

Erotic Transgression in Carlos Saura's *Tango**

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Abstract

Carlos Saura's musical film *Tango*, an audio-visual poem, is patterned upon the discourse of the Argentine tango in its pursuit of cultural otherness. The film elucidates the mid-life crisis of writer/director Mario reframed in an erotic site wherein his masculinity is challenged, distressed, and resurrected. With a playful metanarrative attached to love romance and dance spectacle, *Tango* crosses between the genres of melodrama and dark fantasy to conjure up the weakness of masculine hegemony threatened by murder and sexuality. A genealogy of the erotic via Georges Bataille's taboo-transgression relation substantiates the perception that Mario's self is being reconstituted in an erotic and sacrificial rite transpiring on the architectural terrain of tango dance and

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musical scenes. In these *mise-en-scènes*, the subject separates his “other” self from a patriarchal figure with the help of revisionist *femme fatales* Elena and Laura, as well as with his competitors, Ernesto and Angelo, who challenge him to avoid a living death. It is this quintet of five characters who create the tango microcosm of the film. Supported by his integral relationship with the camera and the mirror set in a cavernous rehearsal hall, Saura and his surrogate, Mario, challenge notions of conformity while reflecting the history of tango, “now and then,” in an interconnected multi- dimensionality worthy of Borges’ labyrinthine narratives. As a symbolic metaphor and psychological meditation, tango serves to reflect Mario’s configuration of the self/other and the encounter with sex and sexuality, death and resurrection, taboo and transgression. Eventually Mario’s self, possessed by his mediators’ otherness, desires a shift from the self to otherness and focuses intently on the coupling bodies, redoubling his excitement upon entering the maze of the tango.

Key Words: Bataille and Borges, self and other, fictional death, Argentine tango, playful metafilm

Carlos Saura's *Tango*,¹ a musical film, presents a complicated love whose epic narrative of teasing playfulness is underscored by the motif of the sultry Argentine tango in order to heal personal wounds and political trauma. In *Tango*, a middle-aged film writer/director, Mario Suárez (Miguel Ángel Solá), though recently divorced, still clings to his ex-wife Laura Fuentes (Cecilia Narova) who acts as a leading dancer in his tango film and has a beloved dance-partner Ernesto Landi (Carlos Rivarola). At the same time, Mario develops a compelling attachment to Elena Flores (Mía Maestro), a promising young dancer having an illicit love affair with the film's producer Angelo Lorroca (Juan Luis Galiardo). These five characters make up a quintet to play out the tango microcosm. Apart from the loss/regaining of love, a pervasive theme in the tango as dance, namely solitude and solidarity intertwined, serves as a reminder of the human self and provides a momentary respite from the *abrazo* (embrace). *Tango*, then, becomes a multi-faceted metaphor in Saura's film. In the process of making a film about tango, Mario is lost in the labyrinthine game of time and love; the lines between rehearsal, real life, and performance become a blur, revealing that, through his erotic desire, he is driven to an ecstasy in death. In an interview, Saura comments that "the tango lends itself well to making a story about emotions, which is part of the tango itself" (Ponga, 2003: 151). This is "because the lyrics of tangos—although they don't appear much in the film—always have that tone of tragedy, of emotions, of death, of stabbings" (151). Saura's explanation reflects an elaboration on the tango from the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges' essay, "A History of Tango." Borges expounds that tango and the *milonga* "directly express a conviction that poets have often tried to voice with words: that a fight can be a celebration" (1955/1999: 396). Indeed, Borges is alluding to the phallic street corner revelries of the old tangos, still

¹ Carlos Saura's film *Tango* is a 1998 Argentine-Spanish musical drama tango film, and its DVD format was published in 1999. The study uses the 1999 DVD version to explicate details in scenarios.

alive in “a fight” that can be “a celebration.” This definition is best described through the concept of eroticism propounded by Georges Bataille, the French literary critic. What Bataille’s thoughts on inner experience mediate on how “a sort of rupture—in anguish—leaves us at the limit of tears” (1957/1986: 18). Transposing that formulation of the erotic onto Borges’ interpretation of the tango, one considers the dance “a devilish orgy” (1955/1999: 396). Robert Farris Thompson, in the book *Tango: The Art History of Love*, provides further details, showing that certain derivatives of African words are related to tango, including “*tanga*” (meaning festival) and “*tanga dungulu*” (meaning to walk showing off). Both terms are associated with one of the most popular etymological origins of the word “tango”: “I touch” (Thompson, 2005: 81). Indeed, tango has achieved a unique place in couple dancing. Elaborating on the ambivalence of “a sort of rupture—in anguish” psyche (Bataille, 1957/1986: 18), Saura offers up a visceral voicing of an artistic tango form that nostalgically recalls the streets, slums, bars, and brothels of Buenos Aires in the 1800s, thus articulating the people’s complex and profound yearnings about themselves and others.

Reading the film with reference to Bataille’s sustained discussion of erotic transgression underscores the cathartic essence of transgression as a return to the singular encounter of self with other. The interpretation of the erotic in terms of transgression proves to be a promising move to engage with Saura’s fantastic elements of playfulness in the film. The sacredness of the Bataillean eroticism in the film does indeed relate to the struggle against death, not only showcasing Mario’s encounter with his erotic otherness associated with taboos against murder and sexuality, but it is also manifesting metaphorically in the dance rituals of tango’s history whose birth, absence, and eventual revival constitute a cycle of erotic transgression from life to death, and a subsequent phase of coming-back-to-life. The restorative openness to the originary erotics observable in tango discourse is treated as a sacred ritual in parallel with Mario’s affirmation of life, even in death. That is, the personal

also being political sustains an apparent transgression of the public/private division as the private life of Mario's self-awakening merges in the film with the public sphere of tango discourse. This is what Saura takes up in *Tango*, where he illustrates the doubling act of Mario's recollection in which the narrative playfulness challenges conventional images. In the film-making within the film, the leading male character Mario moves between the public history of tango and the private spheres of his erotic exploration by identifying different roles, and in so doing he transgresses against both the gendered cartographies and the limitation of the self/other.

The basic psychological love triangle of the film involves the frequently discussed paradigm of erotic love and death which obsessively haunts Mario's mind and raises the value of the object of desire. The death-linked erotic otherness embodied in Mario's ex-wife, Laura, and his new lover, Elena, illustrates the significance of conventional taboos against murder and sexuality. The hostile relationship between these two *femme fatales* is dramatically transformed into a performative ritual of queerness that provides a liminal space outside everyday life to display the unique kinaesthetic connection of affective passion. Not only does it generate a feeling of becoming one, a typically Bataillean de-gendering transgression, but also could divulge Mario's deeper homophobic agony since the ambivalent contemplation of encompassing lesbian eroticism points to some exceptional revisionist elements at odds with the cultural parameters of his normal masculine identity. Apart from engaging in erotic transgression against norms of gender equality, Mario's self is also doubled and relived via subtle associations with his two competitors, Angelo and Ernesto, a move justified through his eventual alliance with another side of himself that he is unaccustomed to identifying with. Both circumstances challenge the constraints of taboos and constitute a crossing phase in erotic transgression.

