that was portrayed in the characters surrounding the narrator, and at the same time stating firmly that he was one of the few who still held to standards of decency. In their attempt to portray Discépolo as a rebel against the injustices of his time, Galasso (1967) and March (1997) reinforce their analysis by quoting lines such as “The immoral have caught up with us” from “Cambalache” (1934) where the first person in plural seems to be excluded from that immoral behaviour and, accordingly, they portray Discépolo as a moralist.

I sustain, however, quite a different interpretation. Once again, I claim that to consider those verses under the lens of cynicism may bring some light to their analysis and enrich the reading of this naïve character. I argue that the innocence of the protagonist is the result of a condition prior to his encounter with society. The protagonist remains naïve and pure before falling in love for the first time and fundamentally, before encountering with others. In several tango lyrics, the home from the characters’ childhood, the period during which they were living under the protective figure of the mother represents, in my interpretation, a pre-social environment, a stage of innocence without the contamination of the city and its mean inhabitants. In concordance with my analysis of other lyrics of tango during the period known as ‘*tango canción’* that I will discuss later, this period of innocence is equally linked with the neighbourhood of the narrator’s childhood that comes to represent the context in which all the dreams and illusions were present, always described as a distant and unachievable past, lost forever as a consequence of the disappointments experienced during the course of the narrators’ life.

I think it will be worthwhile here to evaluate this analysis by referring to the specific transformation that occurred during the late eighteenth century and which reshaped the meaning of cynicism into the vernacular understanding that nowadays predominates. In particular, I refer to the benevolent image of a humankind that Rousseau displays, in contrast with the selfish presocial man of Hobbes’ philosophy that, according to Sloterdijk and later on reaffirmed by Mazella and Shea, reinforced the development of a conception of what became part of the modern understanding of cynicism. In Rousseau’s account, and in order to avoid the pessimism of Hobbes towards mankind, there is a depiction of a presocial and irreflexive man as naturally good, innocent, and kind that falls into selfishness and egotism only as a result of his encounter with society. By following through these arguments, that in a way could be considered heirs of the ancient cynicism in their attacks against the artificiality of human laws, and codes under the context of a State/city, Rousseau allows for the development of a conception of a selfish man once the contamination that results out of the interaction with the corrupted society have already happened. This perspective will be reconsidered again when discussing the perception of education in Discépolo’s world since here, indeed, the antinomy between civilization and primitive life can be applied to the pair knowledge-ignorance, and accordingly could reconfigure the value of reason and the shape of an ideal education. Mazella (2007) states,

It is not nature, but man’s artificially imposed state of dependence, dependence that has rendered man so selfish, greedy, and passionate. This condition of dependence has been reinforced by the historical development of both reason and civilization. Rousseau’s summary at this point inverts the commonsense relation between knowledge and virtue, when he claims savages are less vicious than civilized men simply because their ignorance does more to preserve them than knowledge ever could. (p. 118)

Mazella’s description indeed reinforced two points that I will later on introduce in Part V, when discussing tango’s position towards education: firstly, it establishes that the presocial-primitive state implies a sense of ignorance that related to innocence and purity. As a correlation, secondly, it suggests that knowledge, at least the knowledge that the society of Rousseau’s time praised and depended, can indeed be a force of evil, a source that allows deception to appear in the first place.

Rousseau’s position here introduces a more radical form of cynicism than the bled-out cynicism that Sloterdijk (and other authors considered in this part) deride. I argue that Discépolo presents both simultaneously. He presents the commonplace, everyday cynicism in which he expresses disillusionment with society and cries out because of the unkindness of others, while at the same time offering a much more forceful and damning cynicism in which crucial and dominant values are at stake and in which a more radical and destructive message may emerge. Discépolo’s narrators are portrayed as innocent and pure as long as they remain outside of the encounter with others and with the cruelty that results as a consequence of interacting in society. Once that encounter occurs, there is a point of no return, and the hopes and illusions are lost forever. The narrator becomes wiser in his knowledge that only experience has provided, but is also dissatisfied and disengaged, distrustful and resentful of all others. At some point, each of the characters portrayed by Discépolo that behave with hypocrisy and operate by disguise could presume an equally innocent past, finally falling into moral decline as an effect of their experience into social life.

The connection between the moral decay and the encounter with society can, as stated, be perceived in most of Discépolo’s tangos (and, I will argue, in most of the tangos of other composers too) but it is possibly even more explicit in the song “Infamia”, written in 1941 with lyrics and music both by Discépolo. The protagonist describes his attempts to redeem a sinful woman with a fresh romance, hoping to start again, forget her past and try to live a simple and ‘pure’ life. However, the inhabitants of the corrupted city are the ones to blame for his failure and they do not allow the love story to prosper. She is constantly reminded of her past by everyone surrounding her and ends up disguising her pain in alcohol until her final suicide.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Fue inútil gritar que querías ser Buena. | It was useless to cry you wanted to be good, |
| Fue estúpudo aullar la promesa de tu redención. | It was stupid to yell the promise of your redemption. |
| La gente es brutal y odia siempre al que sueña, | People are brutal and always hate the dreamer, |
| lo burla y con risas desdeña | They mock them and with laughter |
| su intento mejor. | dismiss their best intentions. |
| Tu historia y mi honor desnudaos en la feria, | Your past and my honour stripped at the fair, |
| bailaron su danza de horror sin compasión… | danced the dance of horror without compassion… |

Sloterdijk (2015), reflecting on Rousseau, commented,

Here in Rousseau, we find perhaps the most important figure of thought in moral- political enlightenment: the theory of the innocent victim (…) [Criminals] are not by nature as one finds them now but have been made so by society (…) They are victims of society. (p. 55)

Discépolo’s tangos introduce an even darker portrayal. The initial innocence of the characters is not providing a hope for redemption or suggesting an alternative by which part of that innocence can be retained or recovered. The effect in his lyrics is just to reinforce the downfall of those characters that plummet under the disappointment and the general distrust as an unavoidable destiny.

*A troublesome identity: a disruptive self.*

I will discuss one final aspect present in Discépolo’s tangos that reinforces the connection with our understanding of modern cynicism in relation to the sense of hypocrisy and distrust that I am exploring in this section. The conception of truthfulness is shaken in his lyrics not only by the systematic lies of others but as well by the impossibility of reaching an authentic subjectivity, that is to say, by the dismissal of any form of essentialism in regard to the self. The characters are confused, and they are not able to recognise themselves, their own perception is diffuse, and they constantly feel that they are using or need to use a mask that does not represent their personality. They constantly question themselves in the search for their real identity and uniqueness. Such incapacity to reach a well-defined identity affects their convictions and makes it difficult to ground and justify moral values. Accordingly, those characters are always doubting the validity of their actions. I will mainly explore these ideas by analysing the lyrics of the tango “Malevaje”, written in 1928 and of the tango “Secreto”, in 1932, both with the music composed by Discépolo as well.

In relation to the interpellation of modern cynicism, Bewes (1997) considers that the erosion of the entity of the individual subject as a result of the effects of the postmodern mindset is one of the fundamental elements that explains the proliferation of modern cynic mentality. It should be noted that here, when Bewes uses the term, ‘postmodernism’ he is using it in its pejorative sense, to refer to an (apparent) widespread cultural decline, a political and moral failing, a lack of willingness to stand up for and defend a set of core social and political values. Postmodernism manages this whilst at the same time presenting itself as a radical programme, seeking to escape the straitjacket of conventional thinking. According to Bewes (1997),

Postmodernism all too easily promotes itself as a radical programme carried out against the subject. (p.46)

In Bewes’ analysis (1997), that systematic destruction of any form of accepted essentialism of the self combines with a cultural obsession and growing concerns about the importance of authenticity and transparency. The result is the development of an unachievable utopia of authentic beings. According to Bewes, those ideal and transparent subjects never materialise and there is a constant sense of disappointment as a result. Oneself is never as authentic as the expectations demand and neither are the selves of others. In Bewes’ analysis, the cynic distrust and disengagement he identifies are the direct consequence of such failure.

This argument resonates with Sloterdijk’s characterization of those aspects that the Enlightenment opened up and which resulted in the development of modern cynicism. For the German philosopher, a starting point in the constitution of a hypocritical modus operandi was the destruction of the illusion of a transparent human self-consciousness that took place during the process of the Enlightenment[[21]](#footnote-21).

Furthermore, according to Sloterdijk (2015), the dissemination of modern cynicism during the Weimar Republic, which is central to his argument, appears as well as a result of a crisis of male identity. Sloterdijk (2015) argues that in their formation the political Right and Left in the Weimar Republic were trying to restore the sense of self-assurance in the masculinity of the Nation after the defeat in the First World War. That cultural and mental context was a fertile ground in which the psychological cynic mentality spread, described as a symptom of cultural pathology.

Interestingly, a similar description appears in the analysis of tango as an archetypal Argentinean phenomenon. Taylor (1998) suggests in her book *Paper Tangos* a romantic and idealized interpretation of tango culture that is centered in the idea that Argentineans are in a constant quest for their identity (broken by its colonial origin, a cosmopolitan formation as the consequence of the massive immigration at the beginning of the twentieth century). That insecurity in relation to Argentinian distinctiveness channelled into aggressiveness and melancholic sadness typical of the tango ethos. As Taylor (1998) writes,

The tango reflects this Argentinean ambivalence. Although a major symbol of national identity, the tango’s themes emphasize a painful uncertainty as to the precise nature of that identity (…) In the tango, they often attempt to seek out and affirm self-definition, a self- definition at whose core is doubt (…) Its aggressiveness could have arisen from an anguished sense of vulnerability. (p. 3)

Furthermore, Taylor states that the sense of confused identity is boosted by the men who composed and danced the tango during the first decades of the twentieth century. The process of liberation of women that slowly were gaining social and political participation put a challenge to the absolute male dominance of that time. That hurt masculine pride was, according to Taylor, portrayed in tango lyrics. The tango songs of this period, clearly blame the female characters for the moral decay of the male narrators and might be viewed as symptomatic of this challenge posed by women’s liberation movements. A similar analysis is presented in the works of Archetti (1999) and Savigliano (1995) that I will expand in further chapters. For present purposes I would merely want to point out here that an element of misogyny in Discépolo’s lyrics is equally present.

As stated in the introduction, Discépolo’s lyrics make explicit those elements that are somehow hidden in most of the production of other tango poets and the troubled identity appears as part of the discourse of the narrators of his tangos. Transfigured by the passion that the narrator feels in the presence of a dangerous woman, he opens the first verses of “Malevaje” by confessing,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Decí, por Dios, ¿qué me has dao, | Tell me, for God’s sake, what have you given me, |
| que estoy tan cambiao, | that I have changed so much |
| no sé más quien soy? | I do not know who I am anymore… |

The lost identity follows in this particular song a curious inversion: the main character is represented as a ‘*malevo*’ a tough ruffian that was one of the most important figures of the tango in its origins. Those fictional characters were the symbol of a cult of courage, true only to themselves, despising the laws and any other authority, and appeared as a regular feature in those incipient improvised lyrics during the early stages of the history of tango. They are indeed the very characters who are praised by Borges (1976; 2016) as representatives of the only respectful period of tango culture because of the virility and bravery that the music and the dance symbolized. In “Malevaje”, the ruffian suddenly awakens to a transformation that happened in his self, due to the spell of his lover, and becomes a parody of what he used to be. He is not recognised by his friends in the underworld because he is no longer the tough and brave man he was before. He has lost his previous and well-defined identity. He became a coward, and the song is the admittance of this mutation. He regrets not knowing any longer who he really is, and such confession makes him suffer and even consider the possibility of a suicide as the only escape.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| El malevaje extrañao, | The gang, surprised, |
| me mira sin comprender... | look at me without understanding. |
| Me ve perdiendo el cartel | My fame is fading away, |
| de guapo que ayer | of a tough guy I used to be |
| brillaba en la acción. | always standing up for the action. |
| No me has dejado ni el pucho en la oreja | You did not leave me the butt on the ear, |
| de aquel pasado malevo y feroz. | From that past, outlaw and fierce, |
| Ya no me falta pa’ completer | I have just need to complete the scene, |
| Más que ir a misa e hincarme a rezar. | To go to church and kneel to pray. |

Pujol (2017) recognises in “Malevaje” the crisis of identity that not only affects those ruffians, slowly vanishing from the city of Buenos Aires by the mid-1920s, as “species in extinction” (p. 158). In line with the description of Taylor (1998), Puig asserts that this uncertainty of identity is manifested in the works of Discépolo by questioning those characters that used to define the essence of tango lyrics at least before 1917. “Malevaje”, Pujol argues, is an explicit debunking of that culture of courage that Borges and many other intellectuals admired, only as reliquiae of the past, as a memory of the times when men were (said to be) strong and brave.

Pujol (2017) states,

The lost fame as a tough guy is the confirmation, painful and comic at the same time, that there are no more certainties, there are no immutable truths. The degradation of the main character is evident. (p. 158, m.t)

That degradation of the character is reinforced by his impossibility of asserting himself as a univocal identity: his lack of definition is manifested through the eyes of the others but equally by his incapability to stand strong in a fight because of his sudden fear to die.

The last few verses sing,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ayer, de miedo a matar, | Yesterday, for fear of killing, |
| en vez de pelear, me puse a correr. | instead of fighting I started to run. |
| Me vi en la sobra o finao, | I saw myself in jail or dead, |
| pensé en no verte y temblé. | I thought about not seeing you and I trembled. |
| Si yo, que nunca aflojé, | I, who never gave up, |
| de noche angustiao, | at night anguishing, |
| Me encierro a llorar! | I lock myself to cry! |

Reflecting upon those last verses, Conde (2003) coincides on the mocking representation of bravery that used to be fundamental for a nostalgic reconstruction of the main identity of the tango culture by the late 20s. By the destruction of the illusion of that glorious and bold past, the characters, according to Conde and by association, the men of that generation, suffered “… a degradation in their virility and in their idea of courage, causing them a true crisis of identity” (2003, p. 63, m.t)

One final consequence appears as a result of this identity crisis: once the protagonist is no longer sure who he is, which values he holds, he suddenly becomes capable of behaving amorally: he debases himself and reacts wickedly and with dishonesty, and he does so as an amoral actor, rather than an immoral one. It is no longer only the others who are the ones corrupted: not only the lover, the friends, the society, or even the mother: The narrator himself confesses his moral degradation, or even more, his moral abandonment, that is to say, his departure from a moral realm altogether. I will expand this idea in the next section, when exploring in detail the two reactions of Discépolo’s characters that strongly connect with modern cynicism: selfish accommodation and apathetic isolationism. However, just in order to illustrate this last idea it is worth quoting some verses of Discépolo’s lyrics. In “Secreto”, composed and written in 1932, the character is disturbed once again by the effects of a romantic passion and confesses to the listeners the internal chaos that led to the abandonment of his moral duties.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Vencido por tu hechizo | I have been defeated by your spell, |
| que trastorna mi deber: | that deforms my duties: |
| Por vos a mi mujer | Because of you I have destroyed |
| la vida he destrozao. | my wife’s life. |
| Y es pan de mis dos hijos | And my children’s bread |
| todo el lujo que te dao. | has been feeding the luxury I gave you. |
| No puedo reaccionar, | I cannot react, |
| ni puedo comprender | I cannot understand. |
| Perdido en la tormenta | I am lost in a storm, |
| de tu voz que me embrujó | Because of the witchery of your voice. |

In contrast with the suggestions by Discépolo’s biographers, Discépolo no longer represents himself through the voice of the protagonist of his stories as exempt of the moral decadence he was supposed to be denouncing. The narrator is part of that universe of liars, phonies, and deceivers once he loses his naivety and falls into the corruption that living in society implies. In the following section, I will introduce an alternative reaction of Discépolo’s characters by which his enduring doubts allow him to develop a surviving strategy that promotes adapting to this tarnished world for his own benefit.

# Chapter 4. The modern cynic reaction: selfish accommodation and apathetic isolationism in Discépolo’s world.

As part of my argument so far, in which I stress a strong connection between Discépolo’s lyrics and a diverse set of definitions of what modern cynicism represents in our contemporary society, I have already pointed up the presence of a grim and pessimist description of the reality, reinforced by an idealised image of a past that falls apart as a consequence of the systematic disappointments that every character in Discépolo’s universe experiences when confronting the cruelty of the world. As argued in Chapter 2, tangos describe how broken illusions of a nostalgic past have a disheartening impact on the perception of the present. Furthermore, tangos state the perspective of a future without solutions and so pessimism thrives. In Chapter 3, I argued that the characters’ disappointment is based on the assumption that humans are unavoidably unkind: every other person is hypocritical, mean, and unscrupulous.

However, in order to fully connect this description of the reality with a vernacular understanding of modern cynics, there is a crucial point that has to be addressed: a modern cynic does not only condemn the degradation of society and its values but rather accommodates to the same decadence they denounce. In fact, this particular reaction of complicity or adaptability to the perceived falsehood that surrounds the modern cynic is what differentiates them from the position of a moralist or a reformist: a modern cynic does not attempt to transform the grim reality they perceive but instead accommodates as best as they can, embracing the untruthful and artificial values as the only selfish alternative to survival in a corrupt world.

This conception of the modern cynic reaction to their own process of understanding the apparent falsehood of values and the unkindness of others, was famously stated by Sloterdijk (2015),

The cynic is disillusioned with enlightenment and its promise of universal reason; he embodies a psychic apparatus elastic enough to allow him to function despite experiencing a permanent doubt about its own activities -indeed, this enduring doubt is itself part of his survival strategy. (p. 28)

For the German philosopher, within modern cynicism, there is the same awareness of the faults of the society than as in the ancient version, but there is a lack of rebelliousness. Instead, a fundamental feature of this cultural phenomenon is to be able to plunge into the same hypocrisy that ancient cynicism used to criticise.

A similar perception is central to the analysis of Stanley (2007; 2012) and Shea (2010). They discuss the development of the first stages of the transformation of the concept of cynicism during the period of the Enlightenment, from its ancient definition into our modern understanding and their work will be crucial for the analysis of this section.

In her article “Retreat from Politics: The Cynic in modern times” (2007), Stanley presents this perspective quite explicitly,

Viewing society as a battlefield of narrowly self-interested con men does not in and of itself constitute cynicism. Nor does a relentless exposure of man's most noble virtues as mere masks for the ugliest passions: pride, vanity, greed, gluttony, lust, and their assorted dark companions. After all, this kind of unmasking plays a central role in the Augustinian tradition, in which the curtains always pull back to reveal the fallen human soul tainted by original sin. Yet, cynicism does not so much condemn humanity for its sins, compelling men through a confrontation with their abjection to seek divine grace, as counsel a kind of realistic capitulation to the corruption of the world. This self-aware complicity with an irredeemable world comprises the second move. (p. 390)

A similar point of view is present in Slavoj Žižek’s book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008) and is the central argument of his film *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (2013): the oppressed are no longer the ones unaware of their own oppression, the power does not need to disguise its injustice. Instead, ideology is now transparent in its function, and everyone can perceive its functioning in everyday life. Even if Žižek does not base his analysis by referencing the concept of modern cynicism, the analysis coincides in portraying the modern citizen/cynic as one fully conscious of the ways in which he is subjugated or enslaved into untrue ideals but nevertheless is incapable of rebelling against them and ends up immersed in its false logic.

In order to fully develop this aspect of selfish accommodation, it is worth introducing in detail the text that by many scholars’ accounts (Sloterdijk, 2015; Stanley, 2007 and 2012; Shea, 2010; Allen, 2020) became central in the formation of our understanding of modern cynicism and which I briefly mentioned in the introduction: Rameau’s nephew by Denis Diderot. Once this analysis is properly addressed, I will move on into the discussion of Discépolo’s lyrics, analysed under that new lens.

*Prefiguring modern cynicism: Rameau’s nephew*

Written at the beginning of the 1760s and officially published in 1805, this satirical text represents an imaginary conversation between Moi, an enlightened philosopher, enthusiastic and optimistic with the spirit of the transformative process of the enlightenment; and Lui, a provocative figure that challenges Moi’s statements and convictions with an irreverent mocking attitude that shimmers his scepticism, disenchantment, and disaffection.

In order to address this work, I will predominantly refer to Shea’s analysis (2010). Her examination of this piece was fundamental to her understanding of how modern cynicism was historically constructed, and it will be crucial for my own analysis of Discépolo’s tangos. According to Shea (2010), by the time Diderot was writing his oeuvre, Diogenes was a figure who had been praised and revitalised by many Encyclopaedists. In 1753, Jean le Rond d’Alembert[[22]](#footnote-22) had stated that a character such as Diogenes was needed to speak out against the status quo and to lead the Enlightenment project. Shea (2010) argues that the resuscitation of the ancient Diogenes as an attractive type was due to his courage to voice social criticism and to break the dominant social norms. Through this revival, however, the ancient cynicism was already mutating, removing from its definition those scandalous, insolent, and disruptive acts, and even more importantly for the analysis of this chapter, the consistency of a philosophy as a way of life, seeking a harmony between his outspoken condemnation of social rules and a personal and public behaviour. In Shea’s account, for D’Alembert Diogenes came to represent an intellectual ideal, courageous, and independent from and against power but polished by decency and softened in his manners.

In the words of Shea (2010),

Thus, although the philosophers looked to Cynicism as the avant-garde of the Enlightenment republic of letters and aspired to the ancient Cynic’s direct and satirical critique of power, political and social pressures discouraged them from adopting the Cynic’s bark. Not only was Cynicism politically unthinkable under the reign of Louis XV but it was potentially harmful to the task the philosophers had set for themselves as reformers and enlighteners of their age. (p. 38)

Shea (2010) also mentions that Diderot himself had experienced the dangers of an open criticism to the social order as he faced prison for his early writings. As a consequence, he softened his satirical tone and his voice against the social dominant norms of that time, opting instead for a more polite and intellectually polished discursive approach.

In Rameau’s nephew, however, Diderot does not question the ancient regime of the monarchical France of the mid-eighteenth century but instead produces an autocritique to the world of letters of which he was a fundamental part. Through the voice of the nephew, he put in doubt the validity of the good and polite philosopher and discussed his moral standing and his logical self-justification. In that sense, as argued by Shea (2010), this work was Diderot’s moral confession, a private piece he neither shared with his friends nor published at the time of the writing.

In the oeuvre, Diderot introduces a more ambiguous representation of Cynicism, in the character of the nephew, Lui. He draws upon a traditional depiction of Diogenes as part of the Menippean Satire, as a scandalous character, bitter, impolite, and witty who mainly denounces the corruption of the Parisian society in which he lives, unmasking the philosophers’ ideas as selfish strategies in order to create a comfortable and respectable place for them in society. In the nephews’ account, they are depicted as parasites and swindlers of their own false inventions. The nephew comes to represent the disillusioned, disaffected, and disenchanted product of this age of reason. Interestingly, Shea (2010) considers that this new cynic version is in fact the legacy, rather than the antithesis, of the good, enlightened philosopher. He represents an unsuspected, but predictable, result of that age of reason and a consequence of its radical implications. In fact, his denunciation was introduced as an unavoidable cruel reality.

The central aspect of the nephew, which deserves a special place in this chapter lies not so much in the critique of the values or the distrust of the others (the philosophers of his time), but in the way in which he describes that decrepitude as unalterable and suggest that the only reasonable reaction when confronted with such decadence is to adapt as best as possible. He thus turns rebelliousness or courageous confrontation into selfish acceptance.

Shea (2010) states,

The nephew cynically unmasks the pretences and the corruption of the mid-eighteenth-century Parisian literati, but he accepts what he reveals as “fait accompli” and accommodates himself to reality as best as he can, relinquishing the critical force of his unmasking in the name of survival and profit. (p. 59)

By following this approach, the nephew reconfigures some of the key features of ancient cynicism, allowing the term to finally mutate into the current dominant version that I am considering in this chapter. Whereas Diogenes of Sinope relied on nature to reject all of the social conventions of ancient Greek society, the nephew defines nature differently and argues that nature is the corrupt society of Paris; a world in which an animalistic life implies a selfish fight for survival, rejecting any moral considerations for the sake of endurance. The nephew assumes that whoever denies the self-evident and undeniable corruption of society suffers from pathetic idealism. To live honest to nature is to adapt and to follow the principle of self-interest (Shea, p. 60) and in fact, that attitude is no longer a brave response of the exceptional character, but instead the expected reaction of any man with reason; thus allowing the understanding of modern cynicism to be the banal cultural expression of the masses, as pointed out by Sloterdijk (2015).

*‘Que Vachaché’: the real and literary failure of Discépolo’s earliest tango.*

To explore the presence of this recently described cynic adaptability to a broken society -as it appears in Rameau’s nephew, and as studied by Sloterdijk (2015) and then reinforced by Shea (2010) and Stanley (2007, 2012)- in Discépolo’s tangos, I will focus on the analysis of the lyrics of one of his first compositions, “Que Vachaché”, written in 1926.

The tango was first sung in Montevideo, Uruguay, as part of the play “El organito” [The windup organ] (Discépolo A, Discépolo ES, 1926) interpreted by La Compañia Rioplatense de Sainetes and directed by Ulises Favaro and Edmundo Bianchi. The play, written by Discépolo and his brother, Armando, describes the miseries of a street organist, Saverio, living in the poor suburbs of Buenos Aires. The main character lives surrounded by people of the lowest socio-economical strata, systematically frustrated in their aim to reach some form of financial improvement, and constantly struggling with hunger and debts. Throughout the course of the play, the organist, rejects his previous moral standings and rebels against the values of hard and honest work imposed by a society that doesn’t allow him to prosper. He denounces the hypocrisy of promises of progress impossible to materialise and decides to behave unscrupulously to gain riches and more respect. The character becomes more evil and more sordid as time goes by and ends up betrayed by his own family to whom he had shared and taught his selfish and amoral philosophy. The tango was sung by one secondary character, in the voice of Mecha Delgado and although the play received good reviews and was reasonably successful, the song itself was heavily questioned by the critics and the audience (Galasso, 1967). Discépolo’s biographers coincide in stating that the heavy social criticism present in the tango was not in tune with the euphoria of the auspicious economic development in the country as depicted by the media of that time (Galasso, 1967; Pujol, 2007).

Setting that debate aside for the moment, the song reflects the complaints of a woman who blames her partner for being too naïve and moralist, and accordingly incapable of economic progress in a world described as selfish, unprincipled, and dishonest in which only the strongest survives. The female narrator demands her partner to let the concerns of his conscience aside and to realise that only the material goods are worth fighting for. A dual message then appears explicitly in almost every stanza: the world is corrupted and the traditional values have been replaced by the omnipresent power of the money; and, at the same time, the recognition that the only way to confront that reality is to adapt and to pursue obsessively that same procrastinated material goal.

*Contrasting ideals in ‘Que Vachaché’: reconfiguring the motto ‘deface the currency’.*

In accordance with most of Discépolo’s tangos, a grim description of the reality is equally present in this tango. The contrast that appears in its verse repeats (or anticipates, as this is one of his earliest productions) topics and iconic references which became the signature of most of Discépolo’s compositions. For instance, the song denounces values such as honesty or love as features of the past, long gone in the current commercial society. However, in this song the recognition of money as the new ruler of laws and moral codes is particularly strong. The song states, in one of its first stanzas,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ¿Pero no ves, gilito embanderado, | Can't you see, you stupid believer, |
| que la razón la tiene el de más guita? | that the one who is richer is the one who is right? |
| ¿Que la honradez la venden al contado | That integrity is sold in cash |
| y a la moral la dan por moneditas? | and morals are exchanged for coins? |
| ¿Que no hay ninguna verdad que se resista | That there is no truth that can resist |
| frente a dos pesos moneda nacional? | before of two pesos, the national coin? |
| Vos resultás, -haciendo el moralista-, | You look like -playing the moralist- |
| un disfrazao...sin carnaval... | a masqueraded... without a carnival... |

As in later productions such as “Yira, yira” from 1930 or “Cambalache” from 1934, the narrator agrees with that superficial and materialistic description of a society in which the utilitarian logic prevails. Similarly to the aforementioned songs, the narrator’s singing is used to accuse the addressee of behaving naively and to demand that he becomes aware of the nasty reality in which they live. Matamoro (1969) considers that the relevance attributed to material comfort as a driving force for Discépolo’s characters is directly connected with the socio-economic characteristics of those same characters: they are always among the lowest strata and their singing is the rallying cry for their fight for basic material survival. Matamoro (1969) states,

Discépolo is the stereotypical poet describing the lumpen, the marginal men, the one among the many that formed the mass who followed Yrigoyen[[23]](#footnote-23). As such, Discépolo is a humanist who takes the ethics of the subjects and extrapolates them as universal. (p. 159, m.t)

As the character Saverio in the play in which the song was first presented, the singing voice in “Que Vachaché” indeed systematically reinforces her condition in the lower class and confess the suffering and privation of basic needs. On the other hand, and at the same time, the female voice, once she recognises and denounces the dismantling of the traditional set of values that her partner still hold sacred, claims the need to embrace the superficial materialistic obsession symbolised by the money not only for survival, but also for her own selfish convenience,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Lo que hace falta es empacar mucha moneda, | What it is needed is to save lots of money, |
| vender el alma, rifar el corazón, | to sell the soul, to raffle the heart, |
| tirar la poca decencia que te queda... | to throw away the little decency left... |
| Plata, plata, plata y plata otra vez... | Money, money, money, and money again... |
| Así es posible que morfés todos los días, | Then you'll be able to eat every day, |
| tengas amigos, casa, nombre... | to have friends, a house, a reputation... |
| y lo que quieras vos. | and whatever you want. |
| El verdadero amor se ahogó en la sopa: | True love has drowned in the soup: |
| la panza es reina y el dinero Dios. | the belly is queen and money is God. |

In the first stanza, there is a description of a corrupted world in which economic wealth rules over reason or moral codes, but in the later one, the character advocates for the pursuit of that same materialism that was implicitly condemned before, reinforcing that sense of hypocrisy that is suggested throughout the song. It is at this point when the elements of modern cynicism strongly manifest: the female narrator simultaneously condemns the decadence of the modern world and engages in an egotistic pursuit of its false idols for selfish convenience. The value of the currency is first denigrated as false and amoral (as the ancient cynicism would do) but then is accepted as the only and inevitable driving force that justifies human behaviour. The female singer recriminates her partner, not only for being unaware and naïve about the decadence of their world but criticises him for hanging on to moral values that are dead instead of adapting to the new circumstances.

That same hypocrisy is a crucial aspect of Rameau’s cynicism and became a transformative element in the present understanding of modern cynicism. Shea (2010) states,

Abandoning the contestatory stance of Diogenes and the revolutionary potential of the Cynic’s resolute “NO”, the nephew affirms the emerging values of mid-eighteen-century Parisian commercial society. The Cynic turns cynic (Zyniker) where protest ends, and acceptance begins. (p. 61)

The nephew insists that the only reasonable and logical way of behaving is to take the market as the new dominant moral value and therefore to implicate himself in the same decadent society he mocks. The action of critique overlaps, or appears to be compatible, with a complicity with the corrupted culture and it is equally the central point of Discépolo’s song.

*Continuity instead of exceptionality.*

The striking hypocrisy present in this lyric was acknowledged by many of Discépolo’s critics and was the focal point for those references explicitly connecting him with modern cynicism. This was notable at the time when the song was first presented, according to several critics in the news (Galasso, 1967) and for later analysis of the artist’s tango as in the case of Casadevall in 1957 or Lara, T. and Ines Roncetti de Panti in 1961. The latter claims to perceive a “…background of philosophical bitter pessimism with a taste of cynicism that make him [Discépolo] the Lucretius of our days. We doubt whereas he is encouraging the lower passions of the people. It is evident he has a powerful influence over them, and his speech has coincided with the lowering of our morals in the last decades” (quoted by Galasso, 1967 p. 183, m.t). In the specific case of contemporary writers analysing this song, however, references to the cynicism of Discépolo are ubiquitous, even among those ones who attempt to praise the figure of the composer and claim that he was a moralist and a rebellious denouncer of the injustices of the poor people. For instance, Pujol (2017) mentions that the lyrics of “Que vachaché” appeals to “the cynicism of a poetic first person” (p. 107, m.t) or Matamoro (1969) who recognises that the “…painful, eloquent and direct cynicism [of that song] was never accepted by the public of those years…” (p. 158, m.t)

For these last authors, however, there is an argument that allows for the presentation of this song as exceptional and unique, uncoordinated from the rest of Discépolo’s productions and notably distant from the general trend of tango lyrics: according to Pujol (2017), Matamoro (1969), Conde (2003) and Galasso (1967), the lyric presents an innovative approach that won’t be repeated in the future: the singing voice does not emanate from the man but instead represents the ‘other’ (a woman in this case) and accordingly, that hypocritical reaction is not representative of a universal first person but of an external corrupted self that Discépolo denounces. This element is noted by a discursive analysis of the lyric (Conde, 2003), reinforced by interviews in which Discépolo himself introduces this song as innovative “That [the song] was different, different to everything that had been listened as a tango before. It said other things, it looked at life from a different angle…” (Discépolo quoted by Galasso, 1967, p. 50, m.t) and reaffirmed by the resistance and scandalization of the public at the time of its first presentation.

To the contrary, I argue that, despite the fact that the use of a female voice as the main narrator is not a common feature in tango songs of that period, and indeed does not repeat in Discépolo’s other productions, this female voice should be considered as a temporal continuity in the general narrative of the tango story. In several tango songs, a male narrator cries the betrayal of the woman who has left him, seduced by the richness of another life and, once disappointed, he becomes disenchanted with society and escapes towards isolationism in the forms of alcoholism and by returning to his childhood home. “Que Vachaché” does not represent a rupture in that tale. Instead, it can be considered as the perspective of that same woman, in the instances before abandoning her man. She is not deceptively seduced by wealth and superficial gains but instead she is fully aware of its untruthfulness and nevertheless chooses to engage in that pursuit, consenting to the rejection of the moral codes and traditional values in her path (as commented by Allen, 2020, paraphrasing Žižek, a cynic that knows what he is doing but still is doing it)

This approach could be suggested when considering the final stanza of the tango,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ¡Tirate al río! | Jump into the river! |
| ¡No embromés con tu conciencia! | Don't bother me with your conscience! |
| Sos un secante que no hace reír. | You're a bore that doesn't make me smile. |
| Dame puchero, guardá la decencia... | Give me stew, keep for yourself your decency... |
| ¡Plata, plata y plata! ¡Yo quiero vivir! | Money, money, and money! I want to live! |
| ¿Qué culpa tengo si has piyao la vida en serio? | Is it my fault if you took life seriously? |
| Pasás de otario, morfás aire y no tenés colchón... | You play at naivety, living on air without a bed... |
| ¿Qué vachaché? Hoy ya murió el criterio! | Whatcha gonna do? Common sense is dead! |
| Vale Jesús lo mismo que el ladrón... | Jesus is worth the same as a thief... |

Furthermore, I argue that there is an underlying reasoning that logically justifies Discépolo’s characters’ reactions, and which is coincidentally a crucial point in the nephew’s discourse: the recognition of the moral failings of the world inclines the nephew and the narrators in tango songs to behave without scruples in order to avoid being cheated, conned, or hurt by others. Accordingly, tango characters advise grasping even the superficial gains that others will alternatively take instead. Discépolo himself stated this idea in an interview,

[The citizen of Buenos Aires] tries to mislead when he speaks. It is the fear to be mocked. And in order not to be mocked by the others, he mocks himself. To be mocked! Such a good topic for a writer with spare time… In it, we find our weakness and our strength. By that fear, each time we start something, we turn on all our awareness of our interior self. I mean, all the powers of our spirit get in action to avoid being mocked. And if, after all, we end up in failure, we shout sneering that failure in order to avoid being pointed out by the others. (Discépolo, quoted by Pujol, 2007, p. 126, m.t)

I have previously highlighted in Chapter 3 this idea when analysing the mean behaviour of the others in Discépolo’s compositions. It appears even more explicitly in his later tangos, such as “Justo el 31”, in which the singer shows off his cleverness in deciding to abandon his partner the day before she was going to abandon him anyway. He claims with pride how he managed to escape the humiliation of the breakup.

That analysis in fact coincides with the superficial description of a modern cynic by the YouTube channel, “The School of Life”, previously introduced at the beginning of this chapter. As part of the common ways to portray a modern cynic, the video “What do Cynical People Really Want?” (2016) states,

Beneath that gruff surface, cynics are afflicted by near hysterical fragility, around the idea of expecting anything, which turns out to be less impressive than they had hoped. And so, they twist their mental apparatus to secure themselves against the eventuality of any discouragement. They disappoint themselves before the world can ever do it for them (…) It is an emotional protection. In essence, a mode of coping, learned under conditions of duress.

In a similar sense, analysing the discourse in Rameau’s nephew, Stanley (2007) states,

Cynical logic goes roughly like so: The naive and idealistic get trampled in this world. You have to do what you can to get by. Better to do the outwitting than to be outwitted. Society will always be cutthroat, politicians will always lie, greedy businessmen will always squeeze profits out of suffering. If we can do nothing to change this, then at least we want a piece of the pie. (p. 392)

According to Stanley, the nephew distinguishes the frauds around him but deliberately accepts such corruption and becomes a part of it because of a fatalist assertion that others will otherwise unavoidably take advantage of him instead. Stanley (2007) adds,

He calculates how to exploit a social structure based upon envy, greed, empty status symbols to advance his own social position, and in the rare moment when he fails to debase himself so thoroughly, he bitterly curses his inadequacy: "Couldn't you flatter as well as the next man? Couldn't you manage to lie, swear, perjure, promise, fulfil or back out like anybody else? (p. 394)

There is, however, an interesting point worth discussing that arises as a result of the emphasis on the lens of Rameau’s nephew’s construction of modern cynicism in Discépolo’s tango “Que Vachaché”: both the female singer in the song and the nephew in the play do not express the isolationism and apathy that usually is attached to the modern cynic reaction. They both hold a defiant spirit and express their deception and ambitions with irony and wit and can present a subversive and dangerous speech against the status quo, despite the fact that their discourse is not revolutionary, rebellious, or transformative in a traditional political and social sense.

Referring to Diderot’s character, Allen (2020) reflects,

Deciding that everything is shit, yet finding pleasure in the art of shitting, the nephew’s Cynicism ends up justifying his attachment to the status quo. It is worth noting, however, that Rameau’s nephew has not yet retreated to the jaded, shy cynicism that Sloterdijk detects. He is not a cynic in the late modern sense. Unlike his late modern descendants, he is open about his complicity, and as a critic still has the energy and appetite for combative, prolonged confrontations. (p. 143)

As noted by Allen (2020), residual elements of the hostile approach more typical of the ancient cynicism were still present in Rameau’s nephew, and it could be argued that it maintained a potentially disruptive force that could or may have destabilized the world of letters of the nineteenth century he was criticising. I argue that instead of considering that Diderot’s oeuvre was probably the last attempt to hold that confrontative spirit, some of those elements that are usually connected with Diogenes’ figure are still manifested in our culture and indeed may be perceived and analysed in tango lyrics as well. Features of disenchantment and apathy coexist with the mocking rebellious impulse despite operating in different forms than the ones from the Ancient Greece.

As stated, I argue that Discépolo represents the most striking example of the influence of cynicism in tango lyrics. However, I claim that Discépolo is not an exception, and notably, this analysis can be expanded into tangos composed during the period known as ‘*tango-canción’*, between 1917 and 1955, analysing the production of several writers, poets, and compositors. This analysis will take place in Part III. In Part II that follows, however, I will put this tango period in the context of tangos’ own historical journey.

# **Part II. The transformation of tango culture from its origins in 1880 to the end of the golden age in 1952: a brief historical overview.**

*Introduction.*

The aim of this section is to introduce the reader to a chronological version of the historical changes that tango culture experienced between its origins and the end of its golden age in the mid-1950s. However, the objective is not only to describe and narrate the various episodes that modified the characteristics of this cultural expression, but as well to comment on the dominant narrative that guides usual discussions of its development. According to that dominant narrative, tango evolved from a ‘primitive’ dance, practiced only by ‘marginal’ people, and was as such ‘simple’, ‘vulgar’, and ‘undeveloped’ to become a more complex, professional, and perfected artistic expression that arguably incorporated a more sophisticated lyricism and more elaborate musical compositions and, accordingly, reached popularity and success by seducing a wider audience in Argentina and in the world (Benedetti, 2017).

I will subdivide this historical presentation into three sections. The first section will consider the period between 1880 and 1912, a second section will discuss the years between 1912 and 1924; a third section will analyse the period between 1924 and 1952. In each case, and without necessarily introducing a historiographical debate, I will mention different chronologies and refer to alternative interpretations of each era, by referencing the most renowned scholars and historians of tango.

# Chapter 5. A multidisciplinary approach.

Most historical accounts of tango start by discussing the origin of the word itself. Jose Gobello (1999) starts his *Breve Historia Critica del tango* (Brief Critical History of Tango) by mentioning that the first meanings attributed to the word ‘tango’ referred to an African dialect that described the sound produced by mumbling words. In Benedetti’s account (2017), tango was first used by African slaves in Latin American in order to describe the sound of the drums when played in rhythmical succession “tan-go”. In the interpretation of Tulio Carella (1956), the concept can be linked to a dialect from central Africa that referred to the act of dancing itself (derived from tamgu, tumgu). Finally, Hugo Lamas and Enrique Binda (2008) suggest that the first written examples of the word can be found around 1810 by referring to the place in which the Black communities in Buenos Aires gathered for ritual or religious purposes. The term itself has been a reason of controversy and debate as stated by Gobello (1976) in his article “Tango, vocablo controvertido” (“Tango, controversial word”) but such controversy allows us to realise the multidimensionality of tango as a cultural phenomenon: it simultaneously refers to a dance, to a specific genre of music, to a poetry and lyrics and to the context in which the tango dance, music and lyrics may have been expressed. Accordingly, I will take into consideration those four aspects in each of the periods in this historical account of tango.

Before introducing the first period, it is worth stating that in the formation of tango as a defined genre, three main social groups of the city of Buenos Aires, between 1850 and 1880, were actively (voluntarily or involuntarily) participating in its creation. The stress put into each one of those groups as the main creative force was a divisive line that separated historical narratives among scholars and journalists. The European immigrants from the nineteenth century arriving to the city, the Afro-American community in Buenos Aires and the internal immigration from the countryside were pivotal in the first stages of tango development and continued to influence the transformations of that genre until nowadays.

One of the first actors included in the historical explanations of tango were the recently arrived European immigrants to the city of Buenos Aires. The historians remarking the importance of this group (Vega, 2016; Ferrer, 1999; Sábato, 2005; Lamas and Binda, 2008) mention the influence of popular dances by mid 1800s such as the Couple, the Minuet, or the Mazurka and Waltz in the creation of the early tango choreography. At the same time, they stress the similarities between the ‘Tango Andaluz’ (Andalucian tango) as a music inspiration, and the relevance that later on instruments such as the bandoneon (German origins) or the piano had in the first tango orchestras. In all those analyses, one constant is the statement about the percentages of immigrants arriving to the city of Buenos Aires by the latest decades of the 19th century, most of them settling in the suburbs of the city and later on taking part as direct participants of tango culture from 1880 onwards. The first musicians, composers and lyricists were mostly first or second generations of European immigrants. The immigrants were as well the owners of those establishments where tango started to appear and the first recognised dancers once the genre was relatively defined, by 1880.

A second actor mentioned as a decisive influence in the creation of tango are the members of the Afro-American community in the area surrounding El Rio de la Plata[[24]](#footnote-24). On top of the origins of the word itself, those authors stating the importance of the black community in the formation of tango stress the relevance of the habanera, from Cuban origins, and the candombe, popular in the River Plate area, both musical expressions from the Black community, as the main influences in the development of tango music. Another element usually associated to the connection between the Afro-American culture and the early formation of tango are some abrupt and rhythmical movements known as “cortes y quebradas” that were a fundamental part of the early style of tango dancing and were arguably transformations of movements first introduced in solo dancing styles among the Black community. The recognition of this Black influence on tango was first stated by Vicente Rossi (2001) in 1926 in his book *Cosa de negros* [A thing from the Black people] and it has since been a repeated claim of recognition of the Black contribution in tango history among several scholars (Natale, 1984; Picotti, 1998; Solomianski, 2003; Cirio, 2006; Goldman, 2008; Ortiz Oderigo, 2009; Freixa, 2013;).

A final social actor in the formation of tango was the inhabitant of the countryside that came to the city as the result of an internal migration, carrying their cultural identity, its music, its dance, and its traditions. Some of those dances and musical styles were part in that mixture that shaped tango culture such as the vals criollo, the estilo or the vidalas and milongas. In parallel, the impact of the culture of various areas in the countryside in the formation of tango is frequently associated with the influence that ‘*payadores’* (minstrels that used to make the act of singing a duel between improvised lyrics and the musical accompaniment of the guitar). Those popular composers of spontaneous verses were, in the analysis of several scholars, quite relevant in the development of the first tango lyrics. At the same time, those arriving from the countryside, carrying with them the cult of the knives and the experience of living outside of the civilized society, created a stereotypical character, the *‘compadrito’*, a tough, courageous and rebellious symbol that was the iconic figure of early tango dancers, and was taken as the representation of the tango essence by many, most famously by Jorge Luis Borges who praised them as the holders of the real tango spirit in his essay “The history of tango” (1976), first published in 1930, and later on in his four conferences from 1965, published under the title *El Tango* (2016). Borges’ revindication of the local origins of tango was later on followed by other scholars such as Tallón (1964), Ostuni (2009), or Molinari and Martinez (2016).

Those three influences in the early formation of tango do not necessarily deny one another and later historical accounts try to consider and value them all, such as the study done by Benzecry Sabá (2015). This author, in fact, reflects upon a common background that those three influences share: they all coexisted in the suburbs of the city, that rough and underdeveloped area where all the historians coincide in describing as the place where tango was first created. Matamoro (1969) argued that those dispossessed, excluded from the spheres of economic influence and political participation were the ones that, secluded in the outskirts of the city, created a dance for and by the marginals. Matamoro (1969) states:

The realization of tango was the exclusive responsibility of the orilleros [the ones living in the borders], and the dance the result of their worries of angst, despair, and exile. Their music was the music of the brothels they frequented, and the dance the result of their sexual wildness and their choreographic innovative improvisation. (p.57, m.t)

# Chapter 6. A brief historical contextualization in three stages

*From the suburbs to the city centre: the early days of tango from 1880 to 1912.*

The initial date for this periodisation in the history of tango is not completely arbitrary, and it is widely agreed by most of tango historians: 1880 is the year in which the federalization of Buenos Aires occurs, a moment generally accepted as the final unification of Argentina as a Nation State, reinforced by some expansive military campaigns that extended the borders under the governmental control over the Native Americans that were still holding some autonomous lands in the Patagonia region (Romero, 1994). After years of civil war, the province of Buenos Aires was finally integrated into the Nation and the city became its capital. The historian Natalio Botana (1998), in his book *El orden conservador* [The conservative order] marks the year 1880 as the moment in which the city evolved from an important port into a cosmopolitan megalopolis, absorbing millions of migrants from both the countryside and from Europe. This process had started as a mass phenomenon in the mid-1800s but escalated exponentially in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. This period, in Botana’s analysis, was followed by a concentration of the economic and political power in the upper classes, that designed a political system based on systematic fraud and the concentration of the economic richness in an elitist oligarchy. That same process manifested in the design of the city itself, creating an implicit dividing line between the elegant and prosperous city centre, and the impoverished suburbs that were welcoming most of the new immigrant arrivals.

It was in those recently expanded suburbs where the tango dance started to spread. According to most authors (Salas, 1986; Benedetti, 2017), tango was firstly danced in brothels, *academias*[[25]](#footnote-25) and in the *conventillos*[[26]](#footnote-26) and the first written accounts of tango being danced were produced by police reports, as first researched by Lamas and Binda (2008). Indeed, according to the newspapers of the time, events related to tango in those early days were systematically connecting delinquency and illegal activities (drugs and prostitution). According to those early reports, the dance was enacted by the lowest strata of society, in the most morally condemned establishments in the worst suburbs of the city.

This description of tango origins in connection with a dangerous and immoral atmosphere is nowadays far from being uncontested. This representation was, as researched by Lamas and Binda (2008), the one portrayed in newspapers and reinforced by statements done by writers, journalists, and chronists of that early period (Gobello, 1999) but recent studies have relativised those links by a dual approach: In first place, the level of roughness, violence and scandal associated to those places where tango proliferated has been disputed by studies such as the one from Donna Guy in her book *Sex and danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, family and nation in Argentina* (1995). According to Guy, the brothels were not only tolerated by the authorities in those decades but well-regulated and in some cases even promoted and defended by members of the political order. Furthermore, the disturbances and scandals were not as frequent as presented by those who criticised the contextual birthplace of tango and the author disputes the dimension of those who were allegedly breaking the limits of the law by, for example, referring to the statistics connected to the ‘*trata de blancas’* -trade of white Europeans kidnapped and transformed into slave prostitutes, far lower that what the news of the period were affirming. At the same time, authors such as Matamoro (1969) have relativised the anarchic effects of those ‘*compadritos*’ who exercised regular street violence and were the symbolic emblems of the tango dancers. The author argues that many of those tough ruffians were useful to the political order and, quite often, were hired by politicians and institutions to act as bodyguards or to reinforce their presence in the streets. According to Guy and Matamoro, both the prostitution and the iconic figures of the ruffians were reconsidered as functional to the establishments rather than destabilisers to the political order. A second objection to the lower class, marginalised version of the tango origins (pointed by Varela, 2016) refers to the participation of members of the middle and upper class in those same brothels where the tango first proliferated. According to Varela, there were several young members of the ruling oligarchy that attended those venues, and they were among the first tango dancers as well. This author argues that there was a systematic hypocrisy in the discourse of the upper classes, condemning the tango, its decadent atmosphere and the poor education and background of its first dancers and musicians. At the same time, he argues that there was a political and social strategical use of those rude characters and venues, and, in parallel, a direct participation in that lower and discredited form of popular culture by some of the rebellious young members of the richest families in the country. I will expand this discussion on Part IV.

The dance, the music, and the lyrics from these early stages were as well quite different from the ones which nowadays can be heard in social events in Buenos Aires or in tango evenings around the world (Savigliano, 1995). One of the most distinctive elements in this period is the improvisation. The musicians didn’t have any professional formation and there was no sheet music written, no codes or restriction into what tango as a melody or as a rhythm should sound like. The early groups of 3 or 4 musicians (usually harp, flute, and violin), most of them from humble origins and amateurs, were playing spontaneous compositions, repeated several times in the laps of each song (Molinari and Martinez, 2016). The songs from that period were characterised by a fast beat, in agile and cheerful melodies frequently adorned by staccatos and abrupt breaks (Liska, 2014). These elements contrast notably with the nostalgic, dramatic, and slow-paced music that dominated the tango compositions from 1920s until nowadays (Ferrer, 1999).

The dance was accordingly agile and included those cortes y quebradas (sharp and abrupt movements that required certain level of physical skill by the early dancers), and the sequences were equally improvised. There was no codification on how the movements were supposed to be performed and each dancer added new innovative steps into the experimental connection with the occasional partner. According to many tango historians, the movements were not only fast and impetuous but had an element of provocation and an evocation to sexual gestures and positions (Matallana, 2016). I will further discuss the relevance of this improvised aspect of the music and the dance as I claim that was one of the features that encouraged or at least opened up the possibility of a bodily disruption to the norms and values that prescribed how the music and dance was supposed to be performed in those years.

A final aspect to be considered in this first stage of the historical account of tango, relates to the few lyrics that survived the passage of time. This topic of research has not been particularly popular among scholars but the study by Javier Barreiro, “Una aproximación a las letras satíricas: del tango prostibulario a su codificación” [An approximation to the satirical lyrics: from the tango of the brothels to its codification] (2014) was one of the few relevant contributions to this topic. Those first stanzas in tango melodies were, once again, improvised descriptions of the venues and the participants in which tango first appeared. Most of those lyrics had a rogue content, with allusions and metaphors to the sexual act. In most cases, and once again, this is a feature that almost completely disappeared from the tango narrative. The tangos were proudly praising those brave and courageous characters from the underworld (Benedetti, 2017). Those tangos were frequently sung in first person, showing off the bold attitude of the narrator, proudly expressing their disdain for cultural conventions, and arrogantly stating their life in connection with the violence and the prostitution. As I will discuss in the following period in tango history, the discourse emanating from the early lyrics in this first period contrasts with the self-pity, decadent, and frustrated approach of narrators in tango songs after the 1920s, or with the moral reprimand to young females who approach the life of tango dance and end in a tragic drama. The character of the ‘*compadritos*’ depicted in these lyrics of this early period are proud to be outsiders of the civilised norms, reject the values of work, and advocate for living dangerously. Furthermore, in some cases the character that narrates those early tangos are females, some of them assuming their condition as prostitutes, and happy to live freely and choose their own destiny.

In just a few decades, this tango that was condemned by the media and rejected, at least discursively, by the middle and upper classes ended up performed in the most luxurious dance halls in Paris and in New York, danced by the aristocracy of Buenos Aires in events of charity promoted by the most respected civil societies, and accepted as a national emblem and the defined cultural icon of the city and the country. This process, called by many as the improvement of tango as a refined cultural expression, or by others as a co-opted process that moralised and appeased its rebellious impulse is the centre of the next section.

*From the city centre to the elegant halls: Tango as an exported commodity from 1912 to 1924.*

The year 1912 that brings the previous period to a close and opens up this one in my chronological account of tango history is not necessarily the year chosen by most scholars in order to mark the beginning of a different stage in tango history. For some historians (Gobello, 1966; Barreiro, 1985; 2007; Conde, 2014; Romano, 2014; Balint-Zanchetta, 2014) focusing on the development of tango lyrics, the year 1917 signals the beginning of the period known as ‘*‘tango-canción’’* [tango song] with the first public performance of “Mi noche triste” [my sad night], written by Pascual Contursi. The historians focusing on the transformations of the tango as music (Sierra, 1976; Pujol, 1999) point out 1897 as the date in which the first tango was composed and written into sheet music (“El Entrerriano”) meanwhile others such as Vega (2016), stress the importance of the creation of the first Orquesta tipica criolla by 1908, or the incorporation of the bandoneon and the piano to the tango ensembles by 1917 (Gobello, 1999). I have followed in this section, the periodisation designed by Matamoro (1969) that was the first one interpreting this period not exclusively in terms of the process of perfecting, embellishing, and making more complex the dance, the music, and the lyrics. Instead, he suggested that these transformations that tango culture experienced implied a process of co-option and appropriation of that popular cultural expression by the upper and middle classes, modifying some defining features of the previous stage and making it sociably acceptable for the dominant moral norms of that time.

In Matamoro’s interpretation (1969), the year 1912 marks a significant point in which the upper classes formally start to take into consideration the cultural forms of expression of the lower classes, signalled by the Law Saenz Peña (Law 8871), sanctioned by the congress on February of that year. This law declares universal, compulsory, and secret the male suffrage. By the incorporation of male voters from all social strata into the political system, according to Matamoro, their habits, opinions and forms of social interaction and expressions were the object of attention by the spheres of power. In regard to tango culture, the transformations that allowed tango music and dance to be accepted by a wider audience and welcomed as a form of national iconic expression, happened not only in the way in which tango was supposed to be danced, played, and sung, but as well in the relocation of where tango was played and performed. I will point out four symbolic contexts in which tango was relocated as part of this reconfiguration of its features and its identity.

To begin with, by the beginning of the 1900s, members of the elite of Buenos Aires spread tango dance into Europe and United States. According to Gobello (1999), ‘*los niños bien*’[[27]](#footnote-27) [the good boys], who were regularly travelling abroad, shared tango with their Europeans counterparts, introducing tango as a sinful and prohibited style of dance that reinforced the aristocratic Argentinean travellers in their double identity of citizens of the world and exotic and tough adventurers (Matallana, 2016). The dance spread quicky and became a popular success, as researched by Carlos Groppa (2004) and Andrea Matallana (2016) in The United States, and Guillermo Cassio (1999) in France. Marta Savigliano, in her book *Tango and the political economy of Passion* (1995), argues that tango was, since that moment onwards, taken as a mercantile commodity, a cultural merchandise that was made exotic and erotic as part of the frenetic wave of consumption of foreign cultural manifestations by the upper classes of the imperialist powers of the period before the beginning of the First World War. Tango becomes a fashion in Paris and New York, and creates an industry of related goods, new ‘tango cloths’, new ‘tango colours’, and a constant fascination of scandalous stories between naïve young dancers of the upper class that were spread in the news (Matamoro, 1969). According to Savigliano, this European and American welcoming of tango implied a radical transformation on how tango was supposed to be danced and played or, in Gobello’s words (1999), “…El tango se afrancesa [tango becomes French]” (p. 35).

In this transformation, in musical terms, the tempo of tango songs becomes slower, and the bright and rhythmical staccatos give place to a more nostalgic and melodramatic melody. The minor scales are used more frequently and, more importantly, the improvisation in the execution of tangos is progressively abandoned (Liska, 2014; Sabá, 2015).

In parallel, the dance experienced similar modifications. The abrupt, agile, and provocative moves are replaced by a more elegant, upright, and slow pace sets of movements, in a style that is from then onwards known as ‘*tango liso*’ [plain tango], in contrast to the recently named ‘*tango canyengue*’ in reference to the way of dancing of the previous era (Comas, 1932; Hanna, 1993; Dinzel, 1999). Savigliano (1995) argues as well that it was this process of cultural appropriation that started codifying tango as a musical genre and as a dance. A new profession of tango dance teachers emerged and academies, dance schools, articles, and books started to define a proper and correct way of executing each of the previously improvised tango moves.

A frequently mentioned (Groppa, 2004; Sabá, 2015; Matallana, 2016) example of this modified exported version of tango is the sequence of tango dance in the movie ‘The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse’ (1921), produced by Metro Pictures Corporation, directed by Rex Ingram and with Rudolph Valentino as the main star. The movie narrates the eventful life of Julio, interpreted by Valentino, who is the grandson of a rich landowner, and his adventures in Europe, experiencing the glamour of an artistic and bohemian life in Paris and the drama of the trenches in the First World War. In one of its most famous scenes, Valentino, dressed as a stereotypical Argentine *gaucho*, observes a couple dancing tango in a bar. He steps up, challenges the male dancer, and shows off a display of well knowns tango moves of that ‘*tango liso*’ version that was already popular in Europe and the United States of America.

A second context in which the transfiguration of tango occurred can be exemplified by one notorious event in Buenos Aires. In September of 1913, the Baron of Marchi, from the aristocracy of the city, organised a ball in the recently inaugurated Palace Theatre, in collaboration with La Sociedad Sportiva, a commission of upper-class women, and with the explicit support of ex-President Julio Argentino Roca[[28]](#footnote-28)’s daughter. In that event, a tango competition inaugurated the evening, finally allowing the tango music and tango dance into the most refined circles of the aristocracy of Buenos Aires (Varela, 2016). The dancers, however, were warned that the only tango allowed for such an event was the ‘*tango liso*’ and professional musician, recently arrived from France (Vicente Greco and Francisco Canaro) had to the be in charge of the music.

In Matamoro’s analysis (1969), that event signals a double process of assimilation. The upper classes take seriously a cultural manifestation with origins in the lowest strata of the society but, more importantly, tango adapts to the requests of civilized etiquette of the ruling class.

That event is considered by other scholars (Molinari and Martinez, 2016; Benedetti, 2017), as the occasion that reinforced the importance of the professionalisation of the musicians. The interpreters of most of the tango orchestras during the late 1910s and 1920s will frequently have a formal music education (I will expand this process in Part V, when dealing with the educational models that tango implies in different stages of its development). The melodies will be written in sheet music, and the role of each instrument carefully codified, in line with the interpretation of classical music and in contrast with other genres of popular music such as the jazz in the United States, or even the folk music from the countryside in Argentina.

A third context in which tango is displayed, in this period, are the cabarets of Buenos Aires. Debora Jakubs (1984), in her historical account of tango history, provides a title quite suggestive of the transformation I am introducing in this section. The article is named “From Bawdyhouse to Cabaret” and its subtitle reinforces the idea of the social improvement of the genre: “The Evolution of the Tango as an expression of Argentine Popular culture”. The transition from the brothels to the cabarets is taken, in her account, as a sign of recognition of tango’s merits by a wider audience that allowed tango to finally be accepted in more refined circles in the city of Buenos Aires and in the world. In Matamoro’s account (1969), he equally acknowledges the fact that the new version of tango music and tango dance found the most illustrative context of reproduction in those cabarets of Buenos Aires. In contrast with the brothels where tango allegedly first started to spread, the cabarets from the mid to late 1910s were prestigious halls where the upper class socialised. However, in Matamoro’s interpretation, those establishments were described as the aspirational emblem of the middle and lower class, who were dreaming to access to the glamour of those elegant venues but which equally represented venues from where they were systematically excluded.

The fourth and final iconic context in this period of transformation, in which tango was performed, was in front of the eyes of the Catholic Pope. Two events, one belonging to the myth and the other one well documented, reinforced this process by which tango as a genre was sanitised, purified, and cured from its sinful origins. In 1914, according to the legend that was spread among the first historians of tango (Carella, 1956; Lamas and Binda, 2008) but later on rejected as a propagandistic invention of the ones trying to insert tango in the circles of the upper and middle class (Ferrer, 1999), the Pope Pio X requested a tango performance in order to be able to judge the alleged indecency of that popular dance. Ten years later, in 1924, this time in front of Pio XI and documented by tango historians, a couple danced the tango “Ave Maria” by Canaro (whose title had no correlation with religious figures but instead with a bar in Buenos Aires). In both events, the historically documented and the fictionalised encounter, the Pope did not condemn the dance and rather stated that it was inoffensive and innocuous (Gobello, 1999).

In those four contexts in which tango spread in this period (In European and American halls; in the events organised by the aristocracy of Buenos Aires; in the refined cabarets; in front of the Catholic Pope), the version played and danced presented contrasting characteristics with its version from the previous era. The new style of tango had a slow tempo, a more nostalgic melody with minor tones, and the dance, ‘*tango liso*’, became predominant.

Matamoro and Savigliano’s analysis of this transition are, as stated, presented as a deformation of the first features of the original tango in a process of appropriation and co-option that made tango functional to the local and international political context. From that point onwards, tango became a symbol of Argentinean national identity and was considered as a cultural manifestation of the city of Buenos Aires as a whole, rather than the expression of marginalised social classes. The figures of the ‘*compadrito*’, the prostitute or the pimp were progressively excluded from tango’s narratives.

This position, however, is far from omnipresent in historical accounts of tango. In contrast, versions of that transitional period such as the one from Ferrer (1999) that indeed tend to be more dominant in recent publications, especially among the ones destined to a wider audience (Molinari and Martinez, 2016; Benedetti, 2017) present a different approach. According to Ferrer (1999), the transformations that tango experienced during the 1910s were the result of the success of the genre itself, by which the popular masses kept on improving the musical and danceable style that allowed tango to overcome the aristocratical first rejection and seduced the international scene, thanks to the efforts of consecrated dancers and musicians of that period (Ferrer, pp 66-75).

There is one more aspect worth considering in this period that relates to the transformation of the narrative involved in tango lyrics. The milestone that is systematically mentioned by most historians and that inaugurates a period known as *‘tango-canción’*, was the performance in Theatre Empire by Carlos Gardel of the song “Mi noche triste” written by Contursi (Gobello, 1999). From that moment onwards, the lyrics were not just descriptive of the context and the characters that were representative of the tango culture in its early years, but introduced a story, a set of events with references to the past, the present and a perspective of the future, in the lapse of 2 or 3 minutes that lasted each song (Conde, 2003).

According to Matamoro (1969), the lyrics were from that moment written by recognised poets and progressively the text became as important as the music and the dance. For this author, the increasing relevance of the lyrics, and the fact that the audience was then encouraged to listen to tangos instead of dancing to them, in the context of cafes, family reunions or social events was another sign of co-option. Tango was softening the importance of the embodiment as a cultural manifestation, and became more contemplative, thoughtful, and reflexive.

The lyrics did not only modify certain aspects of its formal design but as well were transformed in its content and mood, in coherence with the changes in the music and the dance. To begin with, lyrics were no more improvised or adapted to the circumstances of the execution of each tango but written and patented (Conde, 2003). In second place, the singer did not use the first person but instead the second informal person became dominant as an implicit code of written tangos (Romano, 2014). In third place, the narrator in tango songs were no longer assumed as brave and dangerous men or sinful but proud prostitutes. At times, those same characters were presented in their unsuccessful version, beaten after encountering the toughness of living, or described in their most pathetic moment, when abandoned, betrayed, or defeated in their aspirations. The same rough men of the previous period are in several of the newly created lyrics described as fragile, cowards and lost in their convictions. One of the most significant switches in the prototypes of tango lyrics is the substitution of the proud prostitute for ‘*la milonguita*’. ‘*La milonguita*’ is characterised as a young woman, almost always from poor and humble origins that is seduced by the glamour of night life in Buenos Aires, that takes advantage of her youth and beauty to enjoy personal fame and material success but ends up, in the narration of most of the tangos, abandoned, lonely, back into poverty and even in agony caused frequently by consumption (Archetti, 1999).