The logic employed in the first section of this paper, "Movements of Imagination," details the discourse of the titular

tango as a dance whose dominant characteristic is concretized by Mario's embarking on an erotic adventure to approach death. The film proposes to trace the historical origins of the nostalgia in tango culture through scenes depicting the arrival of the first settlers in Argentina. Next, "*Tango Blanco & Negro*" ("Tango White & Black") is scrutinized through an exploration of tango's original homosexual source and man-to-man comradeship, the latter designed to attack the homophobia resulting from the former. Both of these scenes constitute a discourse on the tango trilogy—birth, absence, and revival—that is juxtaposed with Mario's love story. The second section, "Erotic Otherness," takes up the film's shift from the public-private domain of the tango to the portrayal of Mario's erotic otherness, it being essential to the demonstration of ambiguous male fantasies of domination, subordination, and victimization of women. It is a strengthened site for representing Mario's sexual desire and the tensions surrounding his relations in erotic triangles where women, namely Laura and Elena, function as examples of erotic transgression, especially through their queer bond revealed in the *mise-en-scène* of "*Tango Lunaire*" ("Tango Lunar" or "Moonstruck Tango") as a contrast to the violent murder in "*Tango Bárbaro*" ("Barbarous Tango"). The fantasy of the women as erotic desire that is paradoxically pure and corrupt, sacred, and secular, is similarly evident in Mario's split self. The similar double consciousness continually dominates his psyche just as he often superimposes Elena's image upon that of Laura in his imagination to arrive at an affective state that will revive him from a living death. This is treated in the paper's third section, "A Double Body." Audiences are affectively drawn into Mario's mind via the camera and mirrors that reflect his identification with Ernesto and Angelo, the "other" men whom his lovers now cherish. A reflective double is based on the relationship of erotic desire that is satisfied by the incorporation of the otherness into the self in "*Trio de Tango*" ("Tango for Three"). Mario exists in two time frames at once, different incarnations of which form a sense of masculinity that is revised and modified with

postmodernist de-gendering implications.

Saura is, in *Tango*, enthusiastic about cinema as a musical form where he can set Mario's personal stories, as well as his interpersonal relations, in the cultural and historical context of the tango. Using tango as artistic ambience is a delicate venture. Rather than treating the dance seriously, Saura seems to avoid the ready drawbacks by giving the film a teasing postmodernist style. In the end, we are simply mesmerized as the camera caressingly lingers on each dancing *mise-en-scène*, displaying a wide range of coherent arrangements of lighting, color, space, music, choreography, acting, and set design. These are the true protagonists in Saura's dance film.

I. Movements of Imagination

The love of dancing, for Saura, is a life-long dedication extending through a remarkable flamenco trilogy made in the 1980s, *Blood Wedding* (1981), *Carmen* (1983) and *Love, the Magician* (1986), all of which are modified from the classical ballet, opera, and drama, yet are renovated with postmodernist revisions and manifest his distinctive visual flare. In the flamenco trilogy, Saura engages in the representation of rehearsals instead of staging performances within a framework of nonlinear narration and conflation of time-axis. However, there is a striking transformation in Saura's next two dance films, *Sevillanas* (1992) and *Flamenco* (1995) that dispense thoroughly with story and pay attention exclusively to choreography and music. Then, in *Tango*, Saura reverts to a visual route interweaving the narrative threads of melodrama and dark fantasy and stringing together a glittering procession of Argentine tango music and dance. In an interview, Saura makes clear the connection between *Tango* and his other dance films. He explains, "It's [*Tango*'s] closer to *Carmen* than to my other films, although it does pertain to *Flamenco* in terms of structure, sets, lighting. In my opinion, it's a step beyond *Flamenco*" (Ponga, 2003: 151). Indeed, *Tango* reminds one of *Carmen*,

demonstrating an obscure juxtaposition of rehearsals and performances to blur the timeline between the reality and the imaginary. *Tango*, depicting Mario's mid-life crisis played out in his filming career and marriage, is the Spanish director's first film made in Buenos Aires. In terms of narrative structure, the metaphorical tango in Saura's film-within-a-film of love and jealousy is expressive of dynamic and poignant conflicts of eroticism that resemble the flamenco in *Carmen*. Yet when it comes to the visual design and formal construction, *Tango* is definitely a film that follows *Flamenco* in stride with its lighting, color, silhouetting, hue, and reflection. Thus, predictably the musical films *Salomé*, *Iberia* and *Fados* in the 2000s—continue to extend Saura's visual aesthetics.

One dominant feature prevailing in *Tango* that distinguishes it from other dance films is its ambition to involve the history of tango culture in Mario's personal love story. The personal is the political packaged in different time zones to fashion a playful and erotic style. At the core of *Tango*, the blending of reality and fiction proceeds to become one potential inflection of the imagined relationship between erotic communication and the articulation of the violent threat of death. Saura's insistence upon the union of Eros and Thanatos paves the way for a primal continuity via the male lead, Mario's involvement with two female characters, Elena and Laura. Both of the female leads are associated with eroticism: they are a pair representing death and revival as Saura has characterized them as transgressive figures of sublimation used to forge the boundaries of social propriety, thus situating the creation of erotic behavior upon taboo.

In *Cinema and Counter-History*, Macia Landy considers that Saura's film explores "eroticism and violence between males and females through one form of tango as a drama of sexual desire and conflict" (2015: 154). Each tango dance scene in the film folds back into Mario's unconscious dialogue of the self and other. Accordingly, in order to define and explain the discourse of the Argentinean tango, it is essential to place significance on Mario's conflicted

reflection of the self/other relation. As a symbolic metaphor and psychological meditation, tango serves to reflect the nature of the self/other, its sex and sexuality, its death and resurrection, its taboo and transgression. Mario's private erotic journey is mirrored in the public domain of tango discourse, including its homosexual origins tinged with the emotional parameters of immigration history, its absence during the Dirty War, and its revival in the 1990s.

Saura's film includes suggestions of the homoerotic accompanied by carefully chosen signs of the suppression of those elements. The clearest of these is Mario's reference to an internal identification with Angelo and Ernesto, the startling direct encounter with a homosexual inclination. Apart from Mario's inner reflection, the homosexual dimension is to be detected in an all-male dance sequence, the dance *mise-en-scène* of "Tango White & Black" (Saura, 1999: 1:18:31-1:20:55).² A long overlooking shot captures the full-length dancers, following the trajectory of their movements over an open space implanted with a chiaroscuro effect where, behind an illuminated and framed screen, cinematographer Vittorio Storaro has adeptly designed a dramatic contrast between light and dark. In this scenario, Astor Piazzolla's "*Calambre*" ("Electric Shock") is played as the background music by the Orchestra Ensemble and Lao Schifrin. Ernesto and a crowd of dancers wearing black singlets challenge another group of dancers dressed in white singlets, led by the famous ballet dancer Julio Bocca, playing himself. The contrast of black and white singlets represents two kinds of forces. Often the dancing silhouettes of the black singlet dancers are reflected on white screens while the white singlet dancers are seen dancing on the black floor. The opposition of the black and white colors builds up dramatically against the maneuvers of the lighting in both the group choreographies and the duos. On a floor that has the appearance of a chessboard, there is a strict dividing line between

² This is an exact showing time period of "*Tango Blanco & Negro*" *mise-en-scène* in the film *Tango*.

these two zones of black and white, yet this line is challenged by two male leads and their team dancers who take the line as their dancing center to enjoy the transgression into the opposing space. All of these are well shot by Storaro whose visual aesthetics rationalizes the usage of light, darkness, shadows, and the range of contrast between white and black for evoking emotion responses that language hard to express. Mario seems to identify with tango's *compadrito* (comradeship) revealed from this male orientation dance. Yet in the final image, there is still a distinguishing line between the opposite forces; it seems to suggest that arriving at a fusion is difficult and hard to achieve, but the efforts are worthwhile. The image of the black/white dichotomy suggests the shattering of a sense of machismo battling homoeroticism.