It is important to point out here that I am not claiming that all tango songs, from this period and the ones that follow, replicate these narrations. Thousands of tangos were written and with diverse topics and styles and as if there were never explicit rules or restrictions about the topics that would belong to the tango genre, different stories were told under the scope of tango, dissimilar at times between each other (Conde, 2014). I claim, however, that those topics are systematically repeated with various stylistic shapes and provide a fundamental point to understand tango culture from the 1917 onwards. Furthermore, I claim that these changes that modified the way in which tango songs were composed, the movements danced and the context in which tango spread from 1912 had a direct repercussion in the way in which lyrics were written, and, central to my argument, developed into the narration of stories of disappointment, failure, scepticism and disenchantment that could be strongly connected with features of modern cynicism, as already presented in the previous Part I, when referring to the Discépolo’s work. In Part III, I will directly discuss the narratives of those tango-songs, written after 1917 under, once again, the scope of modern cynicism.

Before moving into that topic, the final stage of this tango periodization should be presented.

*From the elegant halls into the screen of the cinema: industrialised and massified tango in its golden age from 1924 to 1952.*

The year 1924 that opens this period follows the historical segmentation by Matamoro (1969) who stresses the importance of the inaugural year of ‘*La Guardia Nueva’* [the new guard] with the creation of the Orquesta Tipica de Julio de Caro [Julio de Caro ‘s Typical orchestra]. De Caro was a professional tango composer with a formal musical education and created an orchestra with more complex harmonical accompaniment than the previous tangos. His style was producing music primarily aimed to be listened rather than danced. (Sabá, 2015). ‘*La Guardia Nueva’* is usually described in contraposition with ‘*La Guardia vieja’* [The old guard], as the period in which musicians have a professional formation, improvisations is removed from the composition and the interpretation, and the bandoneon takes a predominant role in the nostalgic sound of the tango melodies, among other features (Gobello, 1999).

Matamoro (1969) names the first few years of this period as ‘*El acuerdo*’ [the agreement] in which the transformation that tango culture was experiencing finally settled with the success of a ‘*tango liso’*, slow and nostalgic for both the lower and the upper classes. By the 1920s, the brothels were officially forbidden, and the popular masses were reasonably integrated into the political system. Between 1922 and 1928, the president elected was Marcelo Torcuato de Alvear, member of the party Union Civica Radical, with strong representation among the workers but member himself of one of the richest families of the country, having worked previously as ambassador in Paris (Romano, 1994). According to Matamoro’s version (1969), Alvear’s success as a political leader was the corroboration of a political coexistence between the upper and lower classes, in which the voice of rebelliousness of the poorest was softened by the aristocratic figure of the president that was supposed to represent them. Matamoro (1969) establishes a parallelism between that political situation and the evolution of tango as a genre, in which its scandalous performativity became tempered by its appropriation by the upper classes.

The expansion of tango culture into spheres that used to reject and revile it, at least discursively, in its origins, finds its most articulated examples in the wide popularity of two musicians of that period, Carlos Gardel and Francisco Canaro (Varela, 2016). Both iconic figures were born in a humble context and became popular tango stars, the first one as a singer and the latter one as the conductor of his own orchestra. They were both taken as an example of the success of tango culture in the country and in the world and as the arguably effective story of economic and social progress that tango experienced (Collier, 1988; Barsky, 2004). Both were welcomed by the upper classes as performers in their events, and became wealthy and famous, while keeping traces of their rough origins only in symbolic gestures and in their way of speaking (Canaro, 1999). In fact, the success of those two characters was deeply imbricated in the progressive commercialization of tango as part of the industry of entertainment. Tango music spread in the record industry, in the radio and in the movies in an economical spiral of expansion (Collier, 1988; Marchini, 2007). In parallel, these figures adopted standards of elegance and etiquette that were imposed by the producers of movies and records that increasingly became part of the tango stereotype. Tango performers and dancers were expected to wear expensive suits, exclusive designs of tango shoes, trousers with a defined Italian cut, and the manners in the dance floor were written and codified in order to obey signs of grace and refinement. Those elements of sophistication are now dominant as noted by various recent ethnographic studies (Taylor, 1998; Carozzi, 2015). Furthermore, in the first decade of this period, tango continued the transformation by which is became more listened and observed without the predominance of the performativity of the dance. Cafes concerts, theatres and cinemas were new stages where tango expanded. The complex new harmonies and the content of the lyrics were turning out to be more relevant in the tango business. In fact, the period between 1924 until 1935 is the one in which each orchestra incorporates singers as part of a fundamental piece in each performance (Gobello, 1999).

However, this universe of etiquette, social and economic improvement, and the rejection of the marginal origin of tango didn’t materialise straightforwardly into the content of those new lyrics that grow to be more important for the genre. In fact, the social ascent that had in Gardel and Canaro the most prominent examples, is presented as impossible and unachievable in tango lyrics of that time. Those who belong to the upper classes are described as unsensible and superfluous and the glamorous halls in which tango was then danced were considered in the lyrics as sinful places of superficial temptation (Conde, 2003). Furthermore, the poor backgrounds where tango first emerged are in the lyrics remembered with nostalgia, presented as an idealized past forever lost by the frenzy of the big city. Interestingly, tango lyrics reflect upon tango culture itself, and upon the historical transformations that tango experienced, discussing and questioning such mutation with a melancholic and sceptic approach.

This aspect is crucial to my argument that perceives a contradiction between the way and the context in which tango was from this period onwards danced and performed, and the nostalgic pessimism of its lyrics. That hypocritical tension is what I claim generates a cynical discourse, in the modern sense of the word.

Accordingly, I will start by discussing, in Part III, three aspects in which this modern cynicism presented and manifested in the tango lyrics of this period, continuing, and expanding the discussion of the previous Part I.

Firstly, I will examine in selected lyrics of various composers, the elements of disenchantment and pessimism, the description of a grim present and a disheartening perspective of a future, that resembles what I have already discussed when analysing Discépolo’s lyrics. This section will reinforce the arguments already introduced before but will corroborate the fact that those elements were not exclusive of Discépolo as a composer, but a central part in tango lyrics as a general trend.

Secondly, I will introduce and debate alternative interpretations of tango lyrics from that period that argue that there is a moralising discourse in those tango stories. According to those interpretations, notably expressed by Varela (2005; 2016), the narrations of catastrophic endings to the main characters of tango lyrics have a discursive function that suggest limits to the social mobility of that time, establishing and strengthening implicit social boundaries. I claim, however, that those stories that warn the listener about the dangers of a sinful life that tango could generate are in fact a hypocritical discourse, and the centre of my connection between tango lyrics and modern cynicism. I argue that those warning speeches are actually listened to by dancers in the precise moment by when they are already taking part into that so-described dangerous dance style. Those warnings, then, are not necessarily declaimed to prevent the moral decadence that getting involved in the tango culture implies. Instead, considering the context of its reproduction, reinforce the sense that the downfall is inevitable, and it is part of the human condition. The lyrics question at times the superficial nature of that glamorous tango life, warn against the temptations of abandoning responsibilities, family values, a work ethic. The ones seduced by tango fever and the ones hearing those songs are, in the precise act of hearing the lyrics, acting the sin that they are warned against.

The final aspect I will address in Part III, Chapter 9, will focus on the melancholia that tango songs display. Tango songs systematically refer to the past with pain, as an uncompleted issue that affects and afflicts the present and determines the tragedy of the future. In this aspect as well, tango songs offer a kind of self-reflection upon tango culture, in a discourse that creates a paralysis of any possible action but simultaneously discredits the values of the present.

These three topics are present, I argue, throughout the years between 1924 and 1952, but each aspect manifests with more intensity in relation to certain subtle changes that occurred in this period. Matamoro (1969), indeed, divides this period in three. In the first stage, between 1924 and 1930, tango experiences an unprecedented expansion and success. It is danced by the masses as well as in the refined circles of the upper class. In this period, the moralizing discourse (or, the hypocritical moralizing discourse, in my interpretation) in tango songs is more frequent and the story of ‘*la milonguta*’ appears in several compositions. A second period between 1930 and 1935, defined by Matamoro as “*la mishiadura*” (the tough period) is determined by the effects of the crash of 1929, the rise in unemployment and higher cost of living, etc. In parallel, democracy is interrupted by a coup d’ Etat that was going to remain disruptive to the political order until 1944. The crisis affected the frequency of tango balls, orchestras were struggling, and many professional musicians, dancers, and teachers related to tango were badly affected by the economic and social crisis. In that period, the lyrics that express explicit pessimism and express dissatisfaction with the prevailing social and economic order, are easily recognised. Finally, in the period between 1935 and 1952, a revival of tango’s popularity occurs, with more orchestras, performances, and dance events than ever before. However, it is also the period in which nostalgic and melancholic songs are composed and where tango lyrics refer constantly to an ever-lost idealised past.

The final year of 1952 in this periodization coincides with the death of Eva Duarte de Peron, commonly known as Evita. In Matamoro’s interpretation (1969), Evita was a symbol of the ascent of the lower class into the highest possible positions. Born as an illegal child, worked as a cabaret singer and actress to finally become the first lady, the story of Evita was the story of the success of the underdogs. Her death, in Matamoro’s version, marks the beginning of the exclusion of the working class from the political sphere, later on materialised by the military coup against Peron in 1945. With the decadence of the working class as a predominant actor in the Argentinean political scene, tango as well suffers and becomes out of fashion, signalling, by this author’s analysis, the end of the golden age.

Most authors (Ferrer, 1999; Gobello, 1999; Benedetti, 2017; Sabá, 2015) coincide in marking the mid-50s as the turning point in the history of tango, some attributing the decadence to the impact of foreign musical genres, the attempts by the new generation of composers to innovate into more experimental harmonies, less adequate to the dance and more elitist, due to its complex arrangements. Until the late 80s, tango progressively decreased its popularity but from 1985 until our days, a new wave of tango appeared, with a young generation of dancers progressively transforming certain elements of tango while still holding traditions from the golden age. Interestingly, the tangos played and danced in this last period were mainly the same ones from the *tango-cancion period* of between 1917 and 1955. This period, in which Discépolo was one of the main protagonists, will be analyse in detail in the following Part III.

# **Part III. The ‘tango-canción’ period (1917-1955) explored through the lens of modern cynicism: pessimism, amorality, and melancholia.**

*Introduction.*

In Chapter 7 of this Part III, I will start by discussing the influence of modern cynicism during the period in tango history known as *‘tango-canción’* that started in 1917 and finished between 1952 and 1955. Although this implies the continuation of the ideas discussed in Part I, in this section I will not only focus on the works on one specific composer as I did with Enrique Discépolo, arguably the most explicitly sceptical and pessimistic of all tango composers.

It is important to remark here that I am not stating that every tango lyric presents such a grim description of the perceived reality; such negativity towards the human behaviours; such an emphatic assertion of a widespread hypocrisy. Furthermore, I do not claim that every song from this period implies the assumption that the only way to confront such a dark reality is to seclude oneself in apathy and isolationism or to adapt strategically and selfishly to an amoral society, in correlation with various interpretations of a modern cynic spirit. As an artistic expression, tango composers never wrote a manifesto with rules setting specific boundaries to the texts, and accordingly, tango poets wrote about a dissimilar series of topics. Just to give a flavour of this breadth, there are tangos with a patriotic ethos, celebrating the centenary of the Argentinean process of independence, others that were written to praise the success of certain football teams, or famous sportsmen; there are tangos which are purely descriptive, depicting a popular café, important streets; and some were written by anarchists and others by conservative nationalists. There are, indeed, more than 20,000 tangos written with lyrics throughout this period (Conde, 2014) and it would be a mistake to assume that all of them share a similar pathos.

However, it is important to also mention that there are some tango lyrics that seem to contradict the cynical approach of despair and resignation. For instance, there are tangos that preserve a romantic spirit and express the wish and ambition of a reconciliation of the broken love, or some which praise the beauty of the lover without signs of disappointment or disloyalty. Furthermore, some tangos even reaffirm the importance of a commitment to engage in the social reality and promote social change. They occasionally express an active desire to transform reality based on avowed moral and political grounds. Yet, those tangos are quite the exception and indeed were not overly successful in terms of their popularity. In his book *Esos tangos malditos* [Those condemned tangos] (2006), Ricardo Horvath compiles and discusses such production by exploring the hidden tangos that actually had a rebellious and reforming discourse in their lyrics but states that those same tangos ended up forgotten by tango culture and they were never successfully widespread in their time.

Although I am fully aware of such disparity in the content of the tango lyrics, with its variety of themes, topics, and viewpoints taking into account the totality of tango production, I argue that a significant proportion of the tango lyrics from this period indeed reproduce and spread elements that are worth analysing through the scope of modern cynicism. This statement is not only based on the relatively high number of tangos that focus on despair and betrayal, but also on the popularity of those same tangos in comparison with the ones that present a less defined perspective.

To back the claim that the tangos on which this research is based are indeed quite representative of tango culture, I have firstly made references to tangos that frequently appear in tango lyric compilations and to those that are systematically mentioned by scholars and historians whose aim is to discuss the so-called essence of tango. In contraposition with studies searching for exceptional or forgotten tangos of a certain kind, as Horvath (2006), or the case of Esteban Busch with his book *Tangos cultos* [Cultured tangos] (2012), I sought to consider those which are quoted more frequently among scholars and writers dedicated to tango culture. My contribution is not so much to seek out unusual lyrics as it is to offer an alternative interpretation of the ones most commonly analysed.

Secondly, I justify the claim that the tangos I mention here are indeed the most representative of tango identity, through my own personal experience as a tango dancer, musician, and dance teacher. I have danced tango in social venues in Buenos Aires and Europe for almost twenty years and the songs quoted in this study are indeed some of the ones that I regularly hear in tango venues, that I play as part of my tango lessons, and I regularly use some of these lyrics for tango social dances and festivals in my home city of Sheffield.

It is worth highlighting that during the course of this Part III, I will refer to different interpretations of modern cynicism and I will argue that varied descriptions of the meaning of the term may be useful for the analysis of different lyrics. In Chapter 7, I will expand the analysis of those elements present in the discussion of Discépolo in Part I by focusing on the pessimist description of the reality that emanates from tango lyrics, starting with the first composition that inaugurates this periodization, “Mi noche triste” [My sad night] by Pascual Contursi in 1917. I will mainly, but not exclusively, draw from the definition of modern cynicism by Stanley (2007) in order to stress the connection between romantic disappointments and a disheartening approach in tango lyrics, followed by an exploration of the elements of hypocrisy and deception present in many songs.

In Chapter 8, however, I will introduce a more personal interpretation of the kind of modern cynicism present in tango by first discussing and arguing against those interpretations that present tango songs as a moral discourse (Varela 2005; 2016). I claim that so-called moral speech is in fact the very essence of a cynical discourse by considering the inner contradiction between those moral stands and the fact that those songs were sang to an audience that, by dancing and practising tango, were falling under the sinful behaviour the songs were supposed to warn against.

Finally, I will discuss in Chapter 9 the relation between a melancholic repetitive leitmotiv in tango songs of this period and the effects of apathy and idealization that defines, in my understanding, a relevant aspect of the influence of modern cynicism on the contemporary popular culture of Argentina. In this section, I will draw upon the definition of melancholy by Žižek in his articles “Against the populist temptation” (2006) and “Melancholy and the act” (2000).

# Chapter 7. Cynicism beyond Discépolo.

In this chapter, I will expand on the elements of modern cynicism that I previously claimed were present in Discépolo’s lyrics. I will refer to diverse tango lyrics, from different years and different poets, to point out that the aspects relating to pessimism, scepticism and hypocrisy are not exclusive of the verses of the already introduced composer, but instead, are a distinctive characteristic of the tango idiosyncrasy in the period known as *‘tango-canción’*, from 1917 to 1955. I will start by discussing the sense of pessimism that is presented as the consequence of systematic failures and disappointments experienced by tango’s narrators.

As specified in Chapter 1, explicit references by scholars to the cynicism present in tango lyrics are rare. I have already noted the exceptions of Taylor (1998), Gottling (1998) and Montes (2017), stating that references to the words ‘cynicism’ or ‘cynical’ are mentioned by those authors as just one of many possible attributes to tango lyrics rather than a defining characteristic of the genre. In all those cases, cynicism is taken as a vernacular adjective, without detailing with its main features or implications.

However, the recognition of pessimism, or fatalism, as one of the main features present in the lyrics of tango, has been acknowledged more frequently and it is described as a regular feature in tango songs from the 1917–1955 period. For instance, Matamoro (1969) states,

The lyrics of tango are a passive answer to a strongly codified and solidified reality in which there is no social mobility (…) The passivity that the tango characters show, overwhelmed by the immutable functioning of such a machine, is completely fatalist. (115, m.t)

According to Matamoro (1969), the narrator of most tango songs during the *‘tango-canción’* period, appeared to always accept the decadent and grim present and recognise that change was not possible and not worth the effort.

In his essay “*Interpretacion del tango”* [Interpretation of tango], (2001), Ramón Gómez de la Serna describes tango as a genre that constantly expresses hopelessness, both towards the everyday events of common men or women, and related to their main illusions such as love, happiness, and success. In similar terms, Conde (2003) argues that from 1917 onwards, most tangos are based on the premises that all characters are doomed to failure and the tango lyrics are the open confession of those disappointments (p.15).

A similar statement can be found in Jakubs’s analysis (1984). In her portrayal of tango, she states (1984),

Tangos are not happy songs. They either portray or are sung by a hero who is disillusioned, foolish (because of his innocence and idealism), and mistreated by life, by women and by fate. The word is seen as cruel, brutal, deceptive, and unjust… (p. 140)

This understanding of tango lyrics from this period has been repeated outside the academic context, most famously phrased by two renowned writers in Argentina. Firstly, by Ernesto Sábato[[29]](#footnote-29) (2005) who pointed out that,

[Tango] is made out of maladjustment, discontent, resentment, and anger against everything. It is the essential expression of the typical Argentinean. It makes the dance introvertive and introspective: a sad thought that could be danced. nostalgia, sadness, frustration, dramatic experiences. (p.19. m.t)

Secondly, by Osvaldo Soriano[[30]](#footnote-30) (2005) who stated in 1987,

No one could be a proper Argentinean without a sense of real and profound failure, a complete frustration, so intense that it can evolve into an infinite sorrow (…) precisely of this tango speaks. (p. 40)

The starting point for all these tango descriptions is the first composition, typically thought to have inaugurated the *‘tango-canción’* period, “Mi noche triste”. This song was written in 1915 by Pascual Contursi with music by Samuel Castriota, and first performed in 1917. In its first verses it is possible to perceive the elements of disillusionment that repeat systematically in future tango compositions:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Percanta que me amuraste | Woman, you dumped me |
| en lo mejor de mi vida | at the prime of my life |
| dejándome el alma herida | leaving my soul wounded |
| y splin en el corazon. | and dullness in my heart, |
| Sabiendo que te quería, | knowing that I loved you, |
| que vos eras mi alegría | that you were my joy |
| y mi sueño abrazador. | and my burning dream. |
| Para mí ya no hay consuelo, | There is no relief for me, |
| y por eso me encurdelo | that is why I am getting drunk, |
| pa’ olvidarme de tu amor. | to forget about your love. |

For the first time in the development of tango lyrics, the song uses its verses to introduce a chronological account of the narrator’s perceived abandonment, the broken dreams of love, and the impossibility of solace. There are no hopes of a romantic redemption and the only alternative presented by the character is to find refuge in alcohol.

Following this song, a narrative based on the combination of abandonment and drunkenness became quite common in tango compositions from this period. The lyrics reinforced the protagonist’s lack of alternative escapisms from cruelty of their reality, culminating in them choosing to submerge themself in the distortions offered by drinking. In some cases, the narrator confesses their sadness to another drunk interlocutor (“Destellos” [Sparkles] from 1924 by Juan Andres Caruso; “Tomo y obligo” [I drink and invite] written in 1931 by Manuel Romero, “La última curda” [The last drunkenness] from 1955 by Cátulo Castillo), whereas in other songs, the narrator encourages the listener to drink with them, assuming the universality of misfortune and accepting the fatalism of a grim future (“Amargura” [Bitterness] written by Alfredo Le Pera in 1934; or “Los mareados” [The drunkmen] by Juan Cobian in 1942). Gottling (1998) dedicates one chapter in his book to alcohol as one of the main topics for tango lyrics. He explores the different ways in which tango lyrics depict its presence, concluding that in most of those compositions in which references to alcohol appear, they work as a reinforcement of the idea that the narrator is incapable of dealing positively with the disappointment of his broken hopes and dreams (mostly broken romantic stories). The narrator rejects any possible alternative, or the reconstruction of any form of expectations, by absenting themself from reality.

Jakubs (1984) states,

Alcohol is frequently the only source of solace and escape from lost love or unrealised ideals, and a way of fending off the harsh assault of time. (p. 141)

As discussed in the chapter dedicated to Discépolo, the perspective of a gloomy future and the negativity which is expressed towards any possible human action that may alter the decadent present of all men and women was central to the definition of modern cynicism, both as a vernacular term and in the characterisation of varied scholars. The story of a romantic failure may sound trivial, but it has a more dramatic implication when we consider that the whole tango universe is usually perceived to be a passionate and romantic genre. In the case of “Mi noche triste”, the disappointment occurred exactly at the point of expectations being raised (considering tango’s reputation in 1917, the date of this song’s composition). At this time, tango songs were assumed to be opportunities for the expression of desire, passion, and love, which further highlighted the protagonist’s failure in all these realms, and their consequent expression of pessimistic resignation.

Interestingly, the disenchantment that the narrator’s failure creates goes beyond romantic feeling and starts to engulf the narrator in and of itself. The pessimist message of “My noche triste” is not only suggested by the reaction of the drunk narrator but is also confirmed by his own perception of the external world. The objects in his room seem to reaffirm his solitude and desolation. The effects of disappointment are extended not only to any other hopeful lover, but impact on the material construction of reality. Once the hopes and dreams are broken, even the objects surrounding the narrator have no purpose or meaning. The singer ends the song reinforcing this idea with the following stanza,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| La guitarra en el ropero | The guitar in the closet |
| todavía está colgada; | is still hanging; |
| Nadie en ella canta nada | Nobody ever sings anything |
| ni hace sus cuerdas vibrar… | or makes its string vibrate… |
| Y la lámpara del cuarto | And the lamp in the room |
| también tu ausencia ha sentido | also has felt your absence |
| porque su luz no ha querido | because its light has not wanted |
| mi noche triste alumbrar. | to light up my sad night. |

Subsequent to “Mi noche triste”, many tangos strongly portrayed a decadent present with broken romances and stories of abandonment, and it also gave rise to several iconic compositions in which the focal point of disappointment was provided or reinforced by physical objects. It is the case, for example, of songs such as “Caminito” [Dear Path] by Juan de Dios Filiberto, 1926; “Aquel tapado de armiño” [That ermine coat] by Manuel Romero, 1929; “La casita de mis viejos” [The house of my parents] by Enrique Cadícamo, 1932; “Caseron de tejas” [Tiled-roof house] by Cátulo Castillo, 1941; “Farol” [Lamp] by Pugliese, 1943 or “Sur” [South] by Homero Manzi, 1948. In all those examples, the narrator’s disenchantment is represented by the dilapidation of the object on which each song focuses, claiming that what used to be the symbol of an illusion and a dream is then represented in a decrepit version of that object as a result of the passing of time. The failures and the painful events that the narrator has experienced has left a grim impact on the object itself. I will focus on the example of the song “Antiguo reloj de cobre” [Old copper watch] with music and lyrics by Eduardo Marzevi, from 1955. I am deliberately jumping to the end of the *‘tango-canción’* period to showcase that these topics remained a fundamental iconic image of tango compositions throughout this almost 40-year period. In the song “Antiguo reloj de cobre”, the narrator starts by describing a copper watch which used to be the pride of his father and a symbol of happiness in his childhood. The narrator inherited the precious object and arrogantly showed it off, but time passed by, and he was beaten by the inclemency of the world (“El rebenque de la vida me ha golpeado sin cesar” [the whip of life hit me non-stop]). Life’s disappointments find their final symbolic moment when the character is forced to give away his treasured watch to a pawnbroker. As one of its verses states,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Cuatro pesos sucios | Four dirty pesos |
| por esa reliquia, | became that relic, |
| venganza del mundo | vengeance of the cunning |
| taimado y traidor. | and traitorous world. |
| Me mordí fuerte las manos, | I bit hard my hands, |
| el dinero me quemaba | money was burning me |
| y mientras que blasfemaba | and while I was cursing |
| a la calle enderecé. | I headed onto the street. |

The transfiguration of that copper watch (that in the first verses of the song was associated with the expectations and hopes of the narrator in their youth) into just meaningless coins, shows in the brief space of the song the process by which ideals and values lose their validity. Simultaneously, it displays the resignation of the narrator in accepting his own tragedy when the verse has him moving onto the street to continue living, but without the moral grounds that defined him previously.

Accordingly, there are two coexisting responses to failure and pessimism presented by tango songs, as shown by “Mi noche triste” and “Antiguo reloj de cobre”. In the first example, the character accepts his failure with resignation and loses himself to an alcoholic escapism, rejecting any possibility of redemption or transformation of his grim present. In the second example, the narrator curses his fate and the seemingly unavoidable sequence of personal disasters but adapts to his new reality. He not only collaborates in the symbolic transformation of that precious watch into dirty coins but continues living and participating into the new disenchanted reality.

This connection between pessimism and the dual reaction of resignation and adaptation, is indeed central to the definition of modern cynicism for authors such as Caldwell (2006), Godfarb (1991) and Hiley (2006) as well as shown in the works of Mazella (2007), Shea (2010) and Stanley (2007; 2012). Interestingly, that same feature is present in those tangos that reflect upon the genre itself. In his article *El tango en el tango* [Tango inside tango] (2014), Julio Schvartzman argues that this genre is quite exceptional in the way in which many of its lyrics discuss the problems relating to tango identity and its definition. The author argues that several tangos systematically praise the value of tango culture but at the same time condemn it and put into question the moral effects of tango music, lyrics, and dance on its participants. Several tango lyrics characterised the tango genre as the one that allows the narrators to express their failures and disillusionments and in parallel reminds them of the pointlessness of any aspiration for change. In “La abandoné y no sabía” [I dumped her without knowing], written in 1943 by José Canet, for instance, one verse states,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Nació este tango, | This tango was born, |
| nació por verme sufrir | it was born just to see me suffer |
| en este horrible vivir | in this horrible becoming of life |
| donde agoniza mi suerte. | in which my luck agonizes. |
| Cuando lo escucho al sonar, | When I hear it sound, |
| cuando lo salgo a bailar, | when I dance it |
| siento mas cerca la muerte. | I feel my death closer. |

The combination of pessimism, disenchantment and resignation that I claim constitutes a fundamental starting point that allows cynicism to find its modern expression, is recognised as being present in tango lyrics by others; by scholars who have studied and analysed numerous tango lyrics of this period; by popular writers in their attempt to grasp the essence of the tango genre in connection with the idiosyncrasies of Argentina and the city of Buenos Aires; by my own analysis of emblematic tango lyrics from both ends of the 1917-1955 period; and finally, by the exploration of those lyrics that reflect upon tango the genre itself and attempt to self-describe tango culture.

Schartzman (2014) alludes to this grim description of tangos discussing tango’s identity by referencing several examples, such as “Yo soy el tango” [I am tango] by Homero Expósito, 1941; “La abandoné y no sabia” by Jose Canet, 1943 or “Che, bandoneon” [Hey, bandoneon] by Homero Manzi, 1949. One particular tango, “La última curda” written by Cátulo Castillo in 1955 with music by Anibal Troilo, included a stanza “La vida es una herida absurda” [Life is an absurd wound] which became a brief slogan of what the tango spirit was supposed to be about according to varied writers, such as Sábato (2005), Taylor (1998) or Conde (2014). In this song, the narrator speaks directly to the bandoneon, as a symbolic representation of tango as a genre, and stating,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Lastima bandoneón, mi corazón | Bandoneon, it hurts my heart |
| tu ronca maldición maleva … | your hoarse transgressor’s curse… |
| Tu lágrima de ron me lleva | Your tear of rum leads me |
| hacia el hondo bajo fondo | into the deep low underground |
| donde el barro se subleva. | where mud revolts. |
| Ya sé, no me digás tenés razón, | I know, don’t tell me, you’re right, |
| la vida es una herida absurda | life is an absurd wound, |
| y es todo, todo tan fugaz | and all it’s so fleeting |
| que es una curda, nada más | that is drunkenness, just that, |
| mi confesión. | my confession. |

With such examples, it is possible to claim that tango disappointment goes much further than a simple broken romantic story. The dissatisfaction may start with the betrayal of a lover, but the systematicity of tango lyrics, the perception of hopelessness that each narrator expresses in its songs, the solace of drunkenness or the resignation of accepting the unavoidable failures that the experience of living implies, expands the level of disenchantment into life in general (and that includes the valuation of institutions or the importance of education, as I will explore in Part V).

I argue that this level of pessimism runs throughout the *‘tango-canción’* period, starting in its first inaugural song in 1917, and continuing up to its final year in 1955. However, it is worth recognising that explicit examples of such negativity going beyond the romantic story are more commonly from the 1930s. During that decade, the Argentinean society was experiencing an economic, social, and political crisis that allowed tangos of that time to continue to express a universal sense of disappointment in conjunction with a sentiment of systemic failures that coincided with the political and social mood of that time, as stated by Matamoro (1969) and Conde (2014). Most of those examples were the tangos written by Discépolo, but there were many other composers who denounced the decadence and corruption of their society at that time, as in the case of Enrique Cadícamo in 1933 with the tango “Al mundo le falta un tornillo” [The world is missing a screw] or “Pan” [Bread] by Celedonio Flores, written in 1932.

*Distrust, deception, and hypocrisy in tango lyrics.*

In correlation with the structure applied in Part I of this thesis, I will now refer to the constant denunciation of a world in which humankind systematically behaves with meanness and falsehood. The characters are presented as selfish, unreliable, and untrustworthy. This approach is another fundamental building stone of the definition of modern cynicism, in particular by reference to the analyses of Goldfarb (1991), Bewes (1997) and Stanley (2007). For instance, the latter author pointed out that, by the logic of a modern cynic, all actors in our society behave in the most selfish possible way, constantly betraying, manipulating, and trying to deceive the other. According to this reasoning, such systematic egotism puts the naive man or woman who decides to ignore these pessimistic truths into an avoidable path of disappointments and dissatisfactions (Stanley, 2007).

The perception of the other as the one who betrays, lies, and abandons is already present in “Mi noche triste”, as recently analysed. It is worth briefly considering an exemplary lyric in which this falsehood is described as embedded in every aspect of our society, beyond the passionate drama of a broken romance. In “Desencuentro” [Mismatch], written by Cátulo Castillo and with music by Anibal Troilo in 1962[[31]](#footnote-31), this depiction of omnipresent betrayal is unambiguous,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| La araña que salvaste te picó | The spider that you saved has bitten you |
| - qué vas a hacer? | - what you gonna do! |
| y el hombre que ayudaste te hizo mal | and the man that you helped did you wrong |
| - dale nomás! | - just keep on going! |
| Y todo el carnaval | And the whole carnival |
| gritando pisoteó | shouting trampled |
| la mano fraternal | the brotherly hand |
| que Dios te dió. | that God gave you. |

The song repeats a narrative sequence already introduced in tangos by Discépolo such as “Yira, yira”, or “Tres esperanzas” in which the singer, or the addressee of the song, had trusted the other and has been betrayed and disappointed, leaving them with pain, with broken convictions and with the need to keep on surviving in a now well-defined mean society.

In “Desencuentro”, this order is even more explicit, when considering its final verse,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Quisiste con ternura, y el amor | You loved with tenderness, and love |
| te devoró de atrás hasta el riñón. | devoured you from behind up to the kidney. |
| Se rieron de tu abrazo y ahí nomás | They laughed at your embrace and right there |
| te hundieron con rencor todo el arpón. | they sank the whole harpoon with bitterness. |
| Amargo desencuentro, porque ves | Bitter mismatch, because you see |
| que es al revés. | that it is backwards. |
| Creiste en la honradez | You believed in honesty |
| y en la moral. | and in morality. |
| Que estupidez! | How stupid! |

Several fundamental aspects relating to modern cynicism can be traced in these final verses of the song. Firstly, as previously mentioned, the betrayal is assumed in this quote as a universalised human behaviour. It is not a specific evil lover singled out as the one capable of treason, but instead the meanness is attributed to ‘love’ itself, implying negativity towards any possible social encounter with an another. In his article about the oeuvre of Cátulo Castillo, the poet of these verses, Enrique Cadícamo (2014) argued that Castillo’s style alternates in his writings between songs which are confessions in which the narrator blames his misfortune on a specific woman, and other songs in which the act of betrayal is extrapolated to society as a whole, as in this case. The use of a generalised ‘they’ as opposed to a singularised ‘you’ or ‘she’ is crucial in this composition.