In the encyclopedic book of *History of Homosexuality in Argentina*, Osvaldo Bazán recounts a parallel association between tango and homosexuality, both burgeoning during the late nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth century. Gay male culture and tango were profoundly linked as they similarly suffered from persecution and marginalized treatment. Their sophisticated entanglement is attributed to capitalist growth and burgeoning European immigration. In the 1910s, Bazán claims, there arose a gap between tango and homosexuality when the tango became institutionalized into Argentine culture and society (2001: 436). As tango became popular as a cultural expression, due to shame and prejudice, it was also embedded an ideology of homophobia (Lahrichi & La Valle, 2016).³

In "Tango White & Black," Saura not only assumes that the male-male partnerships are a homosexual performance, but also considers how the homo-social milieu facilitates a homosexual bonding that can be traced back to the original period of the tango.

³ However, in contemporary Argentina, the ideology of homophobia has shifted to an appeal for gender equality. Under the country's gender equity law, passed in 2012, each citizen can change gender on official documents without any psychiatric diagnosis. Please refer to Lahrichi and La Valle (2016).

Marta E. Savigliano defines such an Argentinean machismo as a “cult of authentic virility fed by a sense of loss” (1995: 43). Savigliano seems to suggest that the tango dance is represented by a variety of conflictive styles of machismo; there is an entangling maze characterized by machismo, homosociality, heterosexuality, as well as homosexual inclination. In her later article “Notes on Tango (as) Queer (Commodity),” Savigliano clarifies her broader statement to point out the meaning of “authentic virility” as being a “power precisely in its transgressive performance of same gender, counter-heteronormative ‘passion’” (2010: 135). Whether the tango dancing couple is the pairing of two males or of two females, it remains a dance between “two subjects who evoke tango’s primal scenes of men competing with steps or knives” (Tobin, 1998: 96). However, Jeffrey Tobin’s combative “mythology of steps or knives” is balanced with the playful “lore of the female closet,” to constitute two typically queer tango scenes in Saura’s film.

Indeed, in the film, queer tango is danced by men and women, both as re-enacting and as parodying the masculine dominance and feminine other. Saura is so highly critical of the gendered asymmetries in tango that he instills the film with a potential castration of masculinity by supplementing it with the relaxed ambience of a lesbian tango between Elena and Laura. This female-female tango of the closet questions the possibility of abandoning the traditional tango’s subversive nature of transgressive aggression. As Savigliano puts it, queer tango, demonstrated by a male-male couple or female-female partners, transgresses the norms of the tango society and tames the tango’s aggressions toward “otherness” (2010: 143). The “otherness” aspect of human subjectivity that Savigliano heavily emphasizes in her text not only suggests a metaphorical meaning to open our bodies, minds, emotions, and souls to others, but also offers a viewpoint from which to observe how tango cultural boundaries are to be transcended. To derive the catalytic eroticism from a process of “otherness,” Saura thus displays a playful and ironic ability to transform the conventional male-

female dual-partnered structure of the tango and its dependence on a hierarchical gender dynamics into a multiple-partnered dance that subverts binary relations between male and female.⁴ A playful dynamic of uncontainable difference is redefined in the film as a transgressive bridge to understand the meaning of the queer “otherness” of tango’s origin that has inspired Mario to make a film about tango, about his erotic desire that could be transgressed in order to search for a new erotic subjectivity.

A genealogy of the erotic via Bataille’s taboo-transgression relation yields insight into how, in the originary process of erotics, the moral structures of taboo can be transgressed by returning to the essence of the self and to the crux of the self’s encounter with the other. In *Erotism*, Bataille details the systematic reasoning of eroticism as something that is different from the pleasure of a sexual act. The function of eroticism is to substitute a sense of continuity for the individual discontinuity by transgressing the line of taboo. The meditation of eroticism is rooted in a state of inner experience that recalls an intimate transition from our normal realm of being discontinuous individuals to reach a profound sense of continuity through a fusion of embodied selves. The fusion, thus, denotes religious sacredness, though not that of conventional Christian doctrines, that can cross over the limitation of such taboos as sexuality and murder set in our society to regulate our behavior. This transgression is a violent challenge that strikes at the very heart of the rational to transform and sublimate it as a sacred desire of eroticism, going beyond the prevailing boundaries to reach the destination of being with otherness. Bataille points out,

In the very first place eroticism differs from animal sexuality in that human sexuality is limited by taboos and the domain of eroticism is that of the transgression of these taboos. Desire in eroticism is the desire that triumphs over the

⁴ The film was shot in 1998, the time the queerness in *milonga* or on stage was rarely to be seen as acceptable variation in Buenos Aires or other regions.

taboo. It presupposes man in conflict with himself . . . everybody realizes also that the taboo on nakedness and the transgression of that taboo make up the general stuff of eroticism, I mean sexuality turned into eroticism. (1957/1986: 256-257)

Bataille's eroticism is essential to the human condition where our uniqueness as human beings is asserted and our psychological distinctiveness is marked as being different from that of other animals that lack the restriction from cultural taboos. However, the imposition of taboos also suggests their transgression to prevent stagnation whilst sustaining stability. "The transgression does not deny the taboo," as Bataille acknowledges, "but transcends it and completes it" (1957/1986: 63). The transgression is the other side of the taboo; they are destined to be united and inseparable. Thus, whenever the construction of a taboo is initiated, the risk of its transgression is generated. The intimacy of this coupling lies in an ambivalent symbiosis that leads to an effective crossing-over while destabilizing the boundary of the taboo. The interaction between taboo and transgression lays the foundation for a social structure which poses an inquiry into individual consciousness. Yet they are both complementary, not negations of one another since a subsidiary move is incurred to create a dialogue between the life instinct and the impulse for breaking it, which Bataille characterized as a struggle between continuity and discontinuity or between the self and other. The triad of eroticism, taboo, and transgression is a crucial base from which to meditate upon the contradiction between the needs of social rationality and those of natural desire allied with the notion of otherness.

Such an erotic triad is similarly accomplished in *Tango*, where the deep well of Mario's imagination overflows with visions of erotic death and natural violence, the primal human agony. Under the aegis of eroticism, Mario recognizes his irreconcilable separateness from the subjects of his desire, Laura and Elena, who embody an awareness of his own predicament, a yearning for continuity that is

impossible in a world of discontinuity. However, for Mario, the ultimate erotic experience is to transform his hatred into a sublime and imaginary death so that he can emerge from death and be resurrected. In the film, the two most dramatic scenes surfacing in Mario's imagination—the stabbing of the two female leads—follow eroticism to its ultimate significance. Saura expounds on a psychological reflection behind Mario's killing of the self: he articulates, "Killing his wife would be logical because she left him and he is depressed and at the point of killing himself, not knowing what to do with his life" (Willem, 2003b: 162). The rules of Mario's society forbid the murder that would transgressively complete his strong sense of masculinity. To move beyond the threat to his masculinity, Mario's fear of death makes him imagine the death of his beloved, the device of the film's poetic justice being to transcend the line of death by making a joke of it.

However, Laura is not the only woman to be stabbed, Elena is also a victim. The ironically well-acted scenes in which Laura and Elena are stabbed turn out to be something fictional in Mario's mind. They mirror Mario's erotic otherness that challenges his own self. The thought of murder comes across his mind in the name of protecting his patriarchal masculinity. At the same time, these two women seem to be in touch with Mario's innermost anxiety permeated by the fantasy of erotic domination. Moreover, his relationships with them are interwoven with the "betrayal" motif originating from the immigrant history of tango. That is, tango belongs to a love dance among immigrants who tend to challenge the limitations of "betrayal" both physically and mentally. As Julie Taylor indicates, the tango is "the lament of the cuckold" (1998: 7). Those who love tango attribute their addiction to solitude, nostalgia, and the yearning for passionate love in a foreign country. Most of all, the women of tango to whom the dance pays homage are the very ones who deceive and betray the men who plead for tenderness.

The Batailleian triad of eroticism, taboo, and transgression can explicate Mario's deepest fear of his selfhood being invaded by

death and how it affects his erotic desire for Laura and Elena. Not only does Bataillean eroticism resist the restricted rational order; it also depends on the notion of transgression, essence of which is to flirt with the sexuality taboos and death. The stabbings of the female leads are justified as jokes that fool the god of death. Moreover, it is believed that as Mario's sense of masculinity is threatened: a state of crisis arises that renders the boundaries of his selfhood ambiguous. The way Mario disavows abject female bodies leads us to realize that he treats them as signs of disorder and of ultimate death; in the same way, his conflicted selfhood can be considered a manifestation of his restricted masculinity, maintained only in the world of fiction and strengthened by his bonds to the childhood self, and his two rivals, Ernesto and Angelo. There is a deeper rationalization of the female bond between Laura and Elena arising from Mario's homophobia, a similar complex exemplified in his formation of a partnership with Ernesto and Angelo. This is a means to strengthen his masculinity on the surface, yet underneath it could be seen as a transgressive strategy to elucidate his sympathy with reference to the hidden homophobic inclination. The double metaphors of Laura/Elena, Ernesto/Angelo are extended to similarly reflect on Mario as a child and a middle-aged man. Doubled with the image of his childhood, Mario, thus, can scrutinize the world of the dictatorship.

However, during the seventies and eighties, a period of dictatorship in Argentina, tango "disappeared" even though it was not prohibited. As tango is based on eroticism and instinctive passion, it could threaten a totalitarian system, so Saura uses ballet and modern dance to replace the "missing" tango. Tango hides in the shadows and cannot be seen in the film. In his famous poem "*El Tango*" ("The Tango"), Borges wrote,

"Where could they be?" asks the elegy
of those who have disappeared, as if there were
a zone in which Yesterday could be
Today, Still, and Yet.
Where, I repeat, is that underworld

that was created, in dusty dirt alleyways
 or in lost villages,
 by those who lived with knives and courage? (as cited in
 Olivera-Williams, 2009: 99)

The tango metaphor illuminates what Borges recalls as a place and a time lost to us in the poetic narrative of days past, when tango belonged in the corners of dark streets and whorehouses.⁵ The “disappeared” tango, replaced by ballet and modern dance in Saura’s film, reveals the tortured history of the Dirty War and condemns the human atrocities that occurred during Argentina’s 1976-1983 dictatorship. In 1976, Jorge Videla seized control of Argentina and ruled the country until 1983. During the period, the country was in a state of chaos, and the government ruthlessly waged a war on any of citizens thought to pose a political threat to the military junta. Apart from “the disappearance of countless Argentine citizens,” Ana C. Cara appropriately points out that “indigenous tango dancing also had disappeared under the influence of *El Proceso* (the military dictatorship)” (2009: 444). In *Tango*, the horror is manifested by Elena’s concerned face and terrified body as she witnesses a political massacre, which eventually leads to her death. Ronald Schwartz describes the dramatic scene of violence thus: “It is probably the strongest and most memorable scene ever created in the dance arena that this viewer has ever seen, a testimony to the talents of the ever-intensely critical master of Spanish cinema, Carlos Saura” (2008: 218). In this sense, the tortured Elena stands in for Argentina’s traumatized victims, as the military junta assumed control of the Argentine government.

Thus, the “disappeared” tango represents those activists—unionists, artists, intellectuals, university students, and professors—taken into custody by the junta to silence the opposition. They simply disappeared.⁶ The revelation of the national wound is

⁵ In his essay “A History of the Tango,” Borges (1999) indicates that the tango was born in the brothels and alleyways of Buenos Aires.

⁶ The Argentinian government’s official estimate is 10,000 disappeared, yet many

investigated through a group of film investors and producers, Angelo being one of the most prominent representatives who object to the depiction of the dance of torture. Mario, bravely citing Borges, replies: "that past is indestructible. Sooner or later things turn up again" (Saura, 1999). The hero hidden in Saura's film is definitely Borges, who emphasizes that the resilience of history is critical, and the transmission of the tragic past caused by violence is crucial. Tango will return.

John Storm Roberts conjectures in his book, *The Latin Tinge*, that tango experienced "a revival that brought interest in the dance to a new generation during the 1990s" (1999: 7). Precisely, tango gained popularity in the late 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s due to widespread interest in the music of Astor Piazzolla and the successful tango shows, *Tango Argentino* and *Forever Tango*, on Broadway. The English director Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson* (1997) and Saura's *Tango* were both shot during the 1990s' tango revival period. Witnessing the tango as one of the popular kinaesthetic movements worldwide, Saura draws attention to ". . . the rehearsals, the preparations, the whole structuring process. . . . The performance itself is less interesting" (Willem, 2003b: 161). Instead of staging a real tango Broadway show, the director's genuine enthusiasm was to invent a film studio mimicking the performing space of the tango in the process of rehearsals and tryouts. Along with supplemental documentary footage, the film explores the confusion which ensues when "imagination" and "reality" merge, when "otherness" becomes present to Mario whose erotic experience may be profoundly ambiguous and related to taboos against sexuality and death, two of the most frequented explored themes of tango.

In the article, "Metacinema: A Modern Necessity," William C. Siska claims that metacinema is practice that assigns struggle with "how to make a movie, how to overcome the obstacles that threaten

human rights groups have placed the estimate around 30,000.

its successful completion” (1979: 287). On this platform, Lionel Abel’s two postulates of metatheatre are also worthy of attention: “the world is a stage and life is a dream” (1963: 105). For each of these tenets, a film about making a film proves to be a significant factor in its performative representation. Amenable to the labyrinthine narrative of Borges, Saura’s meta-theatre/cinema creation emphasizes its nature as a theatric film about the world of tango where characters reflect, construct, and mediate their experiences. It includes an acknowledgement of the fact that the people performing are real dancers/actors/director, and at the same time playing characters. There is a dependence on differences between the fictional world and the reality of film rehearsals, references to performance and writing that detail a tango story of film-within-a-film, for which the French phrase, *mise en abyme*, is appropriated from art history, offering a filmic technique, a mirroring in which a copy of an image is placed within itself. Like any metafilm, Saura’s self-reflexive film, a film about making a film about the tango, oscillates between ideas portraying the cinematic world as real or merely an illusion in the eyes of the spectator. In the opening scene of the film, Mario broods over the screenplay that is about to be visualized as a new film in which a variety of tango dance sequences are performed in an artificial studio. The whole film could be interpreted as staging Mario’s imagination as many scenes are not only superimposed as he reclines on a bed to meditate, but juxtaposed with him side-by-side with the omnipresent camera that proposes to capture the essence of the tango story.