Secondly, the moral grounds that the addressee of this song used to hold are explicitly questioned. The narrator claims that it was a sign of naivety, inexperience, and immature innocence, this trust that his interlocutor had put into honesty and morality. As with some of Discépolo’s compositions, the characters describe a starting point of pure ignorance, in which values, hopes and virtues were still a part of their identity, but that end up provoking disappointment, pain, and the realisation that those ideals were always false.

Furthermore, the criticism over that ingenuity with the word ‘estupidez’ (that resembles synonyms such as ‘gil’ in the tango “Chorra” or ‘otario’ in “Yira, yira” by Discépolo, as previously analysed) reinforces the idea that trusting in people and values is a painful mistake that is the result of ignorance towards the functioning of the real and despicable world. I argue that this description of human nature and social interaction in the society of that time has a direct connection with the particular understanding of knowledge or wisdom that is presented in those same tangos and, accordingly to the relevance and characterisation of a valuable education. The characters fall into disappointment as a result of a lack of experience that impedes or does not allow them to recognise the true (and selfish) functioning of the others. The tangos work at times as a form of transmitted wisdom; they pretend to alert the listener to the evilness of the world while at the same time most of the songs remark on the importance of life experience to finally reach those cynical and pessimist conclusions. This aspect will be discussed at length in the final part of this thesis.

# Chapter 8. Reinterpreting tango as a moral discourse.

It is important at this stage to clearly establish an analytical distinction between pessimism and modern cynicism. The first term is in fact a precondition for modern cynicism to appear, but its presence is not sufficient to define it. That pessimism is understood to be a negative perception of the world as it stands and the conviction that such grim description is unavoidable, is in fact a distinctive element of what usually constitutes a modern meaning of cynicism, both in its vernacular and academic depictions. Furthermore, and in similar terms, the systematic distrust towards the human attitudes of others and the conviction that everyone and everything is fake and in a constant pretending state of behaviour are other crucial characteristics that apply to most understandings of cynicism in its modern variant. However, an extra step is needed to combine those elements of pessimism and distrust and to grasp an approximation of a possible definition of modern cynicism.

It is essential that once confronted with such pessimism, expressed as such negativity towards the present and the future, cynic discourse has to incorporate a double and complementary reaction: firstly, the cynic must express resignation, disenchantment and apathy towards any possible response that could modify that path of negativity. The criticism towards the current and future condition of the society could be based on some unspoken moral standards, not necessarily defined, from the evaluative framework through which the reality is so depressingly defined. In the case of tango lyrics of this period, for example, those moral codes were constructed in relation to an idealised past. It is crucial, however, that such ideals are deemed forever lost and irreconcilable in the present. It is this sense of impotence when confronting a grim destiny that allows the melancholic sentiment to flourish. The melancholic element present in tango will be explored in Chapter 9.

Nevertheless, there is a second reaction that is equally fundamental to the makeup of a cynical speech. There should be an adaptation, an accommodation to that pessimism and amoral reality by the cynic enunciator. Narrators express their cynicism when they admit their complicity with the decadence or falsehood of the moral values of their time that they simultaneously criticise and question. As stated, I argue that a modern cynic discourse is not foreign to moralising speech. Certain moral values are in fact a fundamental standing point for the negativity to emerge. Nonetheless, as stated, the revitalisation and reappearance of those moral values in society should be presented as impossible and utopic, and accordingly, the narrator should accept that grim destiny and accommodate as best as possible to this new amoral and decadent society.

I have already introduced this idea in connection with the works of Sloterdijk (2015), Žižek (2012) and Stanley (2007) in Chapter 4, Part I (“The modern cynic reaction: selfish accommodation and apathetic isolationism in Discépolo’s world”). Nevertheless, it is worth reintroducing some key elements of this analysis before addressing those same aspects in tango lyrics of this period. In Sloterdijk’s interpretation of modern cynicism, the cynic’s disillusionment with the project of enlightenment coexists with an ‘elastic’ reaction that permits the cynic to survive, adapting and continuing with their life instead of collapsing in despair. In Žižek’s account, in our society, everyone is completely aware of the falsehood of the dominant discourse of power. There is no need for a secretive mechanism that perpetuates injustice, and that ideological deceptive discourse is no longer hidden to the views of the masses. He argues, instead, that the lies and pretence of the functioning of power are fully exposed and we are all aware of its effects. However, instead of rebelling, we humans ended up accepting those evident lies, adapting to its falsehood, and taking part in its functioning. This is what constitutes the modern cynic’s reaction to the explicit ideological discourses of nowadays.

My analysis, however, more directly follows the approach that can be found in Stanley’s understanding of modern cynicism in her essay “Retreat from Politics: The Cynic in Modern Times” (2007). She clearly establishes a two-step process to fully apprehend the complexities of the term. Firstly, there should be a critical, disheartening, and pessimistic perception of the world and of all humans in it; and secondly, it follows a strategical and complicit reaction as the defining cynical continuation of that logic. Stanley (2007) states,

First, then, the cynic accepts the impossibility of truly virtuous and principled action in human society. This is cynicism's descriptive vision. Second, the cynic contemplates what sort of action and behaviour is appropriate in such a society. If virtue, authenticity, and principled action are beyond the reach of human beings, then we must abandon hope for any future transcendence of corruption and injustice. Therefore, the cynic often decides that he can only secure personal satisfaction through a mastery of the arts of deception and manipulation which constitute the foundation of society. This is cynicism's posture toward action. Thus, the cynic comes to a resigned acceptance of things as they are, because presumably they could be no different, and learns only to play the game, to thoroughly implicate himself in the very system he has damned. (p. 390)

Regarding tango culture, I have already pointed out that there is indeed, a pessimistic depiction of reality in its songs; there is a systematic distrust of others, their actions and intentions; there is a perception of an unavoidable decadence of everyone and everything. Furthermore, I will discuss in Chapter 9, how this criticism is based on an idealised past that correlates to a sense of omnipresent melancholy. Nevertheless, the key to fully understand the cynical character presented in tango lyrics is the fact that this message of disparagement and condemnation coexists with the message that tango culture itself is one of the causes, or at least is one of the contexts in which such decadence manifests and intensifies.

This apparent contradiction can be exemplified by references to the figure of ‘*la milonguita*’, a frequent stereotypical character in tango lyrics, particularly in those songs composed in the 1920’s. The character is described as a woman from the suburbs, of poor origins, humble, honest, and true to herself who will be seduced by the glamour of the city centre and by the luxury of a con man who will deceive her with richness and ostentation. That woman enjoys social success, and she becomes the centre point of the night in Buenos Aires, completely adapted to the superficial, artificial, and false world that surrounds her. In most narrations, she has a tragic ending, abandoned, depressed, ill, poor, and old, in a contrasting image to the first naïve young version of herself and in opposition to the fame and temporal and frugal triumph she had enjoyed. Varied tango lyrics focus on a message to the young version of ‘*la milonguita*’; warning her of the dangers that may await her in the future; other songs describe her with bitterness, pointing out the hypocrisy of her short-lived popular status in society; meanwhile other compositions reflect upon her final decay. At a first glance, these stories may resemble an exclusively moralist speech, a misogynist one that could be analysed as a conservative force that delays women’s emancipation (Armus, 2002; Saikin, 2004; Savigliano, 1995). I am fully aware that there are definitely important elements of misogyny present in that respect, but I think it is worth noting the following fundamental distinction:

In most of the songs in which ‘*la milonguita*’ appears as a character, the central context of her moral decay and the origins of the seductive forces that drive her into imposture and pretension are the forces of tango itself. The symbols by which she falls into moral decadence are usually a tango dancer who deceives her, the light of a tango ball or the glow and shine of tango dresses. It is at this point in which the most striking elements of modern cynicism appear in tango lyrics: the narration of the verses may point out the dangers for ‘*la milonguita’* of taking the wrong step and falling into the superficial world of the night in the city. Nevertheless, those same verses are sung to a tango audience, to potential ‘*milonguitas*’ that are already part of that tango culture that is described as so indecent and so false. The warnings against the amoral world are mentioned only once the decay has already happened, and furthermore, those same tangos are addressed to those who are expected to continue participating in the tango universe. The lyrics which condemn the hypocrisy of the fancy clothing and elegant saloons are interpreted by musicians and singers for the people who are dancing those same songs in those same chic halls that the songs criticise. The songs claim that morality may be corrupted by tango influence at the precise moment in which the participants inhabit those tangos. The songs are not expecting a redemption of tango: tango is assumed as morally dangerous and yet the songs are aimed at everyone participating in its culture. This is, in my interpretation, an example of the complicity, adaptability and resignation to decay that tango lyrics portray. This is the central aspect that puts tango songs in contrast with a moralist discourse. The decadent path in which society has become immersed is not only inevitable but reinforced and amplified by the tango culture itself. Tango songs warn against this tragic destiny while, at the same time on the dance floors, stimulating its participants to go along with its decay.

In order to expand my argument, I will start by exploring and offering a critique of the perspective of those authors that perceive the tangos of this period to be based on a moralist discourse, in particular, the works of Gustavo Varela (2016). Secondly, I will offer a different possible reading of the same lyrics and stories that Varela analyses. Finally, I will analyse how tango lyrics describe the historical changes that the tango culture itself experienced. I argue that tango lyrics reflect upon the identity of the tango culture in similar terms to the one that ‘*la milonguita’* suffered: it started in the suburbs, was rough but authentic, and ended up being seduced by the glamour of the city centre, losing its boldness for the sake of fame, recognition, and social acceptance in a more superficial and false society. Whether this self-description presented within the lyrics of tango is accurate or not will be discussed in Part IV.

*Tango songs as a moral discourse.*

Several writers have introduced the idea that the tangos from the period known as *‘tango-canción’* contain lyrics that are infused by an often-prescriptive moral discourse. That is the argument of Matamoro (1969), Salessi (1991), Armus (2002), Hernando (2002), Archetti (2003), Saikin (2004), Feldman (2006), and Liska (2014). I would like to focus on the interpretation of Gustavo Varela in his book *Mal de Tango* [Tango Evil](2005) and *Tango y política: Sexo, moral burguesa y revolución en Argentina* *[*Tango and politics: Sex, bourgeoise morality and revolution in Argentina](2016). His analysis of tango culture, and tango history puts the emphasis on an interpretation of tango lyrics as a moral discourse: a prescriptive ethical code that at times works with the conservative forces of the State, and at times is the voice of a social class and its principled regulations.

Varela’s starting point is the claim that with the consolidation of the modern state in Argentina in the last decades of the nineteenth century, there are systematic attempts to administer the life of its citizens, which includes the need to intervene in the sexual discourses they produce and in the varied forms of popular culture they consume. This period which dates from 1880 to 1916, is defined by Varela (2005) as the ‘conservative order’, a label borrowed from Botana (1977), in which the main aims of the government are political peace, free economic circulation, order and discipline before the State and the promise of social improvement for the members of the newly conformed nation. In parallel with, or as a sub product of, order and economic progress, then, the working class becomes a political subject, and according to the dominant discourses, this mass or modern multitude must be controlled, or at least guided in all its facets. Varela argues, referencing Foucault at this point, that state intervention, however, is not exclusively repressive and may operate by multiple mechanisms. In the case of the sexual discourse, the government’s approach may include for instance the regulation, legislation, control and at times prohibition of brothels as an institutional place, but that might as well be a subliminal attempt to modify the characteristics of the music and dance of that period that the masses produced and consumed[[32]](#footnote-32). Varela does not specify how this intervention actually occurs but points out that there is a progressive modification of tango discourses that becomes evident by the first composition of *‘tango-canción’* with “Mi noche triste” in 1917.

According to Varela, tango at its origins was cheerful and promoted a rough laughter that resembled the Dionysian ritual of celebration and open sexualization. Its symbolic space was the brothel, its iconic character the prostitute, defiant and proud of herself in an involuntary but consistent advocacy to anomie and amorality. This characterization, from the author’s perspective, mutated after 1917 into a more intimate mode of expression with lyrics focused on a sensation of guilt and regret at those same acts of socially inacceptable behaviour that were praised in the previous era. Tango becomes attached, then, to a series of fixed moral values that the ruling dominant discourse of that time considered more appropriate for the emerging working masses.

One of Varela’s arguments that respect is in the sense of nationalism that starts to emerge in some of the tango lyrics of that period; one that coincides with the need from the governmental spheres to reinforce the Argentinean identity in a context of massive waves of immigration. Indeed, many iconic songs repetitively state the proud feeling of being Argentinean; express love to the city of Buenos Aires itself; or highlight the general feeling of belonging to the newly consolidated Nation State. Such is the case with tangos such as “Mi Buenos Aires querido” [My beloved Buenos Aires] and “Volver” [Return], both written in 1934 by Le Pera with music by Gardel. Interestingly, in Varela’s account (2005), such discursive praise of the national identity, in deliberate contraposition to a music that had a strong influence from the European and African musical and lyrical tradition, was running in parallel and in combination with the national curriculum of the newly mandatory education in state schools. The author argues that some elements in tango lyrics were in fact reinforcing a message designed by the Ministry of Education to encourage conformity with the modern nationalistic citizen. I will reintroduce and discuss this idea more fully in Part V, the section dedicated to education.

In this section, however, I will focus on a second argument that Varela introduces to support his statement that tango lyrics are fundamentally driven by moral discourse. He argues that tango songs give rise to discussions of moral validity by introducing stories of immorality, which are immediately and explicitly condemned. The affirmation of moral values is emphasised by the condemnation of their counterparts. This is exemplified by the figure of ‘la milonguita’ who is seduced by the glow of the city centre, abandons her humble but true origins, and pretends a social improvement that is beyond her reach; by the figure of the ‘*haragán*’, a lazy and idle character that rejects work and aims for an easy life of gigolo; or by the stories of the ones who betrayed, or left their lovers. All of these figures are contrasted with opposing moral values, such as those of family life, pride in humility, acceptance of the social class and order. Furthermore, Varela includes honesty and authenticity in the case of ‘la milonguita’, hard work for the *‘haragán’* and loyalty for the ones who abandoned their partners. In most of those stories the characters end up suffering, regretting, and paying the price for their sinful acts. Varela (2016) states,

Tango lyrics propose a model of behaviour that determines what is acceptable and determines which are the gestures and actions that fall beyond this model, such as gambling, alcohol, or tango nights. Accordingly, a world of inalterable values that regulates human relations is constituted (…). Whatever transgresses such a model will be described as an object of denunciation and condemnation (…). Progress is evil, the bright lights from the city centre are evil, the woman’s longing is evil, the body’s desires are evil, richness is evil. (p. 99, m.t)

The understanding of tango lyrics from this period as implying a sequence of transgression, denunciation and condemnation was first suggested by Matamoro in 1969 when he incorporated elements of psychoanalysis in order to present the lyrics as an attempt to reinforce the treatment of a tango listener as a child, whose morality had to be guided, preserving the value of the family by exemplary stories of sin, guilt, and punishment. This same idea was stated by many other scholars. For instance, Liska (2014), wrote,

Around the year 1917, the conformation of tango-canción meant the development of a poetic-narrative with a defined moralist tone in which life stories were told with tragic endings, all of them caused by characters that had challenged their class and gender’s duties. (p. 46, m.t)

Examples of such a narrative can be found in the following songs: “Flor de fango” [Flower of the mud] from 1917, “Ivette” and “El motivo” [The motive] both from 1920 written by Pascual Contursi; “Margot” from 1919 and “Mano a mano” [Hand in hand] from 1920 by Celedonio Flores; “Milonguita” from 1920 by Samuel Linning, “Pompas de jabón” [Soap bubbles] from 1925, “Che papusa, oí” [Hey, doll, hear me out] from 1927 and “Muñeca brava” [Tough doll] from 1928 written by Enrique Cadícamo; “Milonguera” from 1928 by Jose Aguilar or “Mano cruel” [Cruel hand] from 1929 by Jose Tagini.

Furthermore, Armus (2002) discusses in detail one of those forms of punishment present in the lyrics, by analysing references to tuberculosis (TB) in tango songs. He argues that TB is presented as a social illness and the final materialization of a punishment for those women that had challenged the social order. It is the symbolic condemnation of their attempt at self-betterment, to progress socially beyond their station through their participation in the sinful nocturnal city life.

It is interesting to point out the perspective of Feldman in his study “Stepping out of the bounds: the tragedy of ‘*la milonguita*’ in the tango-song” (2006) in which he concurs with the understanding that tango lyrics play a role in defining ‘an epistemic wall’ (p. 10) of moral standards. In his view, however, this moral speech is not directed towards the education of the masses but instead helps in the consolidation of the boundaries that preserved the upper class in its favoured place in society. Feldman (2006) states:

Tango music and the state entered into an unwritten contract whose main clause accorded tango’s access to official culture in exchange for narratives that would become the mortar of a wall that the state erected to protect not so much the young women but the class and gender privileges of the bourgeoisie. (p.10)

Furthermore, he argues that the acceptance of tango by the upper classes and the spread of the tango culture beyond the limits of the suburbs was possible due to its transformation into a morally convenient discourse that reinforced the needs of the state of that time. Feldman (2006) writes,

My central contention is that tango was allowed to enter the channels of mainstream culture at the beginning of the twentieth century on the condition that its narratives proved to be operative as an informal technology that lubricated or otherwise assisted the state, more specifically, by becoming an invisible part of the legislative machinery. (p. 3)

Returning to Varela’s account (2016), it is claimed that the impact of the moral speech present in tango was so powerful that it moved beyond the invisible designs of a dominant state in order to become the central point by which a new class identified itself. Indeed, this developed into the moral grounds of a new political movement, that of Peronism. In Varela’s analysis (2016), at the beginning of the 1940s, the moral elements of tango lyrics provided an ethical ground from which a group identity was built, and a sense of belonging manifested during the Peron era (1945-1955). Varela (2016) states,

Peronism and tango share the same sensibility, the same pattern of what is worth to be loved and hated. Such is the power of this coincidence, such its strength, that the end of Peronism will be as well the end of the period known as ‘tango-canción’. (p.21, m.t)

According to Varela, the construction of an ethical set of values that reaffirms this group’s identity is mainly formed by a negative differentiation. The moral rules are established by rejecting the superficiality of richness, fame, and glamour, in contrast with the authenticity of a humble but proud origin. Accordingly, there is even a geographical depiction based on moral standards: the city centre with its fancy dance halls is the space of falsehood and temptation, an unproductive district of laziness that contrasts with the neighbourhood of the suburbs in which the identity of the popular sectors can be shielded.

I argue, however, that the fact that tango is always mentioned in the same songs that Varela (2005,2016) quotes in his work as belonging to the condemned city centre and described as part of the sinful world that has the potential of perverting the identity of the member of working class, is precisely the point that allows me to contest the straightforwardness of the depiction of tango as exclusively a moral discourse. I am aware and recognise that, indeed, among the vast number of tangos written in that period, there is a misogynist discourse that sets moral boundaries into what was in that period perceived as a dangerous liberation of women, with greater participation in political and civil life becoming possible. I would like, however, to provide an alternative and different interpretation of those same tragic stories, by stressing the importance of the fact that those stories are presented as unavoidable. Furthermore, they are directly related and caused by the same speech that seems to be morally condemning them, and by doing so, incorporating elements of a specific form of modern cynicism that I consider worth exploring.

*Tango as a complicit participant in the decadence.*

It is important to reiterate that I am not arguing that tango lyrics from this period do not have a moralist content. The central point of my claim is that there is a double discourse by which certain actions are indeed considered immoral, and certain behaviours are presented as superficial and false and as such denounced by the lyrics. At the same time, however, that particular way of behaving is described as unavoidable and directly linked with the tango culture that promotes and stimulates (quite commonly by references to its dance and its context) such moral decay.

I will start by analysing some of those same lyrics quoted by the afore mentioned authors that stress the exclusively moralist discourse in order to illustrate my claim.

In “Maldito tango”, written by Luis Roldan, the story of ‘*la milonguita*’ is narrated in the first person, and includes the three stages of decadence, in which the female character describes in a few stanzas her innocence in her youth, her moral corruption by the irresistible seduction of tango and her present life of loneliness, illness and decay.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| En un bazar feliz yo trabajaba | I was happily working in a bazaar, |
| nunca sentí deseos de bailar, | without any desires to dance, |
| hasta que un joven que me enamoraba | until a young man that seduced me |
| llevome un día con él para tanguear… | one day took me away to dance tango… |
| La culpa fue de aquel maldito tango | The blame falls in that damned tango |
| que mi galán enseñome a bailar | which my handsome man taught me to dance |
| y que después, hundiéndome en el fango, | and then, causing me to sink into mud |
| me dió a entender que me iba a abandonar. | made me realise he was going to leave me. |

Romano (2014) concurs with Varela’s analysis of tango lyrics as holders of a moral speech but points out that the most striking change in the lyrics from 1917 onwards is the blame placed on tango itself as a direct cause of immorality. He argues that ‘*la milonguita’* is systematically driven away from her initial virtuous path either by conmen dancers that trick her, or by the powerful attraction of the music itself, with its glamorous dance halls and the dazzling clothes of its participants. Matallana (2014) argues that such stories of evil male dancers seducing innocent young ladies (both from the poorest neighbourhoods or from the upper classes) were recurrent in newspapers in the early days of tango, warning against the danger of such a scandalous dance. Nevertheless, the interesting point made by Romano is that tango lyrics from the *‘tango-canción’* period onwards incorporated that same discourse. The tango “Maldito tango” finishes with the following stanzas:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Maldito tango que envenena | Damned tango that poisons |
| con su dulzura cuando suena… | with its sweet sounds… |
| El fue la causa de mi ruina, | It was the cause of my ruin, |
| maldito tango que fascina... | damned fascinating tango… |
| ¡Oh, tango que mata y domina! | Oh tango, that kills, that dominates! |
| ¡Maldito sea el tango aquél! | Damn that tango! |

Tango is described here as the main cause of the narrator’s fall from righteousness, but that path seems unavoidable considering the power and domination that tango seems to have over those who hear and dance it. Tango therefore creates a chain effect, seducing ‘*la milonguita’*, who, converted into a glamorous dancer in the halls, abandons and betrays, before then finding herself abandoned and betrayed.

Archetti (2003), explores in his book *Masculinidades. fútbol, tango y polo en Argentina* [Masculinity, football, tango, and polo in Argentina] how tango lyrics build a stereotype of masculinity and established valid gender relations according to the dominant moral discourse of that time. He agrees that there are elements that censured the freedom of female characters and reinforces the concept of moral condemnation through exemplary stories of temptation and failure. However, he argues that the depiction of women and their role in Argentinean society was more complex, according to tango songs. He claims that there are multiple discourses which coexist, because the same character of ‘*la milonguita’* is reprimanded for taking the wrong step and falling into the dangers of night life, while at the same time, she incites fascination and seduction; indeed, she is the driving force of every possible romance in tango stories. It is because of that fascination and those encounters that will invariably end in broken romances, that the effects of tango culture have expanded beyond the specific story of *‘la milonguita’*. In “La borrachera del tango” [Tango drunkenness] written by Luis Roldan in 1928, the victim of tango’s perversive influence is a male dancer. Its first stanzas state:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| La milonga te ha mareado | The milonga made you dizzy |
| con sus locas tentaciones, | with its crazy temptations, |
| tu moral ha claudicado, | your morality has given in |
| entre champán e ilusiones... | between champagne and illusions. |

Conde (2014) analyses some of those stories in lyrics by Pascual Contursi (the writer of “Mi noche triste”, the first *‘tango-canción’*), in which the main characters behave amorally once the seduction of tango has had its effects. In both “Ivette” and “Aquel tapado de armiño” [That ermine coat] from 1920 and 1929, the narrator steals and betrays in order to comply with the spoiled desires of one of those already sinful ‘*milonguitas*’ in the prime of her beauty and success. Conde, then, reflects that in those tango songs there is never space for reconciliation or redemption. Every relationship is destined to fail, to end in betrayal, to promote the break with the dominant values that are presented as lost in an idealised past. Instead of attempting a transformative change, those same tangos seem to stimulate their characters and listeners to accept the tragic destiny of their society and continue the immersion into the sinful tango culture. In “Pobre corazón mío” [My poor heart] by Contursi, written in 1926, the main character recalls a happy past with his lover until such a night where he must fight a rival for her love. The character kills his rival in a duel before being taken to jail. Meanwhile his lover, having observed the sequence of events, turns her back and returns to the tango dancefloor to continue dancing.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Entonces en mis ojos | Then, in my eyes |
| sentí dos lagrimones | I felt two tears |
| sacando los cuchillos | drawing the knives |
| salimos él y yo. | we went out, him and me. |
| Y cuando me llevaban | And then when I was taken away |
| seguían los bandoneones | the bandoneons were still playing |
| y la mujer aquella | and that woman |
| entró al baile y bailó. | entered the dance hall and danced. |

It is precisely that last sentence ‘entró al baile y bailó’ [entered the dance hall and danced] that perfectly exemplifies the double discourse in tango lyrics; morally condemning certain actions, while simultaneously accepting that the values on which that condemnation is based are forever lost in their corrupted society. Accordingly, the values continue to sink under the weight of the moral decay of the superficial and false lifestyle of a tango dancer, which seems understandable and acceptable.

I will introduce one final example, that incorporates the same logic by way of another stereotypical character whose story is usually taken as an example of a moralist discourse in tango lyrics: the figure of the lazy drunk that is presented as antonym of hard work and responsibility.

Romano (2014) provides several examples of lyrics in which male characters are accused of abandoning their workplace, avoiding their duties owed to their mothers and families, and leaving their old neighbourhood to enter into the party lifestyle, with lovers and irresponsible spending. Such is the case of songs such as “Muchacho” [Boy] by Celedonio Flores from 1924; “Media noche” [Midnight] by Hector Gagliardi from 1928; “Como se pianta la vida” [How life goes away] written by Juan Carlos Vivan in 1929 or “Bailarín compadrito” [Rough dancer] written in 1929 by Miguel Buccino. In all those cases, the characters express their negligence by participating in tango life. In “Mala suerte” [Bad luck], written by Francisco Gorrindo in 1939, the same stories present a different approach. The narrator confesses his lack of commitment in a relationship and correlates his poor work ethic with a direct link to the tango culture, in a similar manner to the previous lyrics, however he states that his moral weakness is embedded in his own identity:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Yo no pude prometerte | I couldn't promise you |
| cambiar la vida que llevo, | to change the life I live, |
| porque nací calavera | because I was born depraved |
| y así me habré de morir. | and I will die that way. |
| A mí me tira la farra, | I’m enticed to the party, |
| el café, la muchachada, | the cafés, meeting with the guys, |
| y donde haya una milonga | and where there is a milonga, |
| yo no puedo estar sin ir. | I must be there. |

The narrator seems to be aware of the superficiality of his current life but nevertheless continues to behave in such a way. As in Stanley’s analysis of modern cynicism, he recognises in himself the impossibility of virtuous behaviour and as an a-priori condition. Accordingly, the narrator rejects any possible transformation or change, and once resigned to such description, in Stanley’s words, ‘implicate[s] himself in the very system he has damned’ (2007, p. 309) and accepts its consequences.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Mala suerte si hoy te pierdo, | Bad luck if I lose you today, |
| mala suerte si ando solo, | bad luck if I end up alone, |
| el culpable soy de todo | I’m the one to blame for everything |
| ya que no puedo cambiar. | since I cannot change at all. |

Remarkably, tango lyrics from this period reflect upon tango history and its transformations. Accordingly, tango started as a true expression of humble people, but ended up seduced by the glamorous halls, danced by the upper classes in a decadent process that granted superficial success but took it away from its former authenticity. Tango does not escape this ominous logic and the same applies to the ones hearing and dancing tango. Moving from the intertextual to the extratextual analysis, I argue that tango audiences from that period were presented with a message that, while appearing to condemn tango culture and its consequences, were in fact re-enacting a form of complex negativity, a cynic self-awareness, a demonstration of our own entrapment, of the challenge of a difficult exit.

# Chapter 9. Melancholy: a cynical approach towards the past.

There is a final point that I will focus on in this section that will reinforce the exploration of tango lyrics and tango culture through a cynical lens. A melancholic sentiment is frequently remarked as being a fundamental characteristic of tango lyrics during this period. My thoughts are that this melancholy connects directly to the creation of an idealised past, links with a description of a pathetic present and implies a disheartening perspective of the future. From my understanding, the specific characteristics of the sense of melancholy present in the songs from this time frame (1917-1955) will provide another angle from which a form of modern cynicism may emerge. One that instead of directly rejecting any form of moral grounds or moral conventions, appeals to an unblemished and flawless version of the past in which positive values were standing, before a fall that crumbled those ideal times and made it impossible to return to them. That past period in tango narrations (imagined, invented, distorted) will work as a crucial base for the sense of negativity, pessimism, and distrust towards any possible modification of a grim present that these lyrics transmit. Furthermore, the final acceptance of the impossibility of bringing back the idealised version of the past allows tango narrators to succumb to the so-described mediocrity of the present and end up adapting to it as strategically as possible in order to survive. The ultimate final complicity (a form of cynic complicity, I argue) with the broken world is mainly made possible by the way in which the lost paradise of the past is introduced.

I argue that this kind of melancholy was completely absent in the previous stage of tango history (the one described in the first point of this Part II, as the ‘origins of tango’) in tangos that were cheerfully celebrating sexual encounters and showing off the scandalous behaviour of their main characters. As Liska (2014) suggests, this slow pace, melancholic spirit will, from 1917 onwards affect the way in which tango was danced, composed, interpreted and, naturally, described in its lyrics.

The relevance of melancholia in tango lyrics from this period has been repeated by several scholars (Mafud, 1966; Sábato, 2005; Karush, 2007; Conde, 2014; Barreiro- Armstrong, 2003). Gottling (1998) gives an exemplary title to his book: *Tango, melancólico testigo* [Tango, melancholic witness].

For instance, Azzi (2014) stated:

Most of tango lyrics confront a painful present with the memory of an idealised past. Frequently, the protagonist is a loser, tormented by the failures that provoked the ending of that past. (p. 59, m.t)

In his exploration of tango as a metaphysical discourse, Crisafio (2003) argues that the central point of tango poetry is the connection between the disappearance of the object of desire and the sense of having missed the opportunity of grasping and keeping it. He (2003) states:

Tango poetry looks back to the past with a mixed sense of absence of a thing and the act of having lost it (…) and as such provides a movement towards nostalgia. (p. 97, m.t)

According to Crisafio (2003), such a description of the past implies,

…the reference to a period of time in which hopes and illusions were still alive, in which failure had not yet happened, or, even more, in which the narrator was not yet aware of his failure. (p. 103, m.t)

Campra (1996) concurs with this predominance of melancholy in tango lyrics by claiming that,

…everything that is not anymore what it used to be constitutes the building block of tango songs. (p. 97, m.t)

This description applies to most of the tangos from this period, but it is possible to find such emphasis of melancholy in the works of two composers: Cátulo Castillo[[33]](#footnote-33), presented by Conde (2014) as a writer consumed by melancholy and Homero Manzi[[34]](#footnote-34) who, according to Taylor (1998), created the grammar with which to write exclusively in nostalgic terms.

Salas (1996) states:

Cátulo’s works are marked by nostalgia: even when love is the topic, it is presented in a melancholic tone, in which whatever has been lost is irrecoverable (p. 66, m.t)

This reference to the strong presence of a sense of melancholy in tango lyrics has been frequently associated with a more generalised, and mostly vague, connection with the essence of the Argentinean identity. The idea of a melancholic spirit has been linked with the characteristics of the geography of the province of Buenos Aires (Martinez Estrada, *Radiografia de la Pampa* [Radiography of La Pampa], 1986) or by the apparent early success of the economic development of Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century and its posterior decadence from the 1930s onwards (Gerchunoff and Llach, *El ciclo de la ilusión y el desencanto* [The cycle of illusion and disappointment], 1998).