The film’s finale returns to the original arrival history of immigration to deconstruct related elements in this metafilm. In the *mise-en-scène* on immigration (Saura, 1999: 1:37:34-1:51:37), on the stage, a group of silhouetted dancers dressed in 19th century period costumes, formed from a mixed population of various ethnicities, moves slowly against the sunset background, reflecting the colors gold, blue, and purple. “Via, Pensiero, Sull’ali Dorate,” a chorus from Giuseppe Verdi’s opera, meaning, “Go, Thought, on

Golden Wings,” is playing to demonstrate the immigrants’ tragic mood of homelessness. The nostalgic mood carries the seed of tango’s exotic wandering handed down from the immigrants who had invented the dance.

The Argentine tango,⁷ one of the dances of intimate connection, underscores an experience of sacred eroticism often interpreted as a state leading from personal dissolution to cosmic continuity. Unlike other ballroom dances, tango is characterized by a unique embrace and passionate body language to sooth the inner soul. Regarding its origin, Borges explains that “the tango was born in the brothels” hidden behind the alleys in the city of Buenos Aires at the end of the 19th century (1955/1999: 394). Suffering from war, hunger, and economic deprivation, European immigrants during that time felt compelled to leave their homes and search for new lives in such places as the port of Buenos Aires, that boasted a prosperous and affluent macro-economic environment. Settlers from Italy, Spain, and Africa led impoverished lives as outcasts in the lower social levels, agonizing over the loneliness of the solitude caused by nostalgia for their motherlands. They compensated for the loss of family by frequenting festive brothels, where they could sing and dance away their frustrations. The tango, born in the brothel, eventually became not just a symbol of an erotic sexuality, but also a psychological representation and cultural transgression of the immigrants.

One recognizes the implications of Saura’s design of having a tango *milonga* segue in the immigration scene shows the history of tango and its intimate relationship with the immigrants. The extra-textual is the socio-cultural frame which perpetuates the *milonga*. After the immigrants have settled, the stage mood changes as they

⁷ The Argentine tango is based on the milonga whose dance and music was cultivated during the 19th century by the Argentine cowboys named the Gauchos in the rural prairie known as the Pampa. Apart from its local feature, it is also a blend of Cuban “Habanera,” Spanish “Contradanza,” and Afro-Argentine “Candombe” (Savigliano, 1995: 185-186).

happily dance to the three basic rhythms of the tango: the Creole waltz, a piece of music with 3/4 time entitled “*Corazon de Oro*” (“The Golden Heart”), the *milonga*, with an upbeat 2/4 rhythm to “*A Juan Carlos Copes*,” and the tango to “*La Cumparsita*,” a piece of music with a 4/4 beat. This series of three tango songs is a sacred dedication to the tango itself, paying homage to the arrival of the first immigrants in Buenos Aires who created the dance forms.

There are several meta-theatre/film features to be detected in the tango trilogy. In the first music of the waltz, “The Golden Heart,” the most striking image is Angelo’s bodyguard (Antonio Soares Junior) playing an immigrant dancer appearing with his full-body shadow; meanwhile, Mario moves around and directs the scene in the crowd, and Elena dances with her partner. Then an orchestra emerges to play the merry rhythm of *milonga*, Ernesto and Elena dance separately with their partners, the bodyguard appears again in a close-up watching Elena attentively, and the scene is connected to a cut that includes producers with their images twisted in the reflection in the mirror behind; at the same time, Mario is smiling, pleased at the success of the *milonga* rehearsal. The colors change from dark-brown to light-orange while Laura dances with tango master Carlos Nebbia (Juan Carlos Copes) in “*La Cumparsita*,” and there is a young girl watching them attentively, suggesting a sense of admiring voyeurism that will enable tango to be enthusiastically passed on from generation to generation.

Saura’s metafilm is a visualization of all these intrusive acts of the director, producers, and orchestra, transgressing as they cross the line of performance into the frame, designating it all as invented and screened, a reproduced cinema instead of the reality of life itself. There is, moreover, a simulacrum of tango’s roots tinged with threatened violence and erotic love. In the film, whereas the celebratory mood changes to the melancholy “Barbarous Tango,” the historical feature of immigration transforms it into a drama of personal hatred-and-love as the same music reminds the audience of Mario’s dream fantasy of murdering his ex-wife, Laura. The close-

ups of the director Mario, the producer Angelo, and a killer's (bodyguard's) dagger amplify the scope of dramatic tension among these two men when they see Elena has been stabbed. The killer and victim become silhouettes against the golden-orange light backdrop. Elena's sudden death recalls her brutal death in the scene of a torture room during the Dirty War. The former links to Mario's deep fear of Angelo's revenge; the latter alludes to the crimes of Videla's dictatorship. Mario remains poised on Bataille's "verge of danger" because he cannot actually participate in the erotic dance of the tango but only manipulate it from the outside until the very end. He remains vicarious, yet so intensively involved that he cannot bear the loss from his lover's stagey death. His erotic arc of transgression from composed director to grief-stricken actor, then back to a camera eye, could be explained as Storaro's design. He modifies the lights and colors over the course of the scene from gold-blue-purple triple colors, dark orange-brown against light orange-red, and back to the initial triple colors. The arrival of dusk, interweaving gold, blue, and purple, creates an overwhelmingly breath-taking setting. Then the color changes from dark orange-brown to light orange-red to elicit a disturbing and bloody atmosphere surrounding a killer, a victim, a director, a producer, and spectators that leads to a dramatic stabbing scenario where the light is amplified to highlight the orange-red. The strengthened light and overwhelming color from the exterior ambience appears to ironically reflect the interior psychological darkness. Finally, the color retreats to the original triple colors in the dusk, the empty stage is left with a silhouetted camera whose distorted image is reflected in the mirror. The sequencing of color gives the audiences a sense of disillusionment that elicits Jacques's often-quoted line, "Speech: All the world's a stage" (Shakespeare, n.d.), in William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*.

Saura has thus succeeded, through metafilm in elaborating the Bataillean taboo-transgression relation, in introducing a kind of erotics that illustrates the history of the tango, whose homosexual

origins, nostalgia among immigrants, disappearance, and subsequent revival, parallel the transgressive characteristics of love- and-death, and sexual diversity. *Tango* suggests the predominance of masculine desires whose potential images are reframed in a site of abject masculinity, where Mario's masculinity is challenged, distressed, and resurrected. Through the process of erotic ritual, Mario masochistically creates fantasies of the annihilation of his two female lovers—fantasies that allow for the resurrection of his shattered subjectivity. However, subsuming the female as otherness is a way refusing any manifestation of the difference between the sexes; furthermore, sacrificing the female subject to reach male dissolution and continuity is a denial of female power. To mentally sublimate the feminine empowerment, Mario internalizes his love for Laura and Elena and identifies with their lovers Ernesto and Angelo. This process of internalized identification justifies his sacred eroticism toward his female lovers and proves his transgression of the taboo against sexual diversity. However, it also confirms the driving force of the tango's homosexual origin while dealing with it in a very subtle and complicated way that displays the solidarity of camaraderie—a sense of masculine alliance menaced by feminine otherness.