It is relevant to mention that in most of these previous cases, the conceptualization of melancholy might not be necessarily the same as the one with which I will be working. In fact, in the examples presented above, the term remains undefined and has varied and vague characteristics. In my analysis, by contrast, I will use quite a specific conceptualization of melancholy as a term, that owes greatly to the work of Žižek, and more generally to a certain analysis of the condition of modern cynicism, as I will explain in the following paragraphs.

In all the cases previously introduced, as well as in the tango lyrics, however, there is a common feature and indeed the narration follows a similar pattern: a golden age in which illusions were bright, and in which there were strong values that structured and organised the newly born National State, the finances, the lives of the individuals or the functioning of the society. This period is followed by a dramatic turning point, sometimes through the fault of the characters involved in the story, sometimes by an event beyond their control (in social and economic terms, at times referring to the success of populism, the change of the world economic order, the disruptions of the Wall Street crisis, or in tango terms, a lover that left, a betrayal, the abandonment of the old neighbourhood or the family house or just the inexorable effect of the passage of time). This disruption explains a depressing present affecting the social, economic, or emotional aspects of the country, or of the individuals. Finally, the golden age is presented as irrecoverable and the perspectives of the future as inexorably grim.

The melancholic discourse in tango may appear in diverse examples of storytelling. It is present in the discourse of the abandoned lover that remembers her romance or the lost woman, or in the sadness of ‘*la milonguita*’ remembering her innocent past, or even her period of fame and glory. Furthermore, it appears in reference to objects that have changed, or been lost, in reference to the lost youth. According to Matamoro (1969), for example, several tangos from this period focus on a melancholic description of a romanticised version of the city set in the past (an undefined past, set in a time near childhood, or the moments around the first love of the narrators). Such a dreamed city, or neighbourhood does not exist anymore. In tango lyrics, in Matamoro’s terms, underdeveloped neighbourhoods that had disappeared were sadly remembered in opposition to an industrialised and overly urbanised city centre that seemed doomed to an endless expansion.

The most striking example of such melancholic discourse, however, is present in the way in which tango lyrics introduce the identity of tango itself and its transformations. Once again, there is an idealised past involving a tango of the origins, in which brave, rough, proud, and authentic ‘*compadritos*’ were the artificers of tango culture. Those characters are slowly disappearing from the city and from tango life, allowing tango music and dance to be seduced by the upper classes, by the elegant saloons, by the opportunities to be exported to Europe and America, and though perverting its character, tango is becoming falsely refined and softened in its bold attributes.

Jorge Luis Borges’s interpretation of tango follows this same discourse, both in his essays in *El Tango, cuatro conferencias* [Tango, four conferences] (2016) and in the book *Evaristo Carriego* (2002). According to the author, tango in its pure forms was aggressive, rebellious, evasive of any ethical code defined by the State or imposed by the society. The ‘*compadrito*’ was its most perfect character. Nevertheless, according to Borges, such tango does not exist anymore. Archetti (2003) describes Borges’ version of the ‘*compadrito*’ as,

… an elegant seducer whom no woman is able to resist; he has been in prison and is admired because of his courage, physical strength, and capacity to cheat when necessary. The compadrito has a defiant and hostile attitude towards other men. (P. 153)

According to Borges, however, with the arrival of the *‘tango-canción’*, the ‘*compadrito*’ vanishes from the tango saloons, his style of dance is socially condemned, and he finally vanishes from tango culture altogether (at the same time that he is extinguished from the city by the process of civilized urbanization of the city of Buenos Aires). Instead of being an active participant in tango life, from then onwards, the ‘*compadrito*’ will be exclusively remembered with melancholia in, according to Borges, a pathetic version of a skewed tango.

However, despite Borges’ complaints about the transformations in tango identity, a melancholic discourse will remain as a defining element of what tango culture implies. In fact, once the crying for the disappearance of the ‘*compadrito*’ or the vanishing of the old neighbourhood stop seducing composers as a topic for their songs, a new object of nostalgia will replace the old one. For instance, in the late 1940s tango lyrics remembered with sadness and pain the lost glories of the tangos from the 1920s, their style of music and dance. Matamoro (1969) and later on Varela (2016) claim that the tangos from the 1940s do not address topics from the present (not even to complain about them). According to those authors, tango lyrics were obsessed with conjuring up memories from 20 years earlier, incapable of coping with the political changes of their time. Tango was, in their interpretation, and despite addressing constantly an image from the past, ahistorical. Matamoro (1969) states,

… the composers are so attached to a pessimist melancholy that they are not able to respond to a social reality that was transforming their time. (p. 217, m.t)

Even nowadays, in my own experience as a tango dancer, musical interpreter and teacher, I have come across multiple situations in which dancers or musicians remember sadly what they perceive to have been the golden age of tango. They try to recreate the style of dancing, or the way in which to play tango music, or the codes that made sense in 1940s in the dance halls in Buenos Aires. It is interesting to point out that it happens even in remote tango locations such as Sheffield, United Kingdom, where some organisers strongly reject any form of tango expression that may contrast with the idealised version that they have of that imaginary past in the tango era (that naturally they have never lived or experienced). This personal perception of tango’s obsession with the memories of its idealised past has been pointed out several times by scholars exploring the tango culture from the 2000s (Morel, 2012), or by anthropological studies exploring tango culture from nowadays, in Buenos Aires and abroad (Cara, 2009; Carozzi, 2015; Westergard, 2016).

A sense of melancholy is, according to the cases presented above, strongly present in tango lyrics and the tango culture, starting from 1917 and with ramifications that are still present nowadays. Tangos from the 1920s cry for the memories of the origins of tango; tangos from the 1940s remember with nostalgia the style of music and dancing of the 1920s, and several musicians and tango dancers from the present are still obsessed with the distorted memories of the golden age of the 1940s. Melancholy seems, indeed, almost omnipresent in the tango culture. To further analyse this melancholic discourse through the lens of modern cynicism, I will introduce the understanding of melancholy by Slavoj Žižek, in particular in his article “Melancholy and the Act*”* (2000).

*Žižek’s pathological melancholy.*

The central aspect of Slavoj Žižek’s definition of pathological melancholy is the perseverance of the subject in his identification with the lost object. There is a sort of fidelity towards the adoration of that object, from the subject’s perspective, that implies the rejection of any possibility of renouncing its connection with it. In that respect, Žižek, referencing Sigmund Freud, makes a useful distinction between normal mourning and melancholy. In the former, the subject accepts with success the loss through a painful but succinct period, whereas with melancholy there is always a remaining, a left-over that cannot be assimilated in the process of the mourning and, consequently, the obsession with the object persists.

A second element worth noting here, in Žižek’s definition of melancholy is the concept of anamorphosis. According to the philosopher’s analysis, it implies that the melancholic object of desire is remembered with misrepresentations and alterations, with an unconscious manipulation of its material reality according to the subjective needs of the individual that has to fill an emptiness in his metaphysical identity.

Žižek (2000) states:

…anamorphosis undermines the distinction between objective reality and its distorted subjective perception; in it, the subjective distortion is reflected back into the perceived object itself, and, in this precise sense, the gaze itself acquires a supposedly objective existence. (P. 659)

Furthermore, Žižek continues, once the memory of a distorted object of desire appears it becomes the central pillar by which the melancholic’s whole reality is structured. The void, the meaningless sense of life, is suddenly replaced by this distorted image from the past, by this altered object that is perceived as lost forever. In that respect, Žižek distinguishes again between the sense of loss and the sense of lacking. He states (2000):

The melancholic is guilty of committing a kind of paralogism of the pure capacity to desire, which resides in the confusion between loss and lack: insofar as the object-cause of desire is originally, in a constitutive way, lacking, melancholy interprets this lack as a loss, as if the lacking object was once possessed and then lost. In short, what melancholy obfuscates is that the object is lacking from the very beginning, that its emergence coincides with its lack, that this object is nothing but the positivization of a void or lack, a purely anamorphic entity that does not exist in itself. (P. 659-660)

It is precisely this process of transmuting the original lack into loss that allows the melancholic to forge an emotional disengagement with the present; perceived by them as decadent or degraded, always in comparison with that imagined and untouchable ideal from the past.

Once again, quoting Žižek (2000):

… the melancholic still displays the metaphysical yearning for another absolute reality beyond our ordinary reality subjected to temporal decay and corruption; the only way out of this predicament is thus to take an ordinary, sensual material object (say, the beloved woman) and elevate it into the absolute. The melancholic subject thus elevates the object of his longing into an inconsistent composite of a corporeal absolute; however, since this object is subject to decay, one can possess it unconditionally only insofar as it is lost, in its loss. (p. 660)

The central point that connects this analysis with modern cynicism is not necessarily the existence of a utopia, an impossible dream worth attaching to, but instead the fact that this impossible ideal is actually utilised as the main argument that sustains a critique of the present while simultaneously working as a legitimation for actively partaking in a decrepit world. Žižek condemns this very cynicism that emerges when the melancholic connection with the object of desire makes claim for a morally superior ethics, and thereby resources itself from a kind of discontented moral absolutism, impossible to materialise and restrained to the temporal phrase of a lost past, while allowing the individual to ‘fully participate in the global capitalist game’ (2000, p. 659). This is the third and final point of Žižek’s analysis of melancholia that I claim is fundamental to my understanding of tango lyrics and its melancholy as a lens of modern cynicism. The idealised memories of the old times (the innocence of a naïve young ‘milonguita’, the authenticity of the old neighbourhood, the boldness of the tango in its origins) do not restrain its effects as a simple perception or description of the past but instead those memories are critical to the understanding of the present and the perspective of the future. This melancholia justifies the pessimism and explains the high moral values in the discourse (which, according to Žižek, are essentially spectral, and by definition unrealisable), its fierce criticism of debauchery and corruption while, at the same time, validates the complicity with the so-described decadent reality.

This is even more evident when the subject, according to Žižek (2000), suddenly has access to the mystified lost object. If that happens, the result is a bitter disappointment as the object cannot satisfy its romanticised version. Such an encounter does not necessarily extinguish the melancholy but instead reinforces the sense of original loss, increasing the idealised version of the past, questioning the effects of the passing of time. This process ends in a complete disenchantment with the present and with any possibility of solution or even redemption to their negative empty reality.

In tango lyrics from this period, this encounter with the object of desire, idealised as a memory from the past, happens in various forms with the same outcome: disappointment, dissatisfaction, and disenchantment. It is, for example, the case of “Volvio una noche” [She returned one night] written by Le Pera in 1935. In that song, the lover from his youth returns for a second chance but the narrator realises with sadness and resignation that she is only “una mueca del viejo pasado que no se puede resusitar” [a faint grin from the old past that is not possible to resuscitate]. This pattern appears as well in reference to places, such as the narrator’s parents’ house as in “La casita de mis viejos” [The house of my parents’] by Enrique Cadícamo from 1932 or a neighbourhood as in “Sur” [South] by Manzi from 1948. In both cases, the protagonist returns to the same place to which he once had strong emotional attachment, a place described as paradisiacal in in his youth, where romances were possible, innocence was not yet lost, and the inhabitants behaved with honesty and authenticity. However, once he steps in the same spots again, he ends up realising that such bliss is no longer achievable as the place is decrepit or has just lost the aura of mysticism previously attributed. Indeed, according to Žižek, the process of incomplete mourning has fully distorted the romances that are recalled.

Furthermore, even when the song does not tell the story of a new confrontation with the object of desire, the ways in which such object are described are always presented as irrecoverable, inanimate, lost forever. Cristafio (2003) states in that respect:

Tango songs are not capable of bringing the remembered lost object back into life by the singing itself. Instead, the song presents it as still, blurred, dead. (p. 123, m.t)

Interestingly, in most of those cases, the narrator describes the idealised past as a period in time when the protagonists were ignorant of the cruelty of the world. It is described as a period of innocent purity that is directly connected with unawareness and lack of knowledge. Once again, this is another consequence of the distortion of the past and the result of a peculiar conception according to which knowledge is only the result of experiencing suffering and disappointment. The discovery of the truth and the path of learning about the world is analysed as part of the process of losing such an ideal. It is the result of going through a dramatic experience that arguably implies disillusionment and the move into the realm of nostalgia and melancholia. What the characters learn about the brutality of the world at the exact same moment in which they distort and idealise their previous past. I will return to these ideas in Part V.

As presented above, the tango lyrics in this period could not necessarily, or at least not exclusively, be read as stories with a conservative moral discourse. The decadence that characters, places, and relations experience in these lyrics are crucially described as unavoidable, which allows the protagonists to accept their destiny with resignation and participate in the same world that is so heavily criticised. Tango songs not only do not attempt to fight back against this decay. Instead, they implicitly promote the ethical corrosion of the individual and their society by engaging the listener to participate in tango culture, so-self-described as morally corrupting. The key point in these narrations is the melancholic connection with the idealised past that is the moral ground from where the criticism of the present emerges, the pessimism towards any possible future and the final complicity with the amoral new reality. In the words of Campra (1996),

…the degradation that tango characters suffer when astonished by the lights of the city centre, who abandoned their old neighbourhood, should not be read only as an expression of a moral censorship or as an implicit complaint to the new social order. Instead, it is the demonstration of the emptiness of the being that suffers when that character feels the loss of their mythical own space (p. 58, m.t)

In the case of tango lyrics, especially from the 1920s and 1930s, as stated above, the mythical space refers as well to an idealised period of tango culture. The songs’ description of the origins of tango coincides with the hypothetical period in which ‘*la milonguita’* had not yet lost her innocence; when male dancers were rough, authentic, and honest; when the neighbourhoods were poor, but valuable and the romantic stories were taking place; before betrayals; and before abandonments. Interestingly, the description of such a period in tango history, according to tango lyrics of the *‘tango-canción’* stage, presents certain features that are worth considering under the lens of a different kind of cynicism, one more related to its ancient forms. In that respect, it is worth stating that, while this melancholic diagnosis is convincing, it risks driving out what might be considered to be more positive or generative elements of cynicism in tango. To reconsider it will be one of the focus points of analysis in the following section.

# **Part IV. Tango in its origins (1880-1917) explored through the lens of ancient cynicism: a scandalous and rebellious cultural manifestation or a myth based on the narrative of tango’s own past.**

*Introduction.*

It is important at this point to return again to a discussion and justification of the non-chronological structure of this thesis in the analysis of tango as a cultural phenomenon. Briefly summarised, I started Part I of this work exploring the period of ‘*tango-canción’*, between 1917 and 1955 focusing on the study of the oeuvre of Enrique Santos Discépolo, a composer that I claim, expresses most clearly the elements of pessimism, disappointment, and disenchantment present in tango lyrics. Discépolo’s lyrics were explored under the lens of modern cynicism in its multiple variants, according to divergent understandings of the term in its academic and vernacular uses and possible definitions. In Part III, I continued with this line of enquiry by expanding the analysis to various composers of the same ‘*tango–canción’* period. I analysed recurrent elements in several lyrics that, I argue, could be reinterpreted under the scope of modern cynicism. Furthermore, I reconsidered the tango’s so-called moral prescriptive narrative, a very specific understanding of tango’s hypocrisy and double discourse, and a redefinition of melancholy, all of them in relation to my own understanding of modern cynicism as an active influence in contemporary culture.

The account which appears in the pages below of the period of the origins of tango, from 1880 to 1917, follows from the fact that this period seems to fulfil a very specific role in the melancholic discourse of *‘tango-canción’*, functioning here as an idealised and utopic past. It is for this reason that the origins of tango are considered only after the discussion of the subsequent period of *'tango–canción’*, since these purported origins only appear, or take form in the history of tango, via a process that has been mediated by subsequent developments in tango. Indeed, to tell the history of tango chronologically, would risk obscuring this very fact. These origin stories are, moreover, rather central to understanding the subsequent operation of tango as a cynic discourse, as a discourse of disappointment and loss of faith which necessarily idealises its own past. The analysis of this early stage in tango history responds then to the need to explore in more detail the characteristics of a period that is a fundamental building stone in the construction of an idealised and most likely distorted version of its own past as a genre. This perception of *‘tango-canción’s* own past reinforces and is functional to its pessimism and disenchantment with its present. It justifies the discouragement of hopes for any possible reform or transformation of the grim description of the reality in tango narrations, and, more importantly, allows for a strategic adaptation to their perceived decadent society.

Remarkably, however, there are several elements in this idealised version of tango in its origins (at least according to the altered version present retrospectively in the lyrics and studies of the *‘tango-canción’* period) that could be explored through a lens of a different kind of cynicism than the modern variant that has been dominant in the previous chapters. Tango in its origins is presented at times as a rebellious art form, wild, scandalous, provocative, and confrontational. This tango style seems to affirm proudly its humble but courageous and bold background, with characters that challenge moral codes, social conventions, and that radically antagonise the moral discourses of the dominant classes of that time. Such a description could be analysed, in my understanding, through the lens of ancient cynicism, in light of the anecdotes of Diogenes of Sinope or, more specifically, in relation to the peculiar way in which a cynic movement emerged among the lower (‘uneducated’) classes in the fourth century AD in the Roman Empire.

Accordingly, a characterization of tango in its origins will allow me to contemplate tango as a cultural phenomenon from a completely dissimilar kind of cynicism than its modern and typically more vague definition, and question whether this possible coexistence of elements of modern and ancient cynicism in tango may interact between each other.

This chapter, then, will try to answer the following questions:

1. Which are those elements of tango in its origins that could establish a connection with ancient cynicism? Furthermore, which kind of ancient cynicism is the one that may effectively establish a stronger link with this period of tango?
2. In which ways is this conception of tango in its origins, figured as rebellious, brave, and defiant, effectively a distorted version, idealised with melancholy by the tango-canción or by writers such as Jorge Luis Borges? How was tango in its origins exaggerated in terms of its immoral attributes by its contemporary moralist critics and how was this distortion part of an attempt to make tango sensual, dangerous, and exotic in tune with the needs of Europe and America, which were looking to import and commercialise a passionate and exotic cultural product, as suggested by Maria Savigliano?
3. Thirdly, have any of the potential features of rebelliousness in the tango in its origins (idealised or historically veridic) survived the so-called process of co-optation, by when tango has arguably switched from cheeky defiance to sad resignation?
4. Finally, are there, in the following periods, or even in the tango of nowadays, elements that keep this original disruptive impulse that are still worth analysing and exploring through the lens of ancient cynicism?

This Part IV is, then, attempting to deal with two distinct issues. On one hand, I am discussing the idea that tango was disruptive in its origins, and that as such it might bear comparison to some disruptive logics which have been attributed to early forms of cynicism. Secondly, I am interested in questioning this disruptive narrative and seek to retain in view the possibility that some, if not all of it, is a mythic construction. Running these two paths of exploration together does create difficulties for the analysis and it is worth acknowledging that this creates the ground for a more complex mode of enquiry. It is important to note that I am not focusing on how much of this version of a disruptive and scandalous original tango is historically accurate. I will not explore how this mythical version is partially contradicted by recent studies by historians and scholars exploring tango from that period. This historical issue falls beyond the scope of this thesis.

Assuming that the disruptive elements of tango analysed in this section may indeed be partially a mythic construction, that possibility does not necessarily invalidate the interest in the exploration of early tangos, about how some of the disruptive elements of tango functioned, and whether it bears analogies to the disruptive tactics of ancient cynicism. This is so, because the nature of the myth might be worth analysing and for the possibility that mythic constructs might still have conditioning effects (in this case, ploughed back into the subsequent development of tango and the development of its modern cynical features). Otherwise phrased, even if the disruptive side of early tango was to some extent exaggerated, and became part of the myth of tango, I will explore to what extent this myth has informed the subsequent development of tango, and has been absorbed within it, as a potentially energising invitation to disrupt and question society’s values.

In any case, it is not the intention of this chapter to argue that tango in its origins faithfully represents an example of the mandates (if there were any) of a form of ancient cynicism. Nor did I want to claim that the lyrics from the *‘tango-canción’* period or the oeuvre of Discépolo could fully and exclusively be understood under the orbit of modern cynicism. Instead, it is worth repeating that this research should be comprehended as an attempt to rethink and reconsider tango culture, and some of its characteristics and distinct elements under the light of cynicism in its multiple conceptions. Both tango (as an object of study) and cynicism (as a conceptual framework for my analysis), with their complex historical transformations, should not, in my understanding, be considered as encapsulated terms, with a precise and concise definition. Both cultural phenomena are considered in this study as terms that are constantly resignifying, adopting in turn multiple and varying characteristics and that present aspects at times dissimilar, contradictory, and difficult to catalogue. Due to this complex identity, I claim the analysis of tango as a cultural movement may benefit by an exploration that studies it at times under the influence of modern cynicism, at times as a possible manifestation of an ancient cynic tradition, but without rejecting or denying alternative interpretations or recognising that there are traits that fall well beyond this restricted analysis.

# Chapter 10. Idealised versions of a wild, rebellious, and rough tango explored in connection with ancient cynicism.

Out of the multiple idealised descriptions of tango in its origins I will introduce first a paradigmatic version, not only because of the prestige of the writer but because of the way in which this version directly plays a key role in criticism and disenchantment with the posterior tango periods, especially in connection with the ‘*tango-canción’* period*.* Accordingly, this description directly creates a sense of a romantic past in tango history that reinforced the so-called decadent elements in tango of the following era. I am referring to the version written by Jorge Luis Borges[[35]](#footnote-35), firstly in his book *Evaristo Carriego* (2002), published in 1930, and then expanded and reaffirmed in a series of four conferences in 1965, only transcribed recently and first published in 2016 (*El Tango, cuatro conferencias, 2016).*

In the book *Evaristo Carriego (2002),* in the first publication of 1930, Borges made a famous statement, frequently repeated by tango detractors of nowadays. He wrote that tango “…used to be an orgiastic devilry and nowadays is no more than a simple style of walking” (2002, p. 134, m.t). According to Borges, the first tangos were brave, courageous, and rebellious, defying the rules of the State by its sexual connotations, by the spirit of quarrelsome omnipresence in its performances and by the nature of its protagonist, both in its lyrics and with tango as an enacted dance.

To begin with, Borges situates the origins of tango in Buenos Aires, around 1880. He states that tango was born in “las casas malas” (2016, p. 33), the brothels in the suburbs of the city. According to his version of its origins, tango was initially rejected by the crowds, and was refused by most women who didn’t dare to dance it. He claims that tango was not created as a representation of the working classes. Instead, he states that tango had an infamous birth, surrounded by prostitution, crime, and violence, danced mostly by the ones outside the borders of sociability.

Up to this point, Borges’s description of tango in its origins coincides with the public criticism by journalists and members of the upper class of those last decades in the nineteenth century. In fact, according to Liska (2014), those first discourses of disapproval could be defined as an attempt to censor, proscribe, and impose a prohibition to the early tango manifestations. Liska states that intellectuals and representatives of the government between 1880 and 1920 alike tended to question tango as a dangerous promotor of the inversion of the values that the new developing country was trying to build. That conception of tangos’ sinful birth was later on repeated, for instance, by influential writers such as Jose Sebastian Tallón in his suggestive book titled *El Tango en sus etapas de música prohibida* [Tango in its period of forbidden music] (1964), first published in 1959, and historians such as Luis Adolfo Sierra, in his book *Historia de la Orquesta Típica (*1976), first published in 1966. Tallón, for example, argues that those who created tango music were outsiders without culture and refinement, displaced from respectability and a proper education by a process of abrupt urbanization that created as a side effect the poor suburbs in which this music developed. As such, according to Tallón (1964), tango was initially condemned because of its supposed sexual degeneration and its aggressive characteristics. In similar terms, Sierra (1976), who defines tango in its origins as a prehistorical period in tango history, before its consolidation as a respectable and well elaborated genre, argues that this early tango was provocative and defiant in its choreographic movements as a dance and predictably amoral in concordance with its deprived and depraved roots: those who enacted it were from an inferior condition, excluded in the suburbs from the growth and wealth that was spreading in the city.

The importance of the brothels as a sinful location where tango was first created was frequently repeated by tango detractors from the last decades of the nineteenth century (Liska, 2014). Furthermore, Sergio Pujol (1999) and Magali Saikin (2004) explored in recent studies this representation and pointed out that, in later reconstructions of tango history, tango dance and its close connection with the sexual act in brothels was systematically referred to as the link that connects music and orgasm, in Pujol’s analysis, and music and sexual tension, in Saikin’s. According to both authors, public performances of sexuality were systematically repressed by the moral discourses of that time, therefore accentuating the scandalous and wicked identity of the tango as a popular expression.

However, Borges’ version of tango in its origins, despite presenting so many coincidences with other condemnatory and disapproving discourses towards the genre, portrays this tango period as worthy of admiration and respect. This age of tango was, in Borges’ account (2016), the real golden age of tango, in which a pure form of this music and dance existed. It later on became deformed and pathetic, as a decadent shadow of what it used to be.

Borges’ praise towards this tango period is mainly based on his particular description about one of tango’s defining protagonists: the ‘*compadrito*’. The ‘*compadritos*’ were, according to him, the first tango dancers and the ones who appeared as characters in the songs. Borges’ description of this character put the emphasis on his courage and his lack of fear, especially when confronting another ‘*compadrito*’ in a knife fight. His bravery links directly to a sense of independence and self-sufficiency and is depicted in correlation to his dismissal of others’ values and opinions. According to Borges, the ‘*compadrito*’ stands exclusively on his own personal convictions, confronting the dominant moral discourses of the time, the law, or a figure of authority. Interestingly, Borges connects this character’s sense of freedom from moral conventions to his background in poverty. The ‘*compadrito*’ endured a tough life in suburbs, in the ‘*conventillos*[[36]](#footnote-36)’, surrounded by privations, hardships and adversities. Those experiences formed his identity and prepared him to fully accept any new adversity in his path, with disdain towards pain and physical suffering. This life experience developed in him an instinct to improvise and adapt in order to survive.

Borges’ praise of this figure is explicitly and remarkably displayed in his book in 1930 and his conferences from 1965. It is important to mention that this description is written at the time when the character of ‘*compadrito*’ is assumed by the writer to be fully extinct, as well as the kind of tango that was its cultural representation. Accordingly, Borges’ memories about this so-called authentic and honest-to-himself character, wiped out by modernization and urbanization in the city, and the co-optation of tango by middle and upper classes, reinforces Borges’ criticism towards his contemporary tango. Tango lyrics from the *tango-cancion* period, as I have already discussed in the previous chapter, depict the ‘*compadrito*’ and the tango he used to perform in similar terms. They revered the figure of the ‘*compadrito*’ and the tango he represented, but directly attached that figure to a sense of melancholy towards an idealised past that is no longer possible to retrieve.

Furthermore, several elements of this version of the ‘*compadrito*’ can even be seen in authors such as Simon Collier. In his article “The popular roots of the Argentine tango” (1992) he similarly associates the birth of tango with the ‘*compadrito*’ when he states,

The tango was born during this hectic rush of urbanization, at a time when the ephemeral culture of the outer barrios reflected both native/immigrant and city/countryside contrasts and tensions. One of many distinctive figures of the arrabal (suburbs) was the compadre, a semi-urban type with roots in the countryside (…) The free, nomadic gaucho world had more or less vanished by the 1880s yet the suburban compadre did perhaps inherit certain gaucho values: pride, independence, ostentatious masculinity, a propensity to settle matters of honour with knives. (p. 94)

Those attributes are reinforced, in Borges’ version of the ‘*compadrito*’, by the introduction of two complementary tango characters of that period: ‘*el ñiño bien*’ [the good boy], and ‘*la mujer de mala vida’* [the woman of bad reputation]. The first character is presented as the son of a well off and respected family that is curious about the dangerous style of early tango. He takes part in tango dances and gets involved in the violence that surrounds it. However, he does so only by participating in fists fights and mainly for fun (Borges associates this aspect to the development of boxing as a sport for the middle and upper classes, in contrast to the violence linked to pride, honour and self-assertion that was fundamental to the ‘*compadrito*’s lives’). The ‘*ñiño bien’* represents, in Borges account, an impoverished version of the ‘*compadrito*’, one that takes part in tango culture by pretending a toughness and a courage that is only a masquerade. His comfortable upbringing and his attachment to the civilized life boosts by contrast the credibility and authenticity of the ‘*compadritos*’ and reinforces the importance of a rough life in order to achieve a true bravery and its consequent sense of freedom.

The second character mentioned by Borges, ‘*la mujer de mala vida*’, is usually a woman with humble origins who works as a prostitute and tends to be the partner of the ‘*compadrito*’, at times described as a ruffian who makes her work for him. This relationship allows the scandal to be performed, not only by the provocative version of the tango as a dance, publicly and openly performed as a sexualised interaction, but as well by the pride and cheerfulness in which her profession and their relationship is presented. There is no sorrow, there are no regrets in her life in the brothel, and no moral condemnation of the pimp’s role. Instead, their identities and characteristics are openly celebrated by the tango community and by some song titles or exceptional lyrics of that time.

Varela (2016) argues that this early tango is cheerful particularly due to the empowerment of this female figure. He states,

The woman is not weak but defiant. She does not betray, she chooses, decides. She goes against or follows the men’s will, at times confronts him. She is a passionate woman and declares her happiness without regrets, without doubts (…) (p. 49, m.t)

This reaffirmation of their identity can be illustrated by the verses of “La morocha” [The brunette] written in 1905 by Angel Villoldo:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Soy la morocha argentina | I am the Argentine brunette, |
| la que no siente pesares, | the one who feels no sorrow, |
| y alegre pasa la vida con sus cantares. | and spends her life happy with her songs. |
| Soy la gentil compañera | I am the gracious partner, |
| del noble gaucho porteño | of the noble urban gaucho, |
| la que conserva el cariño para su dueño. | who reserves her affection for her owner. |
| Yo soy la morocha | I am the brunette. |
| de mirar ardiente | of burning gaze, |
| La que en su alma siente el fuego del amor. | the one who feels the fire of love in her soul. |

Varela (2016) argues that this song clearly exemplifies the contrasting nature of tango characters in this period, in contraposition to the languid and disheartening version of the ones from the *‘tango-canción’*. Varela (2016) states,

‘La morocha’, from 1905, is the voice of a woman who sings her happiness instead of her internal drama. She is far from considering tango as a temptation towards a path of decadence. (p. 49, m.t)

Regarding the scandalous sexual connotation of the dance, Varela refers as well to “Milonga del Baldomero” from 1907 written by Villoldo in which the provocation is more evident. Some of its verses say,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Se cogió a la hermana y al padre, | He fucked his sister and his father, |
| y en el colmo del placer, | and at the summit of his pleasure, |
| no teniendo a quien coger | not having anyone else to fuck with |
| un día se cogió a la madre. | one day he fucked his own mother. |

Tango from this early period seems to present, at least in Borges account, a scandalous display of violence and sexual performativity that, instead of being described in condemnatory terms, is taken as a sign of rebelliousness, of reaffirmation of the pride of ‘*compadrito*’ and his partner. The characters’ main attributes are their sense of freedom and independence, in tension with the moral codes of the times and explained due to their rough upbringing and living conditions.

Borges (2002, 2016) describes tango in its origins as brave, courageous and authentic, praising those qualities in contraposition of his understanding of a pathetic version of tango that came after, the so-called *‘tango-canción’.* Furthermore, Borges presents a distorted and idealised characterisation of that tango in its origins and in fact subsequent scholars have built on elements of such idealisation. It is beyond the possibilities of this thesis to determine up to which point this version is completely or partially distorted. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that this same version (with slight variations) is the same one that tango incorporated in their own discourse about its history.

This version of tango in its origins, interestingly, presents elements that could, I argue, be explored under the lens of ancient cynicism.

*Tango in its origins in relation with ancient cynicism: point of contact and notorious disconnections.*

It is important, once again, to state that I am not claiming that tango from this period is a continuation of the precepts of any kind of ancient cynicism. At no point does this early tango assert a direct connection with that philosophy and not even Borges’ version refers to the term at any point (however, he does mention ‘*compadrito*’ as a possible stoic figure, 2016).

To begin with, there is a striking aspect that differs between ancient cynicism and tango and indeed removes any possible strong association between both cultural phenomena. According to Branham’s interpretation (1996), ancient cynicism’s performed scandals, the public displays of shameless acts and its mockery acts that were considered socially inappropriate had an aim of direct confrontation and criticism towards the customs of the society of that time. The cynic’s performances wanted to make evident the arbitrary nature of the laws and conventions.

According to Shreier (2009),

[Diogenes] exposed the artifice, hypocrisy, and arbitrariness of custom and norms. He aggressively opposed convention; more fundamentally, he opposed the habituated, normalized functioning of communities, conventionality’s inscription of intentions and desires. (p. 33)

Although it is possible that Diogenes and his cynic forerunners did not specify a strict theoretical framework in which the aims and objectives of the cynic philosophy were defined, as Allen (2020) has argued, their performances had a target and wanted to shock the audiences in order to allow them to question their ordinary life assumptions.