To fully appreciate how the performative queer tango scenes have subverted the heteronormative conventions rooted in the traditional *tanguicity* (tango ethos), the following section offers a renovated observation of the playful transgression of the norms of gender equality in the depiction of Saura's female characters. To substantiate this explication, the discussion returns to Bataille, who derives the catalytic eroticism from a process of erotic otherness accessible to interiority through dramatization and a transgression of boundaries.

II. Erotic Otherness

It is not surprising to discover how essential women are to

eroticism and death in Saura's film: we have explained how the director characterizes women as an erotic otherness used to forge the boundaries of subjectivity and upon whom the murder taboo is imposed. In the beginning of the film, Mario, the narrator, is a discontinuous entity who yet yearns for a continuity with Laura after she leaves him for another man. Consequently, when Laura is replaced by Elena, a continuity comes into existence between Mario and Elena to form Mario's new self who is itself discontinuous, yet bears the mark of transition to continuity with a scar left from the two *femme fatale* encounters. Inevitably, the taboo against death must be broken, instigating acts of transgression in order to sublimate Mario's drive for continuity. Saura constantly couples images of seduction and desire with anguish and fear, exemplifying the Bataille theory of eroticism in each instance.

In the film, Mario, whose melancholy voiceover carries the major point-of-view, indulges himself as a writer/director in the pensive memory of Laura who has just left him for another man. Licking wounds of sorrow, Mario tries to transform his feelings by creating a tango script to revive his life after a broken marriage. The blending of reality and fantasy is a cinematic allusion that the director Saura has largely appropriated from Borges. In an interview, Saura indicates, "There is always something Borgesian in my films. I really like the labyrinthine game of time, of temporal leaps, of what we talked the scripts that don't get written—all of which cinema seems to me to be particularly well equipped for" (Ponga, 2003: 153). In *Tango*, Saura has created a cinematic image that not only pays homage to his literary master, but also highlights those puzzling aspects of Borges' narrative style that complicate the identity of the lead character Mario. To establish the multiplicity of identities for his protagonist, Saura's labyrinthine plot structures provide us with a contemplative space that allows Mario to wander along the sinuous paths of fantasy to regain his interior peace and finally find a way out.

In *Tango*, many dance sequences are interspersed and lend

themselves to associations with dark fantasy—a genre Saura is well known for exploring. One of the most intriguing examples provides insight into Mario’s erotic state of mind as he imagines his ex-wife Laura dancing with her new lover Ernesto in his dance-within-a-film. In the *mise-en-scène* (Saura, 1999: 00:06:10-00:09:18), the emotional facets of the tango duet are displayed with stunning images and a strong musical beat, showcasing a dance that explodes with provocative sexuality and jealousy. Laura Podalsky writes that “the silhouettes and shadows cast on the screens within the film constantly extract the body from a specific, recognizable location” (2002: 142). Indeed, shot in silhouette, reflections of the dance and images of the two dancers in profile along with a breathless and suffocating drum beat seem to foretell an approaching emotional storm. Mario’s obsession over an image of the dancing couple reaches its ultimate climax when his intensely voyeuristic fantasy invades the space of the couple’s dance. In a visually splendid setting penetrated with a bizarre atmosphere surrounding a fantastic story, Mario, holding a dagger, kills Laura to resolve the dramatic tension. Macho sexual politics permeate the scene and become a subliminal voice that plays with Mario’s imagination and reality. Lao Schifrin’s original tango score “Barbarous Tango” immerses the film in the ethos of the tango that explores the complex mix of flirtation, jealousy, and death. It is juxtaposed with Mario’s face in color together with the couple’s silhouetted bodies to propose that Mario’s witness of the couple’s erotic dancing is actually a scenario in his mind. This is a man’s soul seeking revenge against the woman who has betrayed him for another man. The tango music “Barbarous Tango” has been replayed in the immigrants’ arrival scene to behold the cruel murder of Elena, but this time it is for Laura. This is a music dedicated to women brutally murdered by jealous lovers. The title name “Barbarous” proposes a critical judgement upon a slayer. Yet their death is transgressive and fictional since it is only realized in Mario’s imagination in the name of producing a tango film.

In her famous article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,”

Laura Mulvey elaborates the practice of seeing: “There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion” (1975: 843). Conventional feature films are shot with a method that makes audiences feel like they are in the scene with the characters, albeit behind the camera—that is what Mulvey means by assimilating the first two looks to the third. The secret hidden beneath the build-up of sensational reality lies in erasing all the creative work made by the camera and interpretive observation by spectators. Contrary to the classic Hollywood films, Saura’s film has completely utilized Mulvey’s three looks to demonstrate a male gaze whose narcissistic pleasure is derived from cinema-audience-character, an all-in-one identification. In Mario’s dream, the camera, shown beside Ernesto, naturalizes not only the fact that the whole show is a dream and play, but also represents the director Mario. The camera’s presence prevents the audiences from thinking their perspective is the unbiased real truth. In fact, it’s the farthest thing from it since they have to accept the camera’s performativity. While intruding into the cinema’s frame as a bystander to watch the tango duet by Laura and Ernest, Mario turns his role of the camera/director to the audiences. It also inverts the gender dynamic of “woman as image, man as bearer of the look” since he becomes an image to be looked at (Mulvey, 1975: 837). More than jealousy, the male-to-male *compadrito* relationship becomes more complicated when Mario and Ernesto exchange looks before murdering Laura. Being in sync with each other, their minds are obsessively subordinated to the necessity of the male ego discerned from the screen. Saura’s portrayal of the male gaze operates through the metafilm qualities to generate the pleasure in looking via Mario whose concept functions through the identification with the gaze of the camera, the experience of the viewer, and the communication of character. In this way, Mario’s gaze in his dream, indeed, constitutes an organized transgression of camera, audience, and character.

Paradoxically, while reveling in the destruction and displacement, he exists as an object of the male gaze.

In *Tango*, Mario's destructive impulse associated with sexual jealousy and possession is similar to Bataille's eroticism, which "when taken to its natural limit, leads to murder" (1957/1986: 19). There is an intricate relationship between eroticism, violence, and death. Bataille holds violence as essential to sexual activity. Laura's part in "Barbarous Tango" is that of a woman with masculine character who has put on a man's shirt. Yet at the same time, her exotic physicality, the evocative sensuality of her body, is also grounded. Laura is the driving force making Mario turn away from the outside world to gaze at his inward eroticism, which is only strengthened after her abandonment of him. His manhood, thus, is threatened. So as to rebuild his masculinity, Laura has to become the passive victim of violence, with Mario sacrificing her in order to reach his own death by fusing with the "other" woman he has imagined to be sacrificed.⁸ Two psychological assumptions can be obtained: there is an innate human instinct in Mario's sadistic behavior, and this instinct for sadism is inseparable from his approach to erotic death.

Mario's masculinity is reconstructed when he imagines Laura's death on the stage since the violent death is the cinematic crux, a metaphorical fetish that serves as a primitive and erotic force that can rewrite Mario's manhood. However, his masculinity is abject since the interdiction of Laura's life is essential to Mario's eroticism insofar as he cannot be conscious of his transgression on his own, but needs the betrayal of his ex-wife, a kind of fear, to offer a sense of violation or transgression. Likewise, according to Bataille, in *The Accursed Share: Volumes II and III*, the erotic moment of the vertiginous void is traced to an act of transgression:

⁸ In his two books *Erotism* and *Inner Experience*, Bataille differentiates his view of sacrifice from that of others: his view not only entails a sense of loss from the sacrificer, but also shares with the thoughts of the victim. It is based on this mutual loss that the victim and sacrificer communicate with each other.

And ultimately it is not ruination, let alone death, it is joy that the pursuit of ruination attains in the festival. We draw near to the void, but not in order to fall into it. We want to be intoxicated with vertigo, and the image of the fall suffices for this . . . the moment death approaches it creates a void in us that incapacitates us in advance. So not only is trickery necessary in order not to die, we must avoid dying if we wish to attain joy. (1976/1991: 84)

Bataille seems to not only suggest that people tend to desire dangerous and fatal activities, but also to note that people must fulfill this desire through imagination. The approach to imaging death, based on Bataille, is not a pursuit of destruction but instead a means of fantastical ecstasy—a sort of suffocated revelation of the state of impending death, almost a state of rapturous revelry in vertiginous chaos, equivalent to the explosive attraction of the feeling of touching the impossible. The underneath power is the healing and artistic sublimation that can lift one up from the suppression of actual life. Regarding the vertiginous experience of the abyss, there is an implicit connection to the nature of playful death and the symbolic association with transgression achieved by the two female leads, Laura and Elena. In *Tango*, the double movement of taboo/transgression within Mario's mind is like a double movement of negation and return that implies, paradoxically, that his erotic feelings toward Laura have driven him to the brink of death. In the possession of Laura as a void, he comes to consciousness—of loss, of death, and of himself as erotic subject. At the bottom of Mario's mind, there is a dilemma between two moments of negation: the first transgression is a negation of his primitive eroticism yielding himself to a convention of masculinity by murdering his beloved Laura; the second transgression is a negation of the conventional stereotype that does not share the same sympathy with the desire of his lover, that justifies Mario's rebirth from Laura's death.

Apart from his recent marital separation from Laura, Mario's passion grows for Elena who has a gangster boyfriend, Angelo, the

influential producer who will finance Mario's tango film. Becoming enamored of Elena, Mario's new love affair threatens the making of the film should Angelo discover their hidden love. Like Laura, Elena's character remains ambivalent through the tango's weaving of her emotions as she struggles to master its sinuous moves. In the studio, Mario plays out his romantic fantasies and shocking nightmares through shadow play, silhouettes, and distorted mirrors, to create a dreamlike and unrealistic atmosphere. Into this artificial studio, Mario fleshes out Elena's character with various tango sequences. The film culminates with several gripping sequences featuring her. At first, Elena, joining the rehearsal of a group of tango dancers, appears reflected in a mirror, leaving a sense of uncertainty as to what is real and what is imagined. Elena's enigmatic yet sophisticated character makes Mario love her more. In another scenario, facing the mirror, Mario says, "I love you, I adore you, I need you—there's no other way to tell the story" (Saura, 1999). It seems that Elena is a fictional character who comes from Mario's mind and is a reflection from his own inner mirror. The audiences, thus, are briefly jerked back to the unresolved reality of the plot. In an unrealistic way, the story goes on to present two climactic dance sequences that portray Elena's tortured body: one on the history of torture and oppression, the Dirty War; and the other on a scene of turn-of-the-century European immigrants. In both scenes, Elena's body is helplessly marked with historical and personal wounds as her emotion becomes prey to the violent expressiveness of the tango. Tragically, Elena's life comes to an end when she is stabbed by Junior, Angelo's body guard, during a dance party hosted by immigrants. The scene is so real that Mario forgets his part as a director and intrudes upon the scene of immigrants to embrace his beloved Elena; the gesture makes the audiences believe that Elena has been cruelly murdered. Eventually, the audiences realize that the scene of stabbing is a rehearsal session in the film-within-a-film, a dramatic scenario belonging to fantastic story used to create a parody of death.

In *Tango*, Elena is considered to be the property of Angelo, a fatherly figure whose authority grants her the ratified status of female lead in Mario's new film. In an ambivalent way, Elena becomes an object of exchange that stimulates the erotic desire of these two men. She "ornaments herself with the greatest care and offers an immobile figure/face to the temptation of he who possesses her" (Bataille, 1976/1991: 121). A *femme fatale* is at the center of eroticism, as Bataille writes it, because of her status as object of exchange that marks the limit between law and transgression. The very notion of a putative object of exchange presupposes that there is a bond between men that allows those connections to be conceived in kinship terms, thereby materializing a sense of brotherhood. Yet, at the same time, a desire for transgression disrupts the bond between Mario and Angelo and drives Mario to experience the seductive artifice of death.

On the one hand, Mario loves Elena whose entanglement with Angelo makes him love her more; yet on the other, Elena reminds him of Laura who used to love him but abandoned him for a new lover. In a different time or space, Elena could be another Laura who betrays him. They both recreate the classical *femme fatale* image that reflects the role of heterosexual prey in a patriarchal homosocial game. The beautiful and deadly *milonguitas* abandon the lovers they have chosen and move on to others for a more promising future. In the social *milongas*, there is a formal custom of how long one dances with one partner before moving on to others—men are supposed to move around. The transgression presented in the film is that women do it. Savigliano notes: "Women's participation in tango . . . as characters . . . presents a dilemma. [Tango] has avoided giving any straight answers about women, perhaps because they were/are seen as the pawns of the tangueros' male wars . . . [and] question the hegemony of the macho message" (1995: 69). What is especially interesting here, as Savigliano puts it, is the focus on addressing women's resistance simply as complicit or submissive; instead the *milonguitas* challenge the dictates of machismo by contributing to a

politics of paralysis that reinforces a dynamic twist in the power game.

Elena and Laura also carry the active erotic gaze with their participation in Mario's life by reversing his destiny. Mario, thus, becomes a passive man whose fate is decided by these two willful women. After breaking up, Laura reminds Mario that she not only has a new lover Ernesto, but also is thrilled with her new dancing partnership with which a crippled Mario cannot compete. Mario's violent reaction to Laura's rejection of him is connected, politically, to Mario's anger at the brutal murder in the Dirty War and his fear of Elena's death by Angelica. Whereas Laura is Mario's primitive erotic brutality, Elena demonstrates the restorative potential eroticism, yet both are dangerous and destructive to his masculinity. The fatal attraction that Elena exerts on Mario is doubled when he realizes that Elena is under the guardianship of the dangerous mafia leader Angelo, a love rival and economic supporter for his film. Her fatality increases as the beginning of their illicit love is accumulated at all imaginable levels. As active emblematic figures caught in a web, both women fight against the established parameters of the patriarchal world. Their transgression is possibly realized only in Mario's imagination when they dance as a lesbian couple to offer a daring resistance to the heterosexual world system contrary to their contentment within the boundaries of heterosexual romantic love. Anyway, Elena will be rescued by Mario and become the repository of Mario's sexual fantasies and his film material.