Bracht Branham (1996), comments on one of Diogenes’s anecdotes in which he complains against a young follower that had just farted in public by saying,

Diogenes attacks the young man not for the act of farting in public, but for farting in public without expressing contempt for society. The Cynics claim the bodily functions as a language of protest. Yet as this example shows, vulgarity alone does not make one a Cynic. The youth had not earned the privilege to perform such an act, since he had not done anything else to reject common life. The irony of the anecdote, of course, is that the youth had no intention of registering an objection to the social order. (p.233)

It is not sufficient, according to this version, to perform a shameless act. Such act has to imply a deliberate criticism towards the society that is experiencing the shock. The cynic act must be premeditated, calculated, and pointed against social conventions. As an example, Allen (2020) refers to a well-timed public defecation by which Diogenes interrupted his own public speech, for the surprise of his listeners. Allen (2020) argues that Diogenes has demonstrated his eloquence, his ability to speak well, which begs to question, of why someone who has learned eloquence should turn his back on it, and undermine his achievement, in the moment when it is celebrated.

Allen (2020) states that,

We might wonder if Cynic obscenity was more than a mere outburst, if it was deliberately intended to draw attention to the arbitrary nature of civilized life and custom. Cynicism invites suspicion of all features of civilized existence. It works toward a reversal in which the finest achievements of civilized living are themselves treated with suspicion, incredulity, even outright contempt. The Cynic invites ire and welcomes disgust so as to redirect it, interrupting its habitual expression and direction of travel. Cynicism causes those it first scandalized to eventually doubt the forces that produced their everyday scorn of all that is lowly and base. (p. 11)

Tango in its origins, at least in Borges’s version (2016), does not appear to deliberately attack civilized norms and customs and there is no explicit criticism towards social conventions. It lacks, from an ancient cynic perspective in accordance with Branham’s interpretation (1996), an active and conscious objection to the dominant moral discourse. Instead, it seems to be a reaffirmation of a mode of being and living that indeed could contradict the moral standards of such social order, but without a premeditated rebelliousness. However, the way in which tango characters proudly assert their identity and way of living, not aiming for direct confrontation but nevertheless disregarding dominant moral codes, independent from the prescriptions of social conventions, represents an act of freedom that may involuntarily create a challenge to the civilized life.

A similar argument can be applied to the praise given to animal life, so characteristic of Diogenes’ anecdotes, in particular in relation to the aim for a simplistic lifestyle and the rejection of material comfort. In ancient cynicism, as Shea (2010) argues, the ascetic lifestyle connects directly with the opportunity to guarantee total freedom and self-sufficiency. As such, it required a voluntary action of dispossession. A cynic has to guide themselves to paths of privation both in material and interpersonal terms.

Mazella (2007) states,

The Cynic abjures not only material possessions, however, but every conventional human attachment, in order to reduce his dependency on others to the absolute minimum. (p. 25)

In early tangos, the characters indeed seem to experience hardship and materialistic privations, and even the loss of a lover. In contrast to the tangos from the *‘tango-canción’* period, this lack is not regretted, and does not imply a crying attitude. It is taken cheerfully, with acceptance and even indifference. The figure of the ‘*compadrito*’, as described by Borges, is a lonely figure, despite being surrounded by occasional lovers or prostitutes, carrying a simple lifestyle and enduring whatever adversity and hard times his path may encounter. But, in contrast with ancient cynicism, his condition is not searched for as a path towards virtue (in the understanding of Shea, 2010) but instead given as default by his birth and his social background from which he cannot escape. This distinction is important, particularly when considering the case of Crates and Hipparchia, who gave away their wealth- who were famed for choosing the life of impoverishment. It is less clear with Diogenes, though, who wasn’t particularly wealthy from the outset, and was also an alien (i.e., not an inhabitant of Athens).

Another defining element of ancient cynicism that seems to be absent in early tangos is the relevance attributed to a parrhesia, or free speech. Bracht Braham (1996), for example, considers that cynic rhetoric was indeed one of the crucial tools used to disorganise social conventions and question the underlying base of daily life. In Shea’s analysis (2010), parrhesiastic speech was not in ancient cynicism an argumentative and rational discussion, following popular models or dialogues in those ancient times, but, by the use of irony, sarcasm and mockery, a strategy to fulfil their commitment to ‘deface the currency’.

Tangos from this period, as argued by Liska (2014), despite occasionally having some short lyrics, as with the case of “La morocha” from 1905, were predominantly performed as a dance and as a musical genre and not quite as often sang. The lyrics, in contrast with the following period of the *‘tango-canción’*, did not play a central role in the conformation of tango as a cultural activity. However, whenever verses were actually part of the early tango songs, they allowed characters from the suburbs, outsiders, and members of the lowest social class to have a voice and in that sense, it is possible to point out that one of the distinctive features of parrhesia (although minimal) is present in tango songs: The Cynic innovation towards parrhesia was not only the stress on the free speech but the fact that this prerogative was not exclusively a benefit of the few, the cultured and important members of the society but instead a right for many to exercise, a right assumed by the cynic against convention.

Allen (2020) states,

Since freedom to practice parrhesia was generally associated with ‘the rights of a citizen (in a democratic state) or the privileges of an aristocrat,’ it is argued that Diogenes’s claim to parrhesia, issuing as it did from the ‘bottom of the social hierarchy— as an impoverished noncitizen’— was a bold manoeuvre. Parrhesia was remodelled by removing it from an elite context governed by conventions of decorum and putting it to use within a setting that refused these restraints and should not have been practicing parrhesia in the first place. (p. 30)

Early tangos, as argued by Pujol (1999), did give a voice to those who were regularly excluded from public debates, appearances in the news or even political participation through the right to vote, at least until 1916. Tango was not only a cultural expression that was performed by the ruffian, the poor immigrant, or the prostitute, but tango also described in their lyrics their identities, their language, and their living conditions.

To sum up, it is worth, I argue, exploring early tangos from the perspective of ancient cynicism. However, both the negative side of ancient cynicism, which is the critic to social conventions through scandal and parrhesia, and the positive aspect, in relation to the praise of nature and an ascetic and simplistic life (following Stanley’s (2012) schematic presentation of ancient cynicism) do not appear to be deliberately targeted in tangos from this early period.

Other aspects of early tangos could, additionally, be interestingly reconsidered when analysed under the lens of ancient cynicism. I will mainly focus on a) the importance of improvisation and adaptability; b) the embodiment of tango as a form of expression and self-affirmation; c) the value of bravery; d) the rude, the obscene and the disruptive elements, and e) the focus on the individual over the collective in early tangos.

Improvisation is a defining aspect of tango as a dance, even nowadays. Hugo Mastrolorenzo, world champion of tango stage in 2016 himself, has written a historical account of tango as a dance, *Tango danza, el origen de la especie* [Tango dance, the origins of the species] (2022) in which he points out the importance of improvisation in the dance of nowadays but states that in the early dances that element was even more fundamental, allowing each dancer to express in their own style, with their own personality put into their own dance moves. According to Mastrolorenzo (2022), it is by the mid-1910s when the dance starts its process of codification, with manuals written about how to dance it properly, tango teachers spreading as a new profession and, furthermore, American tango ballroom creates a precise set of written rules of how to dance it correctly. The element of improvisation was not exclusive to tango as a dance but as well was present in its music and interpretation. Lamas and Binda in their book *El tango en la sociedad porteña, 1880-1920* [Tango in the society of Buenos Aires, 1880-1920] (2008) stresses the ability of musicians, composers, and occasional poets to create melodies, vary their interpretation and improvise short verses based on the circumstances of each social dance. Once again, as Liska stated (2014), those elements of improvisation in the music and in the interpretation were abandoned with the arrival of the *tango-cancion* period, driven by the need to co-opt the wild elements of tango by surrounding it with the prestige of professional and well-educated musician and writers. As Liska argues, the progressive diminishment of improvisation in tango and its correlative methodisation removed part of its disruptive and indecent potential. Furthermore, Borges’ admiration for the ‘*compadrito*’ (2016) is equally based in his ability to adapt and respond to unexpected events, without social or moral constraints which allowed him to react effectively against adversity.

The connection between improvisation and defiance could be explored when analysing the value of versatility and adaptability in the ancient cynic perspective. Allen (2020) states,

A countervailing view suggests that the most famous tenets of Cynic philosophy ‘grew out of a continual process of ad hoc improvisation’. There were no fundamentals or pregivens. That is the position taken here. On this reading, key Cynic ideas and methods were identified only retrospectively. This process of retrospective reading, which we must now attempt to unpick, would reify Cynicism, rendering it inert, as it marginalized the rebellious impulse, the situated and crafty playfulness, the devious improvisation that distinguished it from all other philosophies. Only once these practices had been secured, interpreted, and codified could they become the hallmark, the inflexible imprint of Cynic tradition. The construction of a Cynic tradition would, in effect, be the death of Cynicism. (p.24)

Furthermore, Allen argues, the barrel in which Diogenes lived might be understood as a symbolic representation of the idea that one lives in constant contingency and should then improvise in accordance with each particular context, and by doing so, reinforce the nature of a ‘devious cynicism: unprincipled and doggedly subversive’ (Allen, 2020. p. 25).

Interestingly, the persistence of elements related to improvisation in tango as a dance of our time has been considered as a tool for resistance and a potential opportunity for rebelliousness as argued by Erin Manning in his book *Politics of touch, sense, movement, sovereignty* (2007), as well as by Kathy Davis (2015), Marta Savigliano (1995) and Margaret Westergard (2016). I will expand this idea when discussing the potential remaining elements of the rebellious impulse of early tangos in the tango movement of nowadays, in the later stages of this chapter.

In direct connection with this aspect of improvisation, the authors above argue that the disruptive potential of this feature is accentuated by the fact that tango implies a full compromise from the body, highlighted by the close connection between the couple. Liska (2014) claims that the proximity of the bodies was the focal point of most of the early critics of this tango from the origins, and it was the element that, by being socially outrageous, empowered its protagonists. Borges (2016) established a poetic parallelism between the dance itself and a knife fight, both implying bodily risks and the prospect of honour, pride, and self-respect. This aspect stresses another feature of early tango, the courage and bravery of those ‘*compadritos*’ that Borges admired so explicitly.

Ancient cynicism as a philosophy was based in a bodily commitment to a style of life. Mazella (2007) states,

…a philosopher must continually and publicly demonstrate his willingness to test himself and all around him, risking scandal or even death by his very public words and deeds (p. 29)

It was through the bodily performances, as Allen (2020) argues, that Diogenes was able to question the status quo. There were practical and physical demonstrations in which he aimed to criticise norms and conventions. Those acts implied a level of risk, of marginalisation, ridicule, and rejection by his contemporaries. But the very act of undertaking them was, as Stanley argues (2012), the statement of freedom and independence.

Such marginalization did indeed happen in the early stages of tango (Lamas and Binda, 2008) as part of an accusation of tango as rude, explicitly indecent, and obscene. Firstly, because of openly performing a dance with sexual connotation, this reinforced the location in which those tangos arguably first developed. The sexuality that early tangos displayed, according to Sabá (2015) was never approved as a public performative act. Guy (1995) explores the discourses about sex and prostitution in Buenos Aires at that time and affirms that most of the regulations and public discourses then were trying to restrain the performing of sexual activities to the space of the private. Tango was from the beginning a public demonstration and an openly and shared performed activity, particularly in those first few years and as such may be considered as a scandalous act. Pujol (1999) argues that by contrast, tango experienced a transformation in the following period starting about 1917, in which it was progressively aimed for the intimacy of a private living room once the sexual connotations were diminishing, and it was possible to play it on the pianos of the houses of the upper middle classes or listened to in radios and phonographs. Tango restrained and diminished its public performative characteristic.

Regarding ancient cynicism, Allen (2020) states that,

One must live in private as if nothing remains concealed, developing the necessary inhibitions and restraints. To challenge this framework of subjugation, the Cynic opts to radicalize the idea that nothing is concealed, by acting it out. The Cynic responds to the injunction that the true life is the life that has nothing to hide, by hiding nothing. The Cynic does everything in the open, having given up the security of a home or retreat to privacy. (p. 59)

Furthermore, Allen (2020) argues that those performances are not randomly amoral but deliberately scandalous. It is worth noting that tango dancers at that time were fully aware of the level of scandal that some of its movements may have produced. As shown with the example of ‘Milonga del Baldomero’, the references against the sacred prohibition of incest are quite explicit.

In this regard, the version of the cynic that may adapt best to the elements of early tango culture is indeed the one present in the perspective of his detractors, as Shea (2010) describes,

The image of the scoundrel Cynic, without principles or morals. Rude, obscene, and disruptive, he tramples carelessly on all that humanity deems precious, scorning in his self-proclaimed freedom the dignity of human life. (p. 20)

Finally, it is interesting to note the value of the individual over the collective in early tango manifestations. Borges praises the figure of the ‘*compadrito*’ as one who may encounter others, but he is fundamentally a lone character, without attachment or compromise. Regardless of being a dance of two, the members of the tango world at that time were usually assumed to have no connection with others, as commented on by Azzi (1991). This aspect resembles once again a feature of ancient cynicism, with singular figures impersonating cynicism. Diogenes, however, drew others into their protest, and indeed situated himself in one of the busiest parts of Athens.

Tango in its origins, as discussed by historians (Pujol, 1999; Lamas and Binda, 2008; Varela, 2016) or described in a mythical construction as Borges (2016), presents certain features that could imply a rebellious and defiant spirit, in tension with the moral values of that time, in connection with the ancient cynicism of Diogenes. There is, however, one particular version of ancient cynicism that could bring a new perspective in the analysis of tango in its origins and it will be explored in the following pages.

*Tango explored through a specific version of ancient cynicism: the poorest strata in Roman times.*

There is one precise variant of ancient cynicism that I consider particularly useful to analyse and rethink tango, not only tango in its origins but also the impact that the perception of such period in tango history provoked in the following historical transformations and even in the understanding of tango nowadays. It is claimed that during the Roman Empire, ancient cynicism became a kind of popular philosophy, especially among the lowest strata in society, the dissatisfied, and marginalized. These cynics praised a simple life and challenged the codes of their times.

In Shea’s analysis (2010),

The Roman Empire, as the emperor Julian was quick to point out, was plagued by wandering troupes of men comprising largely members from the poorer strata of society who adopted Cynicism as popular philosophy for the disenfranchised and discontented. They could be seen begging at crossroads or preaching their Cynic gospel of simplicity and defiance on street corners. These Cynic troupes transformed the highly individualistic Cynicism of a Diogenes into a collective movement that bore only a vague resemblance, of dress and rhetoric, to the early Cynics. (p. 5)

Indeed, the tango movement, despite focusing on the importance of the individual at the level of its lyrics, was effectively a cultural expression of a vast group. In its origins, those who took part in tango culture were among the socially excluded and rejected. But more importantly, the reconstruction that we can nowadays make (and tango historians have been doing ever since) about tango in its origins was mainly due to the chronicles of those who initially condemned it. Lamas and Binda (2008) utilised police records, testimonies from ambassadors, articles in newspapers in order to research into the history of the first tango gatherings. The descriptions of those first tango dances were not the result of the statements of its protagonist but instead reflected the views of the middle and upper classes who initially attacked it. Those biased records were crucial to the qualification of tango of that age as underdeveloped, primitive, and vulgar, as well as its criticisms as an unrefined art form and morally dangerous that only later on, when accepted by the elites, was supposed to acquire sophistication and style, as suggested in the historical accounts of Tallón (1964), Carella (1956) or Gobello (1999).

In parallel, the version that we have about the cynic movement as a popular philosophy in the Roman Empire is, in similar terms, exclusively reported by the ones who considered it as a degeneration of its ancient roots. Krueger in his article ‘The bawdy and society: The shamelessness of Diogenes in Roman Imperial Culture’ (1996) points out that among certain members of the Roman elite, there were attempts to praise Diogenes for his poverty and ascetism, but under the stress of a ‘obscenity- free cynicism, largely independent of the traditions of the shameless Diogenes’ (p.229) that was so powerful among those poor troupes who were preaching their own cynic conception.

Billerberck (1996) focuses on the account of this popular cynic movement by the interest that Julian, Roman Emperor between 361 to 363 CE, showed about them. Julian’s admiration for ancient cynicism is a sanitised one, praising humility, simplicity and bravery but stating that dignity and decorum were fundamental values in his society, and accordingly, the acts of indecency and rudeness are removed from his version. Julian’s version, according to Billerberck, is in fact presented in contraposition to the shameful display of street cynics. He states,

The lively interest that Julian took in true Cynicism and the attacks that he launched against the sham Cynics are displayed in two speeches composed in Constantinople during the year 362. Both works seem to have been prompted by the populistic activities of street philosophers whose possibly subversive influence on soldiers in camp and on the lower-class population the emperor could hardly have ignored. (p. 217)

As such, Julian pretends to retain dignity for Diogenes’ cynicism by the rejection of its popular movement in the masses, modifying and muting some of its basic features, making it acceptable for the Roman elite. However, as Allen argues, this deformation of cynic characteristics, in parallel with the rejection of its manifestations among the masses, was a process of co-option that removed its scandals and rebelliousness.

Allen (2020) states,

[Julian] …devoted some time to the study of Cynicism, goaded by the influence street Cynics were having on his soldiers and lower levels of the citizenry. He set out to challenge these bawdy imitators, who were, as he put it, ‘moving from city to city or camp to camp and insulting the rich and prominent in all such places while associating with society’s dregs.’ In this apparently debased, descendant form, Cynicism was clearly still a going concern. (p. 83)

Julian’s version of cynicism, in direct contrast with the one from the streets, had to be reputable and restrained in its outbursts, one that, for instance, implied the courage to speak the truth but without the offenses and foul language, one that could be practiced at home, individually. Furthermore, it was an understanding of cynicism that diminished the relevance of the body over the soul. The body had, then, to be trained to obey the higher demands of the soul and restrict its appetites rather than becoming a tool to express and manifest discontent and criticism as it happened in the popular cynic movement among the lowest classes of his time.

Allen (2020) states,

Those who find themselves still tied to the body— and here we must insert the street Cynics Julian deplores— are by this definition alone, uneducated. The body distracts them, and ensures they remain ‘subject to false opinion instead of truth’. ‘Rapacious and depraved and no better than any one of the brute beasts,’ these inner- city outcasts have, by this account, entirely misunderstood the purpose of Cynic philosophy. (p. 85)

Julian’s case shows, according to Allen, how important it was to first establish a distance from street cynicism, in order to be able to recreate a respectable version of it.

Interestingly, the process by which this early tango, originally rejected by the elites, was finally accepted by a wider audience implied an inhibition to some of the most scandalous movements of the dance. Liska (2014) argues that the there was a commitment by the upper classes to limit the movements that were acceptable on the dance floor, against those that became obsolete due to their indecency. Furthermore, Matamoro (1969) claims that the tango co-option transformed it into a cultural product that could be listened to instead of danced. More tangos, from 1917 onwards, were composed with the aim to be reproduced in houses and cafes, rather than in dance halls (and definitely not brothels). The process of distancing tango-cancion from its previous historical stage was done by rejecting some of its defining elements, by accusing and reproaching its sinful and uneducated components.

However, there is a second process by which the following period of tango distanced itself from the early stage. By the time the actors of that previous scandalous style of tango were finally considered extinct, and when there was apparently no more tango in brothels and no ‘*compadritos*’ wandering the city, this early tango becomes idealised, praised with melancholia and nostalgia as an admirable picturesque past. This was a process in which Borges himself was an actor, when he expressed appreciation for the early tango characters, its courage, independence, and rough character. Those characters described by Borges were praised in the scandal of their style of dance, insofar that that style was actually fully extinguished and does not represent any longer a potential threat to the moral conventions. This is, I argue, the same process that tango songs from the *tango-cancion* period incorporate when referring to the so-called authentic tango from the past to the idealised pure neighbourhoods lost in time, to the supposed bravery and freedom of old tango dancers, by then inexistant. It is this mechanism of praising an idealised object, only as long as this object is dead and irrecuperable, that reinforces the elements of modern cynicism, I claim, present in the *‘tango-canción’* period*.*

# Chapter 11. Tango in its origins as a distortion: an exotic merchandise of passion and danger.

As previously stated, tango in its origins was transformed, sanitized, and made decent by the local elites in their attempt to co-opt that popular cultural expression and make it respectable and palatable for the moral codes of the time. In this process, scandalous movements were removed, the social dances left the suburbs and the brothels, and it moved into elegant dance halls of the city centre or was finally allowed into the houses of the middle and upper classes. The explicitly sexual lyrics were tamed, and the scandalous characters replaced by sad narrators, powerless against the misfortunes of their lives and falling loves.

This transformation implied that many writers studying tango as a phenomenon, rejected its past as primitive and underdeveloped, meanwhile others idealised it, as long as it was definitely extinct. The latter position was the one that tango lyrics assumed about its own past, remembering with melancholy the times when ‘*compadritos*’ were tough and brave. Such bravery was not described as morally questionable but instead came to represent a period of authenticity, when their partners were humble and naïve, or proud and loyal or when the city and its inhabitants had not yet become a place of moral decay. This decay was, then, not associated with tango’s early period, but instead with the moment in which tango in its origins was co-opted and transformed, allowing artificiality, falsehood, and hypocrisy to emerge. ‘Malevaje’, written by Discépolo in 1928 and analysed in Part I of this thesis, exemplifies this analysis: the song describes a ‘*malevo*’ (synonym of ‘*compadrito*’) that confesses that he had lost his courage because of a woman who dumped him. He is no longer the same rough character that once was and has replaced his confidence by singing and crying his depression and his helplessness to whomever wants to hear him complain.

This transition, or deformation of tango in its origins could be explained, however, from another point of view, one admirably expressed by Marta Savigliano in her influential book *Tango and the political economy of passion* (1995). She states that tango became a commercial commodity as a result of a cultural appropriation made by Europe, resulting in a stylistic reification that reconfigured its scandalous and bold elements into an exotic and erotic product of merchandise. She introduces the idea of the political economy of passion which meant that tango played a key role in satisfying the needs from the neo-colonialists of the beginning of the twentieth century of cultural products that were both presented as dangerous and simultaneously disciplined in order to form part of their own cultural activities.

According to her analysis, tango was appropriated as an exotic cultural product, altered to fulfil the dreams of the Europeans, who manipulated the defining characteristics of the early tango, removing in fact their defiant elements, making it decent while at the same time they kept a discourse that allowed tango to be remembered as a wild and dangerous dance, attractive for middle class Europeans.

Andrea Matallana, in her book *El tango entre dos Americas: representaciones en Estados Unidos durante las primeras décadas del siglo XX* [Tango between the two Americas: its representations in United States during the first decades of the twentieth century] (2016) expands Savigliano’s analysis to the United States exploring the depiction of tango in American news. She argues that there was a dual process by which tango was presented as morally dangerous to young American women, viewed as possible victims of the treacherous seduction of Argentine tango dancers, while, in parallel, there was a reshaping of some of tango’s rough elements and a systematic fetishization of it as a commercial product. Matallama (2016) points out how the ‘tango fever’ in the first decades of the twentieth century promoted the industries of tango shoes, tango clothing (there was, according to her accounts, a red tango, popular among the middle and upper classes in America) and, naturally, professional tango teachers, dance schools, etc.

Karoline Gritzner (2017) argues that there was a double discourse that transformed tango, making it more in tune with the moral codes of the time, while at the same time reinforcing a speech of wildness and danger related to tango were key figures of the incorporation of tango as a successful commercial product of globalising capitalism of nowadays. Gritzner (2017) states,

Argentine tango has become a globalised commercial phenomenon over the past few decades. Ballroom dancing has seen a rise in popularity because of TV dance shows such as *Strictly Come Dancing* in the UK and internationally. There is a global tango industry which sells products (such as tango clothing, shoes, and other accessories) as well as experiences (tango tours in Buenos Aires, tango vacations, group classes and private classes with renowned maestros who offer their services at international tango festivals, etc.). Like other forms of the culture industry, tango exists under the domination of capitalism. The tango industry manufactures a product, an idea, an image and above all an experience (the experience of the exotic, the erotic, the seductive and culturally different). The ‘tango experience’ is carefully constructed, packaged, and marketed, producing an image that is desired, a product that sells. (p. 50)

Kathy Davis, in her essay *Dancing tango: passionate encounters in a globalizing world* (2015) argues that tango represents an emotional capital that fulfils the needs and imagination of Europeans or Americans colonizers in their quest for an exotic culture practice ‘of the other’.

There is here, then, a double process that I consider fundamental for understanding tango in relation to modern cynicism. On one hand, Argentine tango, according to Savigliano, (1995), Liska (2014), Davis (2015), Matallana (2016) and Gritzner (2017), has suffered a mutation from its original versions, softening its scandalous elements and making it more acceptable for the dominant moral standards. On the other hand, however, a discourse about its wild nature remained as part of a commercial strategy, holding on to its sinful past in concordance with the desires and imaginations of white Europeans and Americans, and the need for their consumption of exotic cultural products. This hypocritical tension, regardless of whether tango in its origins was properly scandalous and rebellious as it was later on presented to be, creates the ground for modern cynicism to emerge within the context of tango. Tango lyrics from the following period seem to acknowledge this contradiction, admitting that tango’s identity was deformed by the seductions of money and fame. The stories of ‘*la milonguita’* respond to this confession: as with tango, she was seduced by the temptations of money and fame, an improvement of social status, rejecting by doing so, her true identity and ending up swallowed by falsehood, hypocrisy, and superficial values.

*Elements in tango of scandal, rebelliousness, and revolt that persisted beyond tango transformations, deformations, and the process of co-option by local and foreign elites.*

According to Savigliano (1995), Davis (2015) and Gritzner (2017), tango experienced a process of cultural commercial commodification, adapting it to the needs of global capitalism. Those same authors, however, claim that some elements in tango as a dance, in particular in connection with the importance of improvisation, the encounter with an unknown other, and the power of the embrace, allows the possibility of resistance, transgression and rebelliousness towards some of the values of the dominant discourse that co-opted this cultural expression. Tango dance, with the potential transformative force of a fully embodied expression, may have retained some elements of defiance that were arguably present in its early stages. I will build on their work, exploring the different arguments that each of those scholars claim in that respect, continuing to analyse it through the angle of ancient cynicism, focusing on tango’s potential rebelliousness. In my analysis, the elements of criticism and defiance will not, as arguably happens with ancient cynicism, need the inclusion of a strategy with suggestions towards reform, change or improvement. The power of tango’s insolence could remain in the sphere of criticism.

Savigliano (1995), based on her own private practice as an Argentinean migrant in America who was expected to represent a specific role of exotism and sensuality while dancing tango abroad, considers that the body immersion in the act of the embrace opens the possibility to establish an encounter with another that could deny any preconditioning norms. She claims that the gesture of the embrace and the improvised nature of the dance, opened the possibilities to rebel against the patriarchal and post-colonial order that tango was at times representing. Tango dance, as an encounter that cannot be pre-determined, could, at least in her experience, act as a movement towards decolonization, or as an exercise of resistance that transgresses some norms of the hegemonic order.

Davis (2015) argues that tango could reinforce the dominant spirit of material consumerism in which tango is just another product to be sold or bought while at the same time contradicts it and resists it by the act of social dancing. Social dancing, according to her, implies escaping from reality for as long as each song lasts, with a sense of independence and sovereignty that the improvisation in its dance provides. In Davis’ account, there are areas in tango culture that resisted codification, opportunities to participate in a tango experience without having to follow rules on how to dance and what to feel. Those openings allow each dancer a sense of freedom that is at odds with the prevalence of standardisation in most cultural product of this time.

Gritzner (2017) concurs with the previous analysis and exemplifies it by reference to cases of political or social resistance inside tango culture (such as the tango-queer movement all around the world, or examples of manifestations of protest against the political situation as in the case of Turkey by a flash mob of tango dancers). She argues that dancing tango implies the opportunity to resist a blind obedience to norms, social prescriptions, and moral codes, at least in the precise moment of the dance. According to Gritzner, the ‘tango moment’ enacts in the body a full immersion into a present without worrying about the past or perspectives to the future. As such, she claims, contradicts the logic of global capitalism. Gritzner (2017) states,

Together with my dance partner I distance myself from the contingency of daily life. I engage in a precarious experience of alterity which emancipates me from where I am and who I appear to be (when I don’t dance). We find each other in a codified social environment in order to lose ourselves and escape reality. For me, that’s where tango’s contradictory power of resistance comes from. (p. 53)

According to this understanding of dancing tango as a potentially disruptive force within the dominant norms of a society, the stress is definitely put on the experience of the body itself. The improvised nature of tango movements, without choreographies or already designed patterns of steps, arguably allows a sense of liberation that annuls any possible prediction of how the dance may evolve. This sensation is reinforced by the relevance of the embrace, an encounter with another which challenges the way in which each dancer perceives themselves, opening more possibilities in the disturbance of the self. According to Savigliano, Davis and Gritzner, those elements which were distinctive features from the early tango, survived the process of reification that tango experienced during the late 1910s and early 1920s.

Furthermore, Davis and Gritzner draw upon the work of Erin Manning, particularly on the readings of her influential book *Politics of touch: sense, movement, sovereignty* (2007). In that work, Manning argues that the encounters between bodies and the act of touching may create opportunities of instability, misunderstandings and disagreements that could encourage movements of social and political transgression. A precondition for rebelliousness, she argues, is a distrust in the dominant discourses or truth, a doubt towards what is normally considered sacred, at least in Western societies.

As Manning (2007) states,

The proposition is that touch -every act of reaching toward- enables the creation of worlds. This production is relational. I reach out to touch you in order to invent a relation that will, in turn, invent me. (p. xv)

One of the chapters of her book directly addresses the case of Argentine Tango. She recognises that tango culture on one hand reinforces the status quo of national identity, of gender stereotype but on the other hand opens the possibility to contravene and destabilise those same social and moral grounds.

In Manning’s words (2007),

This play between transgression and cohesion takes place in the weaving of tango’s complex webs, webs entwined around tango’s implicit desire to communicate, through the body, with another (…) It does so through micro perceptual movements initiated through improvisation and spontaneity that require an adequate response yet suggests, always, the possibility of subverting the expected. (p. 3)

The improvised nature of this dance, according to her, and the fact that such improvisation impacts directly in another, not only opens possibilities but as well acts as a defiant movement towards our previous conceptions of the self. Manning (2007) asserts,

[The embrace, the act of touching] is always, in some sense, a violence: it is violence to my subjectivity, to the idea that I am One (…) To touch is to conceive of a simultaneity that requires the courage to face the in-between. When I touch you, I reach toward that which I cannot yet define, a worlding of our own creation. (p. 13)

In that sense, the transformative power of tango as a dance, according to these authors, affects the individuals and their perception of self-identity, the other (the dance partner) and, more importantly, the social context as long as this dance is eminently performed in social environments.

These surviving elements of defiance and transgression in tango as a dance are, in my understanding, just a possibility out of so many everyday examples in which social dancing tango only strengthens its codified identity as an erotised, exotic, and simultaneously socially respected dance. During most of its history, at least from 1917 onward, its performativity as a dance fortified its characteristics as a commercial product and, furthermore, its identity as a representative of a predetermined national identity, while danced in Argentina or abroad. In that sense, Manning (2007) states,

Of course, not all tango appreciated this challenge. Politics is never simple or straightforward. At its most common, tango replays the drudgery of the defined roles of self and other, relishing the segregation of sameness. But even then, tango demands a response, a response that can never be accurately predicted (p. 17)

Ana Cara (2009) studies how Argentinean tango dancers have recently responded to the merchandised passionate tango that is sold as a tourist attraction in Argentina and abroad. She establishes a distinction between tango dances on stage, mostly by professional dancers on one hand, and the one that is practiced by social dancers on local dance floors. The former strongly reproduces the fetichism of tango as an exportable exotic and sensual product, while the latter resists such codification with subtle signs of subversion directed toward to that representation.

I fully concur with the criticism towards tango as a fetishist commercial export, as suggested by Savigliano (1995) and I agree with Cara (2009) who argues that there are movements in tango of today that resist such a stereotypical mercantile version of it. I have, however, more doubts about the proportions of the potential rebelliousness in tango, and the idea that some of those elements of insurrection have survived until now. This is in part due to my own doubts about the radicalism of early tangos. As stated, I argue that this scandalous portrayal of tango is at least partially a constructed myth. Furthermore, I suspect that the elements of disruption (not as radical as presented by Borges, for instance) have become wrapped in a complicated discourse which transformed those elements in a melancholic and nostalgic speech, that at times reinforced the modern cynicism present in the lyrics of the following period.

Interestingly, the tension between commercialization, standardization and an impulse towards improvisation that resists such reification is present in the way in which tango is being taught nowadays. The process of learning tango combines a narrative in which a proper technique should be acquired, following the etiquette of tango halls and with the need of the expertise of professional tango teachers, courses online, seminars and so on meanwhile, at the same time, there is an emphasis on learning by risking your own body into the dance floor, by going through the experience of successive failures in order to train your abilities in defining your own style. This aspect of rejection of any form of academicism in the process of learning tango, that coexists with tango involvement into global capitalism, by learning tango in the streets instead of in the dance schools, represents another point in which tango portrays a rejection toward traditional education and its institutions. Tango’s perception on education will be, accordingly, the focus point of the following section.

# **Part V. Tango, cynicism, and education.**

*Introduction.*

As analysed in the previous pages of this thesis, tango culture has been transformed and modified during its history and, accordingly, presented varied features that were explored here through the lens of ancient and modern cynicism. This was done in order to reconsider, rethink and reconceptualise some of its most striking features. Tango as a genre was never a codified style and never had defined rules or norms on the shape or content of its lyrics. Accordingly, there were in tango songs multiple coexisting ideas, metaphors, messages, or conceptualizations and descriptions of the world that cannot be unified under one exclusive corpus of definitions. However, this thesis aims to reflect upon the peculiar way in which pessimism, disenchantment, and disillusion manifested in some of tango’s most iconic lyrics between 1917 and 1955, and how those same elements could be connected with a previous period in tango history, in its origins, in which tango is described as a more defiant and scandalous artistic expression.

The process by which the cheerful rebelliousness of early tangos gave place to an apathetic negativity in the period of tango-cancion took the shape of a systematic melancholia in tango lyrics, remembering a lost idealised period of authenticity, innocence and praised bravery which explains, by contrast, the sadness and defeatism in the analysis of the present. The explicit reference to an idealised past has been understood very differently, of course, by those who have analysed tango as a moralist expression that forged a set of values that tango songs were hoping to bring back into their contemporary society (Matamoro, 1969; Salessi, 1991; Armus, 2002; Saikin, 2004; Feldman, 2006; Liska, 2014; Varela, 2005, 2016). In this thesis, the melancholic discourse was read differently, as an expression of modern cynicism, a speech about a utopia that is positive in appearance but is actually used to condemn the present situation and disregard any specific form of action towards making a change for the future. The idealised past described in tangos is, by self-definition, impossible to bring back and accordingly its memory creates only disenchantment and disappointment.

In the present chapter, this analysis will be applied to the ways in which several tango lyrics portray the idea of education, the idea of being educated and the institutions of education. Education as a topic, even in its broadest sense, was not, however, central in tango lyrics. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace different elements that repetitively appeared in tango songs that refer to education as a broad concept, to the values and conduct of so-called educated people, and to the evaluation of the alternatives to reach, if possible, valid, and useful knowledge. Those elements are going to be the focus point of this chapter.

To begin with, in Chapter 12 I will firstly explore the way in which tango lyrics dismiss the existing formal educational system, rejecting its institutions. The narrator of tango songs tends to despise those characters with formal academic knowledge. Furthermore, I will discuss how this negativity implies a hidden utopic message of redemption and an idealised perception of education in the broad sense. Both of these operations are cynical, as I will explore below. Those utopic expectations will become central to my understanding of tango as a modern cynical expression.

I will then analyse how tangos conceptualise the possibility of attaining knowledge as such. I argue that tangos serve to relativise conceptions of truth, stating, for instance, that everything in the world and its inhabitants is an act or an illusion, an ephemeral artifice that tricks and confuses tango characters. The sense of confusion and the suggestion of a more widespread systematic ignorance is predominant in its lyrics.

To conclude Chapter 12, I will introduce the only valid process of learning that tangos may occasionally refer to: the educational experience of life, where the process of personal suffering, and the experience of individual disappointment are presented as the exclusive accepted sources of learning. The only valid education, several tangos suggest, is the learning in the streets. Interestingly, this discourse is usually dominant in the way tango is taught as a dance and in the perception of tango dancers about their own personal process of learning the dance.

In Chapter 13, I will discuss the challenge that tango lyrics presented to the newly developed mass educational system pioneered by the Argentinean government from the first decades of the twentieth century and the specific relation between tango culture and the educational institutions, analysing the moments in which features of tango were censored, or accused of damaging the education of the young generations of that time.

The study of tango culture and education has not been common among academics, historians, and scholars. Specific literature available in this area is virtually non-existent. There are, however, three notable exceptions that will constitute a constant reference in this chapter. Antonio García Olivares published in 2003 a paper called “La Filosofía de los Cantes Desgarrados: una Epistemología Popular” [The Philosophy of Torn Apart Musical Genres: A Popular Epistemology]. In this paper, Olivares (2003) analyses metaphors in tango lyrics in order to discuss how tangos describe concepts of truth, the possibility for accessing that truth, and the invalid and valid ways in which that knowledge may be reached. His contributions will be fundamental to the discussion of the last two sections in Chapter 12.

A second reference for this analysis is a section of a book by Julian Barsky, “El Tango y las instituciones: de olvidos, censuras y reivindicaciones” [Tango and the institutions: oblivion, censorship, and recognitions], published in 2016. In this chapter, Barsky (2016) explores the relation between tango culture and the institutions of education in Argentina during the twentieth century. His analysis does not explore the ways in which tangos refer to education but instead analyses the presence of tangos in the educational system, in the national curricula. He argues that, despite the claim that tangos are a national symbol of Argentinean identity, they are almost completely absent in every stage in the Argentinean educational system (neither present in the curricula of primary and secondary school nor as an object of study in any career of social sciences at the multiple universities of the country). In parallel, he studies the educational formation of some of the most iconic tango figures and discusses the tension between a process of unification of identity through public, national, and compulsory education, and the cultural expressions of a recently arrived mass of immigrants that put into tango songs their own social conflicts of adaptation to a new home. His analysis will be further discussed in Chapter 13.

In third place, Hector Luis Muñoz’s paper “Cafetín de Buenos Aires, la ‘escuela de todas las cosas’ con su pedagogía aplicada: una aproximación de Discépolo a Rousseau” [Café from Buenos Aires, The school of everything with its practical pedagogy: an approximation between Discépolo and Rousseau], published in 2018, states that Discépolo’s lyrics seem to condemn traditional schooling while at the same time hoping for an utopic education based on non-formal education, or so-called street learning. Muñoz’s arguments (2018) will be discussed in the first section of Chapter 12.

Finally, and in relation to the perspective on cynicism and education, I will draw heavily upon the work of Allen (2020), due to his focused analyses on the ways in which cynicism, as a complex term and through its transformations across its history, has potential to express a perspective on education in a broad sense. Furthermore, I will examine his argument concerning how contemporary criticisms of education are typically not straightforwardly disapproving but instead almost always employ a redemptive reading. According to Allen, this insistent positivity placed in the promises of educational fulfilment (and when education is most in doubt), constitutes an implicit, or systematic form of hypocrisy that could be read as a form of modern cynicism. This reading will be fundamental in my own analysis on how tango portrays education.

# Chapter 12. Tango’s criticism towards education.

As stated in Parts I and III of this thesis, tango lyrics from the ‘*tango-canción’* period tend to show distrust towards society and its institutions. The characters in tango songs are frustrated, disappointed and hold a pessimistic perception of others as well as a disbelief about the dominant moral values of their time. Tango’s depiction of educational institutions and of the value and purpose of being formally educated, does not escape this logic.

Enrique Santos Discépolo provides in the verses of his iconic lyrics some explicit examples. In “Que sapa, señor”, written in 1931, he states,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Ya nadie comprende | Nobody understands anymore, |
| si hay que ir al colegio | if it is worth going to schools, |
| o habrá que cerrarlos | or if it should be better to close them |
| para mejorar. | in order to improve. |

This song describes in the preceding verses how the world became mad, surrounded by chaos in which everyone betrays each other and, remarkably, with the above quoted verses the lyric ends. Galasso (1981) argued that Discépolo’s distrust towards formal education was probably triggered by his own personal experience, as he had abandoned formal schooling in order to follow a career as a comedian and street actor. In an interview, Discépolo once stated,

Everything that I didn’t learn at school, I did it in the streets, in my own life. The philosophy that shows off in my tangos were learned in the wandering around, in life, in those bohemian years of my youth. (Quoted by Galasso, 1981, p. 14, m.t)

Another example of Discépolo’s criticism of education can be found in the already analysed verses of “Cambalache”, written in 1934.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Hoy resulta que es lo mismo | Today it is the same |
| ser derecho que traidor! | to be decent or a traitor! |
| Ignorante, sabio, chorro, | To be an ignorant, a wise man, a pickpocket, |
| generoso o estafador! | a generous person or a swindler! |
| Todo es igual! Nada es mejor! | All is the same! Nothing is better! |
| Lo mismo un burro | They are the same, an ignorant ass |
| que un gran profesor. | and a great professor. |

In these verses, it is possible to perceive a moral relativisation applied to the value of education and on the importance of acquiring formal knowledge. This sceptical disbelief of the transformative power of education as a potential solution for contemporary problems was indeed one of the aspects that made Discépolo so controversial at his time (Galasso, 1981). In remarkably similar terms, in their discussion of modern cynicism Arnett and Arneson (1999), Hiley (2006) and Caldwell (2006) figure cynicism as a threat, as an excess of distrust that could damage the ways in which Western societies value the importance of formal education and rational thinking. This version of cynic disenchantment is further displayed in Discépolo’s lyrics which direct criticism beyond the current system of education to an attack on the possibility of thinking rationally, or logically, in contemporary society. In “Esta noche me emborracho” written in 1928, the character claims that thinking is painful and useless and instead, presents the loss of reason by getting drunk as the only alternative. In “Que vachaché” from 1926, the narrator warns the listener that there are no valid standing points “What can you do? Judgement is dead”.

Formal intelligence, and accordingly, formal education, is usually associated with the acquisition of superfluous and practically useless knowledge. The tango characters who are depicted as educated in formal institutions are the ones who show off their expertise in rational thinking or academicism, the *‘ñiños bien’* [the good boys]. They are criticised in tango song as being completely ignorant of everything that in the logic of those tangos is perceived as worth learning. Even more, those cultured *‘ñiños bien’* are accused at times as holding in their knowledge just tools for trickery and deception. García Olivares (2003) analyses tangos from the ‘*tango-canción’* period and concludes that academic knowledge and its scientific approach is frequently dismissed in tango lyrics. For instance, García Olivares (2003) references the song “Vamos, che!”, written by Peyrano and Boedo[[37]](#footnote-37) whose verses state,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| …pinchá tu nube de filosofía | Get rid of your philosophical cloud, |
| llená tus venas de niebla y hollín (…) | fill you veins with fog and dust (…) |
| Son los años y no la universidad | The years passing by, and not the university, |
| los que otorgan el diploma de doctor | are the ones providing the title of Doctor, |
| los que me hacen mas sabio que tu ley. | the ones who make me wiser than your laws. |

García Olivares (2003) argues that in several tango songs abstract knowledge is presented as pointless, and as only having the aim of providing status among peers in a system designed by the upper class. He references “El Algebrista” [the algebraist], arguably written by Enzo Gentile in 1954 as an example of that idea. In its verses it says,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Algebrista, | Algebriast, |
| te volviste refinado hasta la esencia | Even your essence became genteel. |
| oligarca de la ciencia | Oligarch of the science |
| matemático bacan (…) | posh mathematician (…) |
| Puede que algun día | It may happen, that one day, |
| tanta cáscara aburrida | so much of this boring shell, |
| te llegue a cansar al fin. | made you feel tired at the end. |

There is, however, another aspect in this critical approach of tango lyrics towards education that goes beyond simple negativity before the presence of the educated and that indeed connects with a deeper understanding of modern cynicism. I argue that in tango’s conception, the dismissal of formal education hides a utopic speech in which education can be redeemed. Such a version of an ideal form of education lays, at times, in an undefined past. For instance, Discépolo’s criticism directed towards education tends to reinforce the importance of a particularly negative present and, by omission, it contrapositions itself to a better version of education set in the past. It is possible to perceive this in the previous examples when considering the relevance of the temporal signs of the terms “hoy / today” and “ya / anymore” as initial words in each stanza of “Cambalache” and “Que sapa, señor”.

In that respect, it is particularly interesting to consider the analysis of Muñoz (2018) who argues that in Discépolo’s lyrics there is, despite a superficial criticism, a conception of education as a fundamental element in the path towards ethical improvement, for the individual and for the society. Muñoz’s analysis (2018) is part of the compilation of essays under the name of *Escepticismo ético y la esperanza en la obra de Enrique Santos Discépolo* [Ethical scepticism and hope in Enrique Santos Discépolo’s oeuvre] (2018) in which several authors explore Discépolo’s songs as a discourse that, while spreading a message of scepticism and pessimism, simultaneously holds an implicit message of hope (I will return to this book and expand its ideas in the Afterword). In Muñoz’s case (2018), he focuses on Discépolo’s perspective on education, arguing that, behind an explicit criticism directed towards the educational system of nowadays, there is a hope in a future in which a more authentic form of education may emerge, one capable of improving social life. Muñoz (2018) mainly analyses the lyric of “Cafetín de Buenos Aires” [Little Café in Buenos Aires], one of the last compositions of Discépolo, written in 1948 in which the everyday life experiences in a café, surrounded by locals without proper cultural formation is presented as a much more valid form of learning, in contrast with institutional education. Furthermore, Muñoz (2018) establishes a comparison between Discépolo and Rousseau in their approach towards education and he states,

The thought of both [Discépolo and Rousseau] idealise the hopes of reaching a perfect society, although such an ideal is just utopic considering that the urban style of life implies an unavoidable block to those dreams. (…) [Discépolo’s] utopic way of thinking has proximity with the way in which Rousseau presents the possible solution to the problem because for both education is a crucial aspect in social transformation. (pp. 54-55, m.t)

In Muñoz analysis (2018) those similarities between Discépolo and Rousseau make them both moralists of a sort, for whom education figures as a crucial civilizing device. However, in my analysis, those same points of contact are the elements that allow a form of modern cynicism to emerge. In that respect, I draw heavily on the work of Allen (2020) in his understanding of what he calls ‘the cynicism of modern progressive educators’ (p. 139). In that regard, Allen (2020) explores the impact of Rousseau’s *Émile* and his subsequent effect on theories of education in the development of modern cynicism as we could understand it today.

Allen states,

As a mainstay of subsequent progressive thought, *Émile* helped frame what I call the cynicism of modern progressive educators and their love of education (which is an entirely different type of cynicism from that of modern conservatives just mentioned). Just like the liberal, academic cynicism discussed above, this cynicism is again hard to draw out because of its insistent positivity. It is associated with those who assume that education is underpinned by, and can return to, an essential goodness, where the practical challenge is one of removing the worst artifices of technological civilization that imprint on and unduly restrain the free development of the child. (p.139)

The defining element of modern cynicism directed towards education in tangos from the period of 1917 to 1955 is not necessarily its condemnation of the current educational system and its distrust towards its institutions, but instead the implicit utopic hopes of educational redemption that, according to the logic of a modernised society in which tango stories occur, is by definition unachievable. This is not directly analogous to the work of the progressive educator cited above, but it does trade on a similar logic of cynic positivity, a kind of sham educational utopianism.

Allen (2020) explains further the characteristics of this kind of modern hypocrisy,

The claimed effects of this healing of education will not simply be an improvement in the experience of children, but will be felt at a political level too, where better, more progressive education leads to a better and more harmonious society. Amid such educational hopes, which even in their most jaded form still rely on a basic refusal to entertain doubt about the mission of education, the cynicism of educationalists, of those who still believe in education, is deep set. This insistence on principle (implied if not stated) that education is, at core, naturally good once it is freed from the shackles of didactic teaching and paternalism, is the origin of the positive (but duplicitous) cynicism of educators who respond to the traumas of modernity by perpetuating a myth of educational redemption. (pp. 139-140)

In Muñoz’s account (2018), Discépolo’s lyrics reject formal education, at least in its so-described decadent shape, but implicitly hopes for an alternative model of education, one that is never properly defined but may be found in the memories of a nostalgic past, or in the context of the streets and the toughness of direct experience in life. Such an ambivalent conception of education, both critical to the current educational system and utopic in principle, I argue, can be extrapolated to tangos in the tango-cancion period, as I will explore in the following section.

*The concept of truth according to tango songs.*

As stated in Parts I and III, tango lyrics from the tango-cancion period express, in the voice of its narrators, a sense of systematic distrust towards the society and the others. Tango characters confess their misfortunes to the audience, based on the experience of being victims of the deception of partners and friends, of being cheated and tricked in the past. The fatalism in this repeated tango story is based on two conceptions of knowledge and truth. Firstly, characters are never able to understand how the world and its people work and think prior to their failures. There is a constant sense of confusion and ignorance among tango protagonists. This idea is expressed, for example, by the use of a recurrent metaphor of a fog that does not allow the characters to see the external reality as it is. This reference is reinforced by complementary images of a faded light and a broken or missing lamp. Secondly, the idea of the truth being relative is never universalised. Each narrator seems to present their stories as a personal confession on how they perceive the events of their life and there is never an attempt to universalise conclusions.

Crisafio (2003) references several examples in which the fog is not only a repeated background context in tango songs but also a crucial feature and he argues that it represents the idea that nobody knows, and nobody would be able to ever know in tango’s conceptions. The characters live in a constant sense of confusion and uncertainty. The sense of the fog and the impossibility of reaching the truth is frequently exacerbated by the idea that the attempts to understand are constantly weakened by the interference of the past, and the way in which deformed memories distort the perception of the present. That is, for example, the case in “Nieblas del Riachuelo” [Fog from the river] written in 1937 by Enrique Cadícamo in which its verses say that “the fog in the river is grappled to memories” or in “Una cancion en la niebla” [One song in the fog] by Cátulo Castillo in 1951 which says “the fog of the night punishes us with the grey distance between us and our reminiscences”. The use of fog as an environment that reinforces the sense of ignorance and confusion is occasionally replaced by references to dark nights or even weak lights. This idea extends beyond the year 1955, and it can be found again in a more recent tango “El ultimo Farol” [The last lantern] written by the same composer, Cátulo Castillo, in 1969 in which the narrator sings,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Tan alta la ciudad | The city is so tall, |
| que nos dejó sin sol | that left us without a sun, |
| que nos tapó la estrella | it blocked the shining star |
| del ultimo farol. | of the last lantern. |

It is, in this lyric and in the ones referencing the fog, the big and modern city is to blame for the sense of inevitable uncertainty, for the lack of clarity. It provides opportunities for deception and disguise. Discépolo presents multiple examples in which his protagonists seem to live in constant confusion. It is the case of songs already analysed in Part I, as “Chorra”; “Esta noche me emborracho”; “Malevaje”; “Soy un arlequín”, “Desencanto”; “Condena”. In those stories, the characters blame their own ingenuity and ignorance in order to explain their disappointments in life. Their failures do not necessarily provide wisdom but instead still seem to leave them in a state of disorientation that manifests as a complete relativisation of everything, including ideas about moral standards or even about their perception of their own identity as individuals.

In that respect, García Olivares (2003) argues that in tango songs the idea of truth is never objective and unique, but instead is completely relative. The truth is subjectively constructed by each tango protagonist who never makes claims beyond their own case and, aware of the fragility of his conceptions, is constantly doubting his own affirmations. García Olivares (2003) states that this idea was so predominant in the tango ethos that appears even in recent tangos as in the case written by Juan Carlos Cáceres in 1993, “Incertidumbre” [Uncertainty] which sings,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| No me pidas más definiciones claras | Don’t ask me for clear definitions. |
| si no las hay. | There are none. |
| Que te de consejos | Don’t ask me to give you advice |
| o que te diga lo que va a pasar. | or to tell you what is going to happen. |
| Yo no sé lo del bien, lo del mal, | I don’t know what is good, what is bad, |
| cuando empieza o va a terminar. | when something begins or ends. |
| Negro y blanco, | Black and white, |
| si todo es igual. | everything is the same. |
| No preguntes, no puedo pensar. | Don’t ask me, I can’t think. |

According to García Olivares’ analysis (2003), the protagonist confesses his ignorance but goes beyond to assert that there is no external truth to be apprehended (there are no clear definitions). Additionally, in the verses ‘Black and white, everything is the same’, the total relativisation is quite explicit. García Olivares explores further the use of metaphorical colours and provides multiple examples in which grey is dominant.

This recurrent reference to uncertainty and doubt in tango characters lies, in my understanding, far from the radical uncertainty of ancient cynics as described, for example, by Bracht Branham (1996). In Branham’s account (1996), the uncertainty was strategical and pragmatical in order to reinforce the value of improvisation and adaptability but in any case, was never portrayed as a limitation, a sign of imperfection or a reason for restraint. In tangos, however, the sense of confusion and ignorance is not celebrated and praised. It is, by contrast, generally assumed as inevitable, with characters who ask questions that they know have no valid answer. I argue that a more modern version of cynic hypocrisy can be found in this simultaneous implicit assumption of the idea of the inexistence of a unique truth, or at least a truth unreachable by tango characters, with the constant sensation that, regardless of how pointless, those same characters are constantly asking questions that cannot be responded to. In that respect, Žižek (2006) references a joke that I consider exemplary of tango’s double discourse towards truth and the possibility of knowledge,

We all know the old joke about a guy looking for a lost set of keys under a streetlight: when asked where he lost them, he says, “in a dark corner.” So why is he looking for them under the light? Because the visibility is much better there. (p. 567)

*Street education: Embodied learning through personal experience.*

Whereas several tango songs repeat the discourse about the impossibility of reaching universal truths, and reject formal education and rational thinking, as argued in the previous section, other lyrics reflect on street learning as the only valid process to gain any form of knowledge.

Three characteristics stand out from this positive valuation of informal education. To begin with, the learning is directly connected with everyday experience, with the encounters of life. The wisdom some characters claim to have earned happened through the passage of time, by the repetition of failures, and the accumulation of disappointments and betrayals. As a consequence, the lessons learned, and the conclusions reached are always grim and negative. Secondly, this experience has to involve the exposure of their own body. Learning in such a way, implies, according to tangos, a certain level of risk and fragility, allowing for the chance of suffering. It is through this pain that truth is attained. Finally, this kind of learning process is granted to whoever is willing to dare to learn, considering the suffering involved in the process. It does not require any form of culture or refinement or capacity for abstraction (which, according to this tango discourse, blinds the characters with false and superfluous convictions). In that sense, representatives of the lowest stratum of society seem to be, according to many lyrics, the ones who have a better understanding of how the world works.

Interestingly, these three features may correlate with elements related to the learning process by ancient cynics, as analysed by Allen (2020). However, the results of this learning process in tango’s discourse, allows only a grim pessimism to emerge: the conclusions are that no one can be trusted, that the present is discouraging and that there is no hope of redemption for the future, in line with the stereotypical pessimism usually attributed to modern cynicism.

In relation to the connection between direct experience and the process of learning, García Olivares (2003) states that, according to tango lyrics,

The valuable truth, the truth that they [tango characters] really care about, is the result of direct observation of everything that has happened to them, and the product of their own personal experimentation of life. (p. 236, m.t)

As examples of this conception, it is worth mentioning “La escuela de la calle” [Street school] by Ravazzano Sanmartino in which a verse states, “La calle a mí me enseñó todo cuanto yo presiento” [The street taught me everything that I feel] or “Gladiolo” by Alberto Echague which says “Mi maestra fue la calle, sabia y dura consejera“ [My teacher was the street, wise and tough adviser]; Copen la banca” [Take care of it] which says “Dale gracias a la gambeta que apañaste en la experiencia” [Thank the trickery that you learned through experience] or “No la maldigas por dios” [Don’t curse her, by God’s sake] by Jorge Moreira which says “Los libros enseñan, pero hay muchas cosas que andando en la calle las vas a aprender” [Books may teach, but wandering in the streets you will learn many things]. The streets of the neighbourhood in the suburbs of the city are frequently described as the space where most relevant learning takes place.

Crisafio (2003) argues that this old neighbourhood in which the process of learning was possible is, in tango’s universe, however, almost extinct. He states that it is represented as the only place where it was possible to experience something authentic, in contraposition with the deception of the big city. For the tango character to return to that old neighbourhood, however, is not possible as they have already suffered the consequences of the modernization of the city, which devoured them in its falsehood. Another frequent location present in tango lyrics is the old café, the one that in the lyrics is remembered with nostalgia as it has already changed. It is the case, for example, of “Cafetín de Buenos Aires” [Little café from Buenos Aires] by Discépolo that says “En tu mezcla milagrosa de sabiondos y suicidas, yo aprendí filosofía, dados, timba, y la poesía cruel de no pensar mas en mí” [In your miraculous mixture of wise men and suicides, I learned philosophy, dice, gambling and the cruel poetry of not thinking about myself]; or “Café La Humedad” [Café The Humidity] written in 1968[[38]](#footnote-38) by Cacho Castaña which says “Yo simplemente te agradezco las poesías que la escuela de tus noches enseñaron a mis días” [I simply thank the poetry that the school of your nights taught me] or “Ciudadela” written by Horacio Ferrer, in 1976 which says “pa’ consultar a los turbios apóstoles del café, que allí tu verdad saqué” [To ask the dodgy apostles of the coffee shop from whom the truth I learned].

This experience, according to tango lyrics, implies the direct intervention of the body and its senses in order to reach any form of enlightenment. Crisafio (2003) states that in tango discourse,

The knowledge that surges from experience, if any, has to be intuitive, through the senses of the body. (p. 116, m.t)

Furthermore, the body has to go through the experience of pain in order to finally get some learning. In “Cuando me vaya” [When I am gone] written by Jorge Vidal in 1951 the singer states “De las cosas que la vida me enseñó, a los tropezones aprendí” [The thing that life taught me, I learned it by stumbling] or in “A golpes” [Through beatings] written by Omar Facelli in 1999 it says, for instance, “A fuerza de golpes se aprende a vivir” [Thanks to all the beatings you learn how to live] or in “La guita” written by Horacio Ferrer in 1992 which says “Lo sé de haber sufrido” [I know that because I have suffered].

Interestingly, according to tango songs, dancing tango, experiencing tango in one’s own body is perceived as another way of obtaining wisdom about life (Collier, 1992). In parallel, it is a widespread speech among tango dancers that, in order to improve in your learning process of the dance itself, you need to go through painful experiences in life, as a precondition to be able to understand the deep emotions that tango is arguably suggesting (Cara, 2009; Carozzi, 2015; Westergard, 2016).

The process of learning (learning about how the world and society works, learning about yourself and about others as well) is based on direct experience in which the body is exposed. This education happens in the streets of the old neighbourhood, or in the coffee shops, far from any formal educational institution. Finally, it is worth pointing out that this informal education is accessible to everyone, regardless of their level of culture and social stratus. Even more, the ones who are able to access formal education are usually bewildered by traditional knowledge and are not able to reach the kind of knowledge that tango characters describe as relevant (Karush 2007). Ferrer (1999) extends this analysis to the artist that created tango melodies and lyrics. He states that tangos were mainly created by marginals who were projecting their own truths in those compositions, without the expertise in musical theory or literary skills.

García Olivares (2003) argues that in tango songs,

In the context of tango lyrics, even the complete ignorant [in formal education] is able to reach a proper knowledge to live, once we consider that knowledge, according to tango’s discourse, comes out of personal experiences, more informative and useful that any books. (p. 226, m.t)

And adds,

How does tango define the path towards knowledge? In correlation with its social origins, tango is the knowledge that only emanates out of the losers, the defeated. (p. 231, m.t)

In that respect, some tango songs reinforce the connection between relevant knowledge with characters usually described as marginals and outcasts in society. That is the case of “Consejos de la experiencia” [Advice from experience] written by Ravazzano Sanmartino which says that “El hombre mas inferior siempre nos da una lección” [The most inferior man always teaches us the lesson] or in “Quién me enseñó?” by Jose Larralde, which says “Quién me enseñó, si me crié entre doctores de reja y pico, pala y pastón?” [Who did teach me, if I grew up between teachers of grid, pick and shovel?].

According to Crisafio (2003), tangos put the emphasis on those dark spaces where the characters expose their miseries, and declare their failures and disappointments, but at least those confessions are authentic, and the result of life- changing experiences. For instance, “Tango de Lengue” written by Enrique Cadícamo expresses,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Siempre habrá algún convicto | There will always be a convict |
| en algún calabozo. | in a cell. |
| O en bulines sombríos, shoficas tenebrosos | Or in a dark apartment of a sinister ruffian, |
| que al escuchar tus notas aprendan a llorar | who when hearing your tunes, will learn to cry. |
| Porque esas son las aulas sagradas | Because those ones are the sacred classrooms |
| del gotán. | of tango. |

The relativisation of the concept of truth, the rejection of rational and abstract thinking, on one side, and the idea that street learning, through the experience of the body and its senses, and without the mediation of any teacher figure, are fundamental in the way tango culture perceives education as a general term. Both ideas I argue, complement each other in order to reject formal education, whose negative depiction appears at times explicitly. Even more, the characters holding any form of valid wisdom are the ones from the lowest strata, without refined culture. As such, tango discourse towards education in a broad sense could have presented a challenge to the Argentinean education system that was trying to consolidate its structure by the time tango culture was spreading in Buenos Aires, between 1920 and 1940, as I will explore in the next section.

# Chapter 13. Challenging the Argentinean educational system.

When considering the perspective that tango songs (and arguably, tango as a dance as well) display regarding the topic of education in a broad sense, it is worth discussing a last aspect in this Part V: up to what point did tango culture represent a real challenge to the Argentinean educational system?

To begin with, it is fundamental to understand that the historical period in which tango surged and became popular arguably coincides with the consolidation of a universal system of public education in Argentina (Halperin Dongui, 1987). Julian Barsky (2016) states,

In our country [Argentina], the origins of tango and modern school are simultaneous and occur in parallel. (p. 79, m.t)

On the 8th of July in 1884, the national law number 1420 established primary education as universal, free, and mandatory in Argentina. Furthermore, this law took education under the full scope of the State, making it secular. The removal of the church as the leading actor in the newly formed national system of education did not imply the rejection of moral elements as part of this imparted education (Escude, 1990). The initial curricula attempted to combine mass alphabetization, with the development of a sentiment of national identity as well as the development of a moral citizen, according to the governmental criteria of that time.

Varela (2016) states that,

[In the school] they taught the work ethic, honesty, respect towards the parents, the duty of hygiene, but as well the rejection of alcoholism, of cheating, of laziness and the refusal of a life without ideals. (p. 97, m.t)

This so-called moral instruction (Halperin Dongui, 1987) did not restrict itself just to civic behaviour. It included the development of a sentiment of patriotism. Varela (2016) argues that,

The school was the space for the formation of national identity, the discussion about the national language, the remembrance of patriotic dates, the systematic use of the national flag, the commemoration of events of the independence, the mandatory singing of the national anthem in official events. Those were some of many signs of patriotic liturgy that developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century. (p. 58, m.t)

This process intensified during the first decades of the twentieth century. Archetti (2003) argues that by then there was,

…a transformation of the elementary school and secondary school curricula into a nationalistic education emphasizing Argentinean history and geography, national civic duties, moral teaching based on the cult of Argentinean heroes, Spanish language, and Argentinean literature. (p. 33)

The association between formal education and a uniform nationalistic identity was primarily aimed towards the newly arrived immigrants and their descendants who were still holding their own traditions, and even more crucial, their own language (Massielo, 1992). In the words of Varela (2016), this education had a primary target which was ‘the homogenization of the immigrant population’ (p. 20, m.t). In the context of the public schools, that implied the proliferation of patriotic acts, tributes to national icons, school competitions with issues about Argentinean identity and the inauguration of monuments and busts related to patriotic events in Argentinean history (Barsky, 2016).

Whether this tension will be found in tangos’ explicit confrontative speech towards formal education and its institutions, or because of its amoral, sceptic and pessimist discourse in its lyrics, or by the influence of elements of immigrants who were fundamental in the development of the genre, it is worth asking up to which point this tension actually manifested.

In that respect, the research by Barsky (2016) provides an interesting insight. This author analyses the presence of tango as a genre in the curricula of state education from the beginning of the twentieth century. He explores the music and dance that appear in events at school, in the subjects related to music, in the teachers’ own formation, in those patriotic acts which happened at school.

He states that,

The school aimed for mass alphabetization and the reaffirmation of local values (patriotic symbols, language, territory) as well as those universal moral standards (honesty, hard work, discipline, equity), all of those according to the notions of liberal thought. In that construction of national identity that schools were taking a part, there were no signs of those elements of local culture [tango] that the local population actually consumed. The establishment, educated on European bases, did not consider it dignifying enough in order to be included in the educational system. (p. 149, m.t)

Barsky (2016) does not explore in any detail the reasons behind that rejection. He provides accounts of several areas in formal education in which tango is not necessarily explicitly condemned but is ignored. Tango is absent from any reference in the curricula, special events of everyday life in educational institutions. Far from considering tango as a defiant style, either because of its amoral discourse or by its scandalous elements, Barsky regrets this disconnection between formal education and tango as a cultural genre and hopes for a more frequent interaction in the near future. He states,

Curiously, the universal acceptance of tango as the genuine expression of our country did not have the same response from the point of view of educational and academic institutions. Even nowadays there is a fight for the inclusion of tango in the primary and secondary school curricula. At university level there are still just a few spaces where this genre appears and develops. We hope that this work may collaborate in this last direction. (p. 28, m. t)

In contrast to Barsky’s argument (2016), I argue that the absence of tango in educational curriculum is not a curiosity but instead could be explained by the elements explored in Chapter 12 above. Tango’s confrontative discourse towards the value of formal education and institutions in general, its rejection of logic and rational thinking and its praise of street learning and embodied education clashed directly with the aims of the newly formed educational system in Argentina. Furthermore, the elements of pessimism, negativity and disenchantment that have been explored under the lens of modern cynicism in Parts I and III were clearly disturbing the moral education that the schooling system was trying to impose at the beginning of the twentieth century (and arguably, up to our present). One final aspect can explain the tension between formal education and tango as a local cultural expression: tango lyrics had a systematic use of a slang form called ‘lunfardo’ that presented direct challenges, I argue, to the educational system. To begin with, it confronted the idea of a rational, logically structured language as it did not strictly follow grammatical rules or obey etymological roots. As such it was rejected by institutions such as the Real Academia Española [Royal Spanish Academy], the foremost institution in charge of defining the officially accepted norms in Spanish language, for Spain and the Spanish speaking countries around the world (Fraga, 2006). Secondly, this specific form of slang was connected with the outsiders of society, considering its origins in jails in Buenos Aires, used firstly by ruffians, thieves and prostitutes. Barsky (2016), for instance, claims that,

The origins of lunfardo must be found in the marginal borders of the society, at the end of the nineteenth century, specifically among the groups connected with the local mafia. It is not incidental, then, that the first studies of that form of slang were done by police officers (as Dellepiane o Fray Mocho) and is of no surprise either that it has been defined as the language of the thieves. The word lunfardo itself could have originated from a term ‘lombardo’ that was associated directly with the word ‘burglar’ (p. 61, m.t)

Thirdly, it was a slang in which there was a predominance of foreign words, a mixture between local dialect in Spanish with elements of Italian and French, among other languages. It was the expression of the newly arrived immigrants and their complex process of integration to the city of Buenos Aires. The education system at the beginning of the twentieth century aimed for the homogenization of the population under the scope of a nationalistic formation. One of the pillars for such education was the Spanish language and the assimilation of all immigrants under that linguistic scope. The systematic use of *lunfardo*, by tango lyrics, was, then, a direct challenge to that goal, especially considering the success of tango as a genre among the lower classes and the neighbourhood of immigrants in Buenos Aires. In that respect, Barsky (2016) states that,

The mixture of languages and dialects arriving from the immigrants (the Italian, the caló, elements of the Portuguese as well as words in Guaraní and Quechua) made lunfardo the nerve centre of several criticisms from the ones defending the purism of the Spanish language, with a strong dose of nationalism and xenophobia (p. 61, m.t)

It was mainly due to linguistic reasons that elements of tango were, at different points in history, censored and persecuted (Gobello, 1999). Indeed, from 1931 onwards, on several occasions tango lyrics suffered editing, restriction, or suspension, and were accused of deforming the language. Most of those interventions were made under the spectrum of laws related to press and media broadcasting, as the ‘Reglamento de radiocomunicaciones’ [Radio communication’s regulations] in 1931 or, decrees by the ’Secretaría de Prensa y Difusion’ [Department of press and broadcasting] in 1948. In both cases, the point of questioning in tango lyrics was related to the use of lunfardo as well as occasional censorship of verses that did not condemn alcoholism, prostitution or, quite exceptionally, because it spread a pessimist speech in the youth. In 1943 there was the only case in which the Ministry of Education intervened in relation to tango songs. In that year, under the supervision of the Minister Martinez Zuviría, a commission was created in charge of, according to Barsky (2016),

…safeguarding the purity of the language. This commission lunged against tangos, forbidding the use of lunfardo as well as any reference to alcohol and drugs (p. 68, m.t)

Considering the above, it is reasonable to consider that tango was recognised up to a point by the authorities as potentially dangerous and subversive. The fact that educational institutions completely disregarded and gave no place for tango as a cultural phenomenon is indicative of the challenge it may have represented to the Argentinean educational system. The confrontation between tango and education may not have been overt but nevertheless is worth taking into consideration. The process by which tango became commercialised, and turned into a cultural export, may arguably increase the possibilities by which the disruptive elements of tango could have become invisible. This process correlates with the analysis from the majority of scholars who try to redeem tango as a morally accepted genre, and, by doing so, they remove completely their traits of rebelliousness and confrontation with the status quo. Furthermore, according to my analysis, the elements of moral relativism, pessimism, and disenchantment, although potentially disruptive, were not necessarily apprehended by those who consumed tangos from the 1920s until nowadays. This last argument draws in part from my own experience as a tango dancer and instructor in the last 20 years, as well as the conclusions of studies such as the one by María de los Montes (2017), mentioned in Part I, according to whom the potential elements of cynicism in tango lyrics were disregarded by the participants of her research (all of them tango dancers) who did not consider those aspects representative of how they felt tango in their lives. Despite its arguably scandalous origins, and beyond those elements of melancholia, apathy, and grim perspective of society in its lyrics, tango remained strongly associated with the images of passion, love and romance which were attributed as part of its transformation from the 1920s onwards, and that remains dominant in the commercially successful representation of today.

# **AFTERWORD**

A rebellious impulse or a pointless defeatism?

In Part I on this thesis, I explored elements in Discépolo’s lyrics that could relate to a modern sense of cynicism. To begin with, I considered the strong pessimism and the grim description of reality in his lyrics. There is always a temporal narration in which an original starting point full of hopes and expectations is broken by a series of disappointments due to the perceived nastiness of the world. These series of disillusions lead to a pathetic present and create a disheartening perspective of the future in which no solution is available and in which there is no chance for improvement or redemption. In Chapter 3 of Part I, I presented the reasons that made that sequence of disappointments in life unavoidable. Those failures and frustrations that Discépolo’s characters experience are the result of the so-called omnipresent selfishness, unkindness, and hypocritical behaviour of human beings, at least of those contaminated with a so-called civilized life. Discépolo’s depiction of society strongly resonates with the commonplace understanding of modern cynicism, which presents a grim description of human nature as egoistic and manipulative. I have also discussed in Chapter 4 another central point in the vernacular understanding of cynicism which relates to the attitudes taken by those same characters once they realise the falsehood of the reality surrounding them. On one hand, some characters become apathetic, isolated, and exclude themselves from any possible future encounter. They either return to their mother’s house, where they can avoid any social interaction, or get drunk in a lonely bar where they cry powerlessly over their damned fate. On the other hand, in other songs the characters are submerged into the decadent society they criticise, by accommodating themselves to a corrupted world. In the view of these characters, the only reasonable reaction is to become complicit and survive individually as best as possible in this mean world. These ideas and concepts were then extended to tango lyrics during the ‘*tango-canción’* period, in Chapter 7 of Part III, in which it was argued that those same elements analysed under the scope of modern cynicism were present, however not as explicitly and ubiquitously, in several of the most emblematic of tango songs.

How is it possible, then, to consider Discépolo’s lyrics and tango songs in general in that period between 1917 and 1955, as potentially disruptive, as hypothetically rebellious?

I would like to introduce, in order to address this point, a series of recent studies that discuss Discépolo’s work focusing their analysis on the relationship between his scepticism and the possibility of a rebellious impulse based on a message of hope. I am referring to the book *Discépolo, todavía la esperanza. Esbozo de una filosofía en zapatillas* [Discépolo, still the hope. An outline of a philosophy in casual shoes] by Daniel H. Dei (2012) and the compilation of articles present in the book In *Escepticismo ético y esperanza en la obra de Enrique Santos Discépolo* [Ethical scepticism and hope in the works of Enrique Santos Discépolo] published in 2018.

*Do hope and modern cynicism contradict each other?*

Daniel Dei aims in his book *Discépolo, todavía la esperanza. Esbozo de una filosofía en zapatillas* (2012) to relativise the apocalyptic criticism present in Discépolo’s work and instead suggest that in the composer’s work there is a message of rebelliousness that starts with what he defines as ‘ethical scepticism’ and ends with a lesson of hope. In Dei’s analysis, there is a distinction between two kinds of hope. The first one, the *relative hope*, is directly related to a specific content. It could refer to material gains, a romantic story, or a specific objective in any of Discépolo’s characters. That hope is subject to be tested by experience and in tango lyrics this *relative hope* always ends in disappointment. The characters may suffer betrayal and disappointment in their objectives and feel disillusioned and disappointed with their expectations. However, Dei introduces a second type of hope, one that is universal and absolute. This second kind of hope remains beyond the empirical test and works as a transcendental motivation for the frustrated characters of Discépolo. According to Dei, this transcendental hope is the moral ground from where Discépolo bases his dissatisfaction with the current status quo (his ethical scepticism) that allows a message of rebelliousness to emerge.

Dei’s work was, in fact, part of a larger project. In 2010, the University of Lanus, Buenos Aires, summoned various academics in order to discuss the elements of critique present in the works of local popular artists, with a special focus on the case of Discépolo. This project was part of a program of cultural studies developed by that institution that was trying to recuperate the thoughts and ideas of influential artists that were forgotten by scholars and academics of the past. Dei’s book and a compilation of articles published in 2018 and edited by Daniel Dei, under the name of *Escepticismo ético y esperanza en la obra de Enrique Santos Discépolo* were, in part, heirs of that initial objective.

The compilation brings different scholars specialised in tango together to discuss the rebelliousness in Discépolo’s work (Dei, 2018). There is a common starting question among all the papers in this book: Is it possible to separate a fierce diagnostic of our current time from the need of social change in Discépolo’s tangos? And perhaps the follow up question: Can such a devastating criticism allow any space for a hopeful alternative?

Ricardo Maliandi, in his article “Discépolo y la antinomia ética fundamental ¿Ya se murió el criterio?” [Discépolo and the fundamental ethical antinomy] (2018) analyses, for example, the lyric of “Que Vachaché” (discussed here in Chapter 4) and states that the female narrator represents a disheartening speech that coexists with the silent voice of the addressee of her complaints that still holds an idealistic hope. According to Maliandi (2018), both discourses coexist allowing a critical approach while simultaneously creating a space outside that counterweights the devastating criticism.

Oscar Conde, in his article “Alcances axiológicos del renunciamiento en el drama ‘El hombre solo’ y el tango “Confesión” [Ethical considerations on the renunciation in the drama ‘the lonely man’ and in the tango ‘Confession’] (2018) establishes that in Discépolo’s work there is a constant distinction between how things are and how they should be. However, according to Conde (2018), even if in Discépolo there is a non-explicit but equally present prescription on how things should be, that goal is presented as unachievable considering the perceived nastiness of humankind (p.117).

I concur with the analysis of Conde (2018), and I consider indeed that in many of Discépolo’s songs there is an implicit reference to a never fully defined ideal, at times related to a golden past of innocence and good intentions. However, I think that precisely that vague moral background is one of the crucial elements of one of the most problematic possible versions of modern cynicism. It forms the basis of that hypocritical approach that offers a comprehensive, all-encompassing critique of the current state of affairs, and then demands improvement and change in those very institutions that are the building blocks of the dominant system which is being challenged and, as such, are incapable of any real transformation. The way in which things should be, according to this approach, is an unreachable ideal that not only perpetuates the sense of disappointment but also blocks any real challenge to the dominant discourses. I claim that some of the most melodramatic tangos that Discépolo has written reinforce this false sense of expectations and this is the same aspect that I discussed in Part V, Chapter 12 in relation to education.

This same conflict that exists between pessimism towards the present and an undefined moral ground was analysed in relation to tangos in general during the ‘*tango-canción’* period, in Part III, Chapter 8, when discussing the argument of Varela (2005; 2016). Once again, the modern cynical hypocrisy present in tangos was precisely the tension between an idealised past of purity and innocence that sets the ground for all moral values to emerge, and the impossibility of that past to return or materialise again in the tango characters’ lives. The hopes for a perfect world and the disappointment felt when confronted with the tango narrators’ reality was exacerbated by a melancholic sentiment that is dominant in tango songs of this period, as explored in Chapter 9, in Part III. That idealised and distorted past also constitutes how tango songs represented tango’s own past, as authentic and brave, as humble but still attached to values of courage and being true to itself. This version of tango’s origins played a key role in the consolidation of a melancholic discourse that I have analysed as a cynic expression.

In that sense, in Part IV, Chapter 11, I have explored how that version of tango in its origins was distorted in a process that transformed tango into a commodity of passion and danger, allowing tango to retain some memory of elements of scandal so long as those elements were already extinct in real tango life. Tango was, therefore, co-opted, tamed, and softened in terms of the rebellious impulse that it could have actually had in its origins, and thereby retained an idealised image of defiance with nostalgia.

In Part IV, Chapter 10, however, I have explored elements of tango in its origins that could have actually been defiant to the moral order of the time, and I have discussed where some of those elements could have survived the process of transformation that tango experienced around 1917.

*Bringing back rebelliousness through humour or just accepting straightforward criticism.*

I would like to conclude this thesis by arguing that tango culture could still provide elements than can be connected with a much more forceful form of cynicism, capable of shaking the dominant codes of the society of its time.

Firstly, I prefer to revindicate, if that word were to be necessary at all, those other tangos in which the ironic and critical element are more present. In those tangos, it is harder to find an appeal to undefined moral grounds and instead they work with a more destructive and radical message. The fierce criticism in some of those sarcastic lyrics (In Discépolo’s case, for example, are the tangos “Cambalache”, “Yira, yira”, “Chorra” or “Que Vachaché”) provides less space for a hopeful speech and those lyrics seem to be a direct attack on the dominant values of that time.

This approach, one that considers tangos in their more critical aspects, and refuses to insist on a constructive and moral presence in tango lyrics, is both as necessary as it may be difficult for scholars to accept as a defining element of tango culture, particularly as it clashes with the bleached out commercialised version that tends to be dominant nowadays. Many scholars have indeed rejected or downplayed such emphasis on the negative aspects of tangos’ poetry and fight hard in order to consider them as a more positive and respected cultural expression for our society.

Returning to the paradigmatic case of Discépolo, Adriana Fernandez Vecchi, in her article “Enrique Santos Discépolo: La lógica de la negación como apuesta a la esperanza” [Enrique Santos Discépolo: The logic of negation as a bet towards hope] (2018) reinforces the same discourse that is dominant in the already mentioned book *Ethical scepticism and hope in the works of Enrique Santos Discépolo.* She states that by the use of a double negation in Discépolo’s lyrics there is a stress on a moral and hopeful speech over the critical and scathing consideration of the world. She focuses on the analysis of the tango “Uno” and interestingly, quotes the initial verses,

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Uno, busca lleno de esperanzas | One searches full of hope |
| el camino que los sueños | for the path that dreams had |
| prometieron a sus ansias... | promised to their longing... |
| Sabe que la lucha es cruel | One knows the struggle is cruel |
| y es mucha, pero lucha y se desangra | and it's huge, but one fights and bleeds out |
| por la fe que lo empecina... | for the faith that he clings to... |

Remarkably, this is the exact same quote that can be read nowadays in a big graffiti that decorates one of the new tunnels of Buenos Aires, recently inaugurated by the government of the city, ruled from a centre right party.

A bridge with a train painted on it

Description automatically generated

Av. Nazca, Buenos Aires. Photo taken by the author, December 2022.

In both cases, the quote ends there and leaves a hopeful message of valid persistence in the search for your dreams. That quote, indeed, portrays Discépolo’s song as the recognition that the path is hard, and there are plenty of obstacles to face, but that we are born to fight until the end for our convictions.

A wall with musical notes painted on it

Description automatically generated

Av. Nazca, Buenos Aires. Photo taken by the author, December 2022.

This selective quotation, however, avoids the message of the last verses of the song, that indeed leave a different sensation:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Pero un frío cruel | But a cruel cold |
| que es peor que el odio | that is worse than hatred |
| -punto muerto de las almas- | -a dead-end for the soul- |
| tumba horrenda de mi amor, | the terrible tomb of my love, |
| ¡maldijo para siempre y me robó... | cursed me forever and stole... |
| toda ilusión! | every illusion! |

This final stanza leaves no space for a hopeful and constructive message. The narrator confesses that he feels completely empty after crying for so much betrayal. There is no space for redemption in this song, no alternative future for the main character.

I prefer then, to hold onto, or foreground, Discépolo’s most critical verses, those in which his sarcastic and disheartening description of his society may not offer alternatives for a better future but may promote distrust and disgust with the current affairs of the world. It is through his cynical humour where I find the possibilities for slowly eroding the dominant discourses which prevail in tango today and the consumerist culture it is an expression of. This approach presents similarities with Yurchak’s hypothesis in his book *Everything was forever, until it was no more: The last Soviet generation* (2005) in which a widespread cynical apathetic distrust in the soviet system by its citizens, manifested in seemingly inoffensive jokes that simultaneously criticised the regime and assumed it to be unchangeable. Yurchak argues that this kind of cynicism was potentially one of the forces that collaborated in its collapse. I argue that this modern cynical impulse, if freed of moral condemnation and censorship, and combined with a more confrontative and less apathetic approach, may still have an interesting narrative to discover. It may be too late for Discépolo, already embellishing the walls of Buenos Aires with some of his phrases for the delight of tourists and tango lovers. But it is worth remembering that verses of the same composer were as well taken during the protest of December 2001, as mentioned in the first chapter of this section, to express anger and dissatisfaction. As Allen (2020) argues, there is still a potential disruptive force in cynicism worth exploring that perhaps remains unrealised in our present. Returning to Discépolo’s radicalism, as well as the radical negativity of other songwriters, should not, however, be done lightly. It requires the consideration of elements of misogyny, for instance, discussed earlier in this thesis. Fortunately, several scholars have been and are now exploring and discussing this aspect of gender stereotyping (Armus, 2002; Archetti, 2003; Saikin, 2004; Feldman, 2006), and it is a central point of discussion among the new generation of tango dancers in tango festivals and events. Accordingly, I am not arguing for straightforwardly embracing Discépolo’s discourse but instead I point out the importance of a more rounded understanding of tango, one that considers its poetry in its negativity. Such intellectual commitment, I hope, may resist its co-option and its idealisation.

Furthermore, I argue that some elements of defiance which were arguably present in early forms of tango, in particular those connected with tango as a dance, and as an embodied manifestation of scandal and discontent, can provide a powerful opportunity to reassess tango’s defiant features, as analysed in Part IV. This relates to the ideas suggested by authors such as Savigliano (1995), Manning (2007), Davis (2015) or Gritzner (2017), according to whom, despite their differences, the bodily interaction in tango as a dance provides opportunities for rebelliousness, considering its improvised and unpredictable nature. I argue that those same elements can be empowered by the conviction that each dancer is dancing a lyric that shouts social criticism, and that questions the status quo with a sceptical and cynical discourse. I have in mind a form of dancing, then, with the awareness of the negativity that tango entails, rather than with an ethos of romanticism and sensuality that still surrounds my everyday life experience as a tango dancer. This form of tango-dance may indeed revitalise the current tango. Dancing and performing it with the recognition of its cynic elements could work as a path towards a reappraisal of its history and a reconfiguration of its image as a cultural expression. It is, of course, not easy to anticipate how the implications of these ideas may be enacted. As a personal example, my partner and I have been working with Hugo Mastrolorenzo and Agustina Vignou (World champions of Stage Tango in 2016, and author himself of books about how tango is portrayed and its potential alternative performativity [Mastrolorenzo, 2005; 2020; 2022]) in order to develop a tango choreography that can resist the representation of an almost omnipresent story of passion and love (Mastrolorenzo, 2020). We are trying, instead, to dance and perform expressing ideas related to radical pessimism, manifested with a non-tragical approach, with a humorous and sarcastic emphasis. This future presentation will imply the incorporation of elements of contemporary dance, and it is still clearly a work in progress.

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It was not the aim of this thesis to claim that tango was exclusively cynical, but instead to open the possibility to start thinking about manifestations of Argentine popular culture, as tango, from an innovative approach, away from the need to either defend or praise tango as a genre, or to condemn it. In the process of writing this thesis, I hope I was able to rethink and reconsider the influence and meaning of cynicism in Western culture, at least in the case of Argentina.

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1. The legend tells that Alexander the Great came to see Diogenes. The philosopher was lying in the sun and when he was asked by the conqueror for a wish to be granted, Diogenes replied he wanted Alexander to stand out of the sun. So impressed was Alexander with the answer that, according to Plutarch (1919), Alexander stated: “But verily, If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes” (p. 259) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There are no writings surviving from Diogenes himself and it is even possible that Diogenes of Sinope who lived in the 4th century B.C.E. didn’t write anything at all (Branham, 1996). Moreover, there were not many written accounts of contemporaries (followers or detractors) describing his life. More than 500 years after his death, Diogenes Laertius compiled the most substantial collection of his sayings and anecdotes, portrayed as a cumulative narrative of stories in *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (Shea, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Antisthenes (ca. 445 – after 366 B.C.E) was considered the founder or at least an important forerunner of the cynic movement influencing and providing a model for Diogenes with his teachings, writings, and his practice (Long, 1996). As a regular companion of Socrates, he continued to praise the importance of self-mastery and the pursuit of virtue by focusing on living an ethical life. He stressed the importance of indifference in regard to wealth and name, and even advocated for poverty, elements that left a mark on cynic legacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It is worth mentioning that this criticism was not exclusive of post-Hegel writers. As analysed by Branham (1996), during antiquity Galen, Lucian and Apuleius all discredited the cynic rejection of intellectual culture. Others, however, praised this path to virtue, particularly important being the first Stoics. Apollodorus of Seleucia was the first Stoic to present the famous cynic as a ‘shortcut to virtue’ in positive terms (Griffin, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peter Sloterdijk’s bestseller, *Critique of Cynical Reason,* publishedin 1983, was a turning point in the understanding of the relationship between cynicism and Enlightenment and has created a deep impact on subsequent research (Shea, 2010; Stanley*,* 2012 and Niehues- Pröbsting*,* 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In line with an analysis dominant in varied studies focusing on the transformation in the dance (Liska, 2014), on the figure of the female characters (Archetti, 1999, Armus, 2002, Feldman, 2006) or references to sexuality (Salessi, 1991), or on the specific analysis of the lyrics (Romano, 1989; Conde, 2003) in which the dominant feature of the culture of tango is the condemnation and censure of immoral behaviours, in clear contrast with the characteristics of tango in its origins. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Mi noche triste” is a tango composed by Samuel Castriota, originally named “Lolita”. By 1917, poet Pascual Contursi wrote a lyric that was attached to the original melody, renaming the song in the process. It is usually considered as the first tango with a narrative lyric that inaugurates a trend in the genre that became dominant in the period named “Tango cancion” [tango song]. The song introduces for the first time a mood based on melancholic nostalgia by the crying of a male narrator that complains to his partner who has just left him. The song was first sung in the play “Los dientes de perro” [The dog’s teeth] and was later on recorder by Carlos Gardel becoming and immediate success (Conde, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Several of the books related to tango and Discépolo have never been translated to English. Accordingly, several quotes are my own translation. From now onwards, I will add the letters m.t (my translation) when applicable. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The term refers to the works of Evaristo Carriego (1883-1912), Argentinean poet with a nostalgic and sentimentalist style that is considered a fundamental influence in the development of the lyrics of the ‘*tango canción’*period*,* between 1917 and 1955. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Peronism is an Argentinean political movement related to the ideas of Juan Domingo Peron, Argentinean president between 1946 and 1955 and again between 1973 until his death in 1974. It is a political phenomenon usually associated with populism, involving a strong leader, and in Peron’s case, a demagogue and dictator. Whereas it is difficult to categorise Peronism as either a right or a left movement, it undoubtedly directed some of its policies to the improvement of the working class, expanding the welfare state and reinforcing the importance of the labour unions working in pair with the government. In Argentina, the movement remains the most important political force and continues to be a controversial topic in contemporary politics, dividing the population between its admirers and haters. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Argentinean crisis during December 2001 was a period of civil unrest with riots, mass protests and popular revolts that led to the resignation of Fernando De la Rua, president at that time, and was followed by a period of political instability. It was, as well, a period in which spontaneous organizations of citizens from Buenos Aires and Rosario created popular assemblies, self-organised local markets based in exchange without the use of any legal currency and established regular cultural activities in the streets. This period was the result of a great economic depression in which private and national banks collapsed, the currency plummeted, and savings and salaries suddenly dropped. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. All translations of lyrics are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Even if there are some, but not all, translations of tango songs available online in sites such as [www.planet-tango.com](http://www.planet-tango.com) or [www.letrasdetango.wordpress.com](http://www.letrasdetango.wordpress.com) from which I have taken some verses, I have preferred to use my own translation in most cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Both Galasso (1967) and Pujol (2017) insist on the influence on Discépolo of members of the artistic movement named “Boedo” in which poets like Adoldo Bellocq, painters like Benito Quinquiela Martin and Abraham Vigo, and writers such as Facio Hebecquer or José Arato, portrayed a cruel representation of the poorest sides of the city to denounce the social and economic injustice of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Most of those characters were Discépolo’s close friends in his youth. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The translation here cannot represent the meaning of “*grela*” properly. The word is one of many synonyms of woman in Argentinean *Lunfardo* (slang) from that time and implies vilification. This might explain why it has been translated as ‘whore’ on some websites. It is possible that there is here an allusion to the Moirai, the three women in Greek Mythology who control the destiny of mortals, which correlates with the idea of unavoidable fate. Here, as elsewhere, the misogyny present in some tango lyrics is evident. This deserves a proper discussion. I will introduce and expand this point later in this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Yerba mate are tea leaves for Argentinean national drink, Mate, that could be reused (despite the loss of taste and flavour) by exposing it to the sun to get dry as a last resort. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Galasso, (1967) insists on the idea that this tango is comprehensible mainly as a manifestation of the dark days of the 1930s by including statistics of the growing number of suicides during the years when this tango was written. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Mazella focuses on the movement of the Counter-Enlightenment in England and the fears of the spread of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic expansion, and Shea and Stanley explore its internal effects in France during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I here move beyond the limits of the Argentinean society by taking into consideration the multiple references to contexts different than Buenos Aires and its surrounding in many tango lyrics in its golden age, including Europe (mainly Paris /France) and The United States (Savigliano, 1995; Cordero, 2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I will expand on Varela’s arguments in Part III when I discuss the main interpretation of tango lyrics without necessarily focusing on the specificity of Discépolo’s case. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As explored in Chapter I, I discussed Bewes’ presentation of cynicism as a modern pathology and disagreed with his position on the total and absolute rejection of every aspect of modern cynicism, in which he calls for remedies that could avoid its spreading. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Sloterdijk considers that the mode of critique inaugurated in the period of the Enlightenment went on to work away at its own base and became, as a result, self-undermining and allowed a new form of modern cynicism to finally emerge. This undermining of the Enlightened project worked as well as a path that damaged the idea of a transparent human self, promoting doubt into each individual’s identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. French philosopher and co-editor, with Denis Diderot, of the Encyclopédie. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Argentinean President between 1916-1922 and 1928-1930 usually considered the first one to be elected out of a party of masses in the new democratic system in Argentina. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. El Rio de la Plata refers to the Plate River and its surroundings, including both the city of Buenos Aires and the city of Montevideo. Both cities claim to be the place in which tango first originated and that debate reflects on discussions among diverse scholars. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Originally designed as dance schools, Matamoro (1969) stated that by the 1880 onwards those halls were instead hidden brothels, where the customers tended to have a paid a few dance-pieces with the prostitutes as a preparation for sexual intercourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Collective urban housing, where several families shared the rent and the limited facilities, toilets, and eating areas. The poor hygiene, the overcrowding inhabitants and the mixture of languages and habits by the confluence of locals with different accents and recently arrived immigrants made the place a recurrent topic for tango lyrics during the 1920s onwards. As it arguably happened with tango culture, the *conventillos* were as well reconfigured into an icon of Argentinean tourist representation, and it is possible to visit nowadays in the neighbourhood of *La Boca*, colourful reconstructions of those crowded living spaces, while watching street tango dancers performing to the foreigners. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Niños bien* is the way in which lyrics of tango songs from the following period, after 1917, describe those sons of the local aristocracy that are pretending to understand the tango music and participate into its culture and sentimentalism, but are too attached to the material goods and too used to have a nice and easy style of life and, accordingly, are incapable of feeling and experiencing the bitterness of life and, therefore, are incapable of understanding the tango mood (Varela, 2016) . [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Julio Argentino Roca, Argentinean president from 1880 to 1886 and from 1898 to 1904 was the symbol of that period defined by Botana (1977) as the conservative order and the representative of the elitist political sector that controlled the political power in Argentina until 1912. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. An Argentinean writer who won some of the most prestigious prizes as a novelist of Hispanic literature. He became particularly renowned from his role as president of the commission which investigated war crimes occurring during the 1976-1982 military dictatorship. His role resulted in the publication of a book, *Nunca más* [Never again] (1984), which included details of the findings relating to the forced disappearance of people at the hands of the State. He wrote a book about tango “*Tango, discusión y clave”* [Tango, key discussions] (2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. An Argentinean writer and journalist, who was politically active as a left-wing activist for the newspaper *La Opinion* which forced him into exile during the dictatorship of 1976. His works frequently interacted with Argentinean popular culture and identity (football, cinema, comics) and he designed recurrent main characters that were systematic losers, showcasing melancholy and frustration. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. This tango was written beyond the 1917-1955 period which is the focal point of this chapter. However, both the writer and the composer were strong symbols of the *‘tango-canción’* period. This tango in its musical style and in the content of its lyrics continue the trend of the previous years. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Varela’s analysis is then focused on the tango lyrics, but a similar standing point can be found in Ulla (1966) in her analysis of the transformation that occurred in that period in the dance itself, or in the works of Liska (2014) with the focus on the transformations of the music. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Cátulo Castillo was a renowned poet and composer of tango, mostly successful during the 1940s. His father, an anarchist militant, was a central influence in his creative compositions. He was censured by the dictatorship named Revolución Libertadora from 1955 to 1958 and his name was blacklisted which served to block his work until 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Homero Manzi was a tango lyricist, journalist, and film director. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Jorge Luis Borges, 1899-1986 was one of the most renowned Argentine writers of the twentieth century, particularly renowned by his short stories, poems, and essays, in which he introduced philosophical thoughts, usually playing with concepts such as labyrinths, dreams, the infinite, mirrors, etc. He was a key influence in the magic realism movement in Latin America’s literature. Interestingly, his work has been analysed under the lens of cynicism by Arthur Rose (see *Literary Cynics, Borges, Beckett, Coetzee, 2017)* [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. The *conventillo* is a specific kind of improvised urban accommodation, usually associated with immigrants in the city of Buenos Aires. It had several rooms for multiple hosts, poor sanitary conditions, and shared common spaces. These spaces are regularly mentioned in tango songs, such as ‘Tu cuna fue un conventillo’ [Your cradle was a conventillo] from 1925, written by Francisco Ruiz Paris, or ‘Flor de Fango’ [Mud flower] from 1919 written by Pascual Contursi. In those lyrics, it symbolises the rough conditions in which tango protagonists were living in their youth while at the same time is depicted as a place where the characters were still authentic, innocent, and preserved from the temptations of the city centre and the modern tango halls. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. I have been adding dates for tango songs when first introduced in this thesis, as long as the dates were found. In the cases in which a date does not appear in this thesis, it implies that I was not able to track down the exact date of composition. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. I have included in this section, compositions that were written beyond my period of analysis, originally ending in 1955. Firstly, as both Crisafio (2003) and García Olivares (2003) are exploring a different period than my own timeframe. Secondly because I think these lyrics introduced in this chapter provide an interesting insight in how tango’s depiction of education has extended even beyond its golden age period, even in tangos written during the 1990s, as mentioned below. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)