The lavish queer tango scene appearing in Mario's mind manifests his deepest fear and anxiety for a feminine bond between Laura and Elena in the *mise-en-scène* dance sequence entitled "Moonstruck Tango" ("*Tango Lunaire*") (Saura, 1999: 01:12:30-01:15:26). Mario turns on a wind machine facing an open dressing room where Elena is dancing erotically with Laura, one dressed in white and the other in black, to show seemingly conflicting characters while simultaneously suggesting that they are the same person in Mario's mind. The black and white floor tiles, echoing

their dresses, recall the analogous setting of "Tango White & Black" where two groups of male dancers create an intense yet lyric confrontation. The queerness can be repetitively detested and emphasized in both scenes. Considered as one of the most influential cinematographers in cinema, Storaro has adopted a different approach for the two queer dancing scenes. The duet with the men is filmed in a chessboard-like duel space, to show the power of machismo by viewing the competition of two groups of male dancers' moving bodies and speedy feet. There are no shots of men's faces until the very end to give the audiences close-ups of Ernesto and his rival leader Julio. Desire is subordinated to athleticism and the need for masculinity, whereas with the women, it is the opposite.

In stark contrast to the masculine movement, the female dancers enact a lesbian pseudo-erotic ritual. A theatrical ambient on screen is subtly arranged in the backstage dressing room where a group of women are viewed in close-up montages, their poignant facial expressions and sensual bodily gestures amplified to create a mood of female eroticism. The French word for the music's title "*lunaire*" can be translated into English as "lunar" and associated with lunacy, validating the queerness of two-female dancing. The metaphorical wind revealed from the scene is empowerment of mystical endeavor lurking in unknown haunts among women; the pure feminine intuition goes where the air whispers in the open wardrobe that reveals a homosexual ambience. The camera focuses on details of the splendid female costumes in the nostalgic 1920s: the make-up ceremony, long smoke nozzles and seductive young women's faces. Being surrounded by swirling smoke and reflections from mirrors, Laura moves on to kiss Elena, the same active gesture also shown in the invitation to the dance in front of the closet with red-purple lighting. Their eventual kiss not only reshapes the stereotypical representation of women who always surrender to macho men's spell in the tango, but also comprises yet another bastion for countering the passionate, exotic image of the *femme fatale*. There is an obvious association between tango and queer

identity. In the same vein, Mercedes Liska illuminates in *Argentine Queer Tango*,

. . . the spread of a discreet, moderate dance style among women suggests that gender configurations in the tango transcend erotic-affective choices. In this sense, it can be said that gender politics and discourses are playing a role in shaping the aesthetics of contemporary dance practices, particularly in the tango. Be that as it may, queer stylistics do combine different feminine normative registers in the interest of favoring sexual-generic convergence. (2017: 135)

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler, explains how “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender: identity is performatively constituted” (2006: 25). Butler conceives of gender as an elaborate fabrication, or in Saura’s sense of “playfulness,” as designed to oppose the patriarchal society. She brings the concept of “performativity” to a brand new level by indicating the fact that people tend to not only cite the conventions and ideologies of the social world, but also enact and perform that reality. Accordingly, queer identity, played out by Laura and Elena, is confronted with the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant. Their exaggerated tango performance gives the director of photography, Storaro, license to use more expressive visual elements—the saturated color texture of red-purple and the lighting in the ambience escorting the two female leads’ warmer sensation—to arrive at a performative sensual kiss. From this, the audiences have realized that Elena and Laura are not only associated in Mario’s subjective terms; they become akin to the sacred fusion via a performative ritual of continuous and reciprocated pleasure of spontaneous kissing, as Bataille portrays it, “. . . the final aim of eroticism is fusion, all barriers gone” (1957/1986: 129). This overflowing eroticism therefore corresponds to transgression. The transgressive value of eroticism contributes to displace the experience of subjectivity and achieves unity with sacredness that results in the obliteration of subjectivity, a sort of destruction associated with death whose aura

symbolizes prevailing passion. However, the most renovated point revealed from the queer dancing scene is indicated by Kathy Davis' article, "Should a Feminist Dance Tango?" where she writes, ". . . tango is queered when the gendered binary between leader and follower is disbanded altogether and partners constantly—and with passion—switch the roles of leading and following" (2015: 9). Although it is Laura who invites Elena to dance a *milonga* as a man would, it is hard to detect which woman, Elena or Laura, takes the dominant lead position, or which is subordinated to follow as the gender line is erased. The same trans-gendering deployment is to be seen in the male-to-male dance, although subtly perceptive audiences might detect a slight difference as a lead-and-follow partnership still remains in the male-to-male dance wherein Ernesto plays the role of leader and Julio follower, judging from the embracing posture they hold. Even though Laura sometimes plays a leader in the dance, yet she shifts to a follower when embracing and kissing Elena. Saura seems to suggest that women adapt more easily to the process of erotic transgression.

The *mise-en-scène* causes some ambivalent controversy on female subjectivity and erotic fusion, not just because of their seductive embracing movements and the lesbian kissing, but also because the audience is reminded to look for clues hidden in the song "Who Would Have Said" ("*Quién Hubiera Dicho*"). The lyrics croon:

Life is so strange, friend
 I didn't love her when I met her
 Until one night she firmly said to me
 "I am tired of everything" and left
 Life is so strange.
 That night I fell in love with her. (Saura, 1999)

The song is repeatedly sung twice, with the first time predicting the coming song. First, it is played as background music when Mario admiringly looks at Laura's picture after she has left him; although the song is sung by a male singer, Mario's voice-over recites the lines

from the screenplay saying, "The first note is sung by a female." His voice-over seems to predict that the same intimate song will be sung by Elena whose charm Mario will not be able to resist. It seems that Mario is addicted to the memory of unfulfilled love, and such an addiction will urge Mario to find another love and turn it into a similar kind of unfulfilled love. It is his imaginary love of Laura that leaves him addicted to her memory. Eventually, for Mario, Laura and Elena complete the formation of a double self in Mario's mind, a representation of the eternal image of the beloved woman who eventually turns love into betrayal.

Through this song, Elena and Laura's erotic fusion is performed again; however, there is slight difference between these two women. This time Elena is more prominent than Laura as she is given the voice to sing the song while Laura is only a silent image in the photo. Elena's substantiality is reinforced when Mario gifts her a box that contains a pair of singing cicada whose rattling-cum-buzzing cacophony supports Elena's dynamic enunciative position to be concretized not just as a singer-and-dancer in Mario's tango film, but also as an empowered female whose declaration of rejection of Angelo's love distinguishes her from the masculine world that claims a female is only a male's accessory or prey. Never surrendering to erotic dominance, as is seen from her refusal to accept Angelo's phallic monopolizing desire, she attains the power of autonomy over her body. No longer Angelo's possession and Mario's invention, she is her own creation. Like a cicada, she symbolizes the birth of Mario's new life in relation to his creation of a new tango film. She creates the infinite power to life and the enthusiasm for faith that Mario lacks in middle-age. Therefore, it is she to whom he turns for shelter in his love life and an eternal mystical image of woman in his film. It is Mario who has to become incorporated in her empowered world of a cicada's life, the equivalent of an all-day work of singing and dancing that leads to her staying away from a living-death life with Angelo and starting a life by entering into the world of the tango with Mario. It is Mario who has to be incorporated into

Elena's world as he needs her strength to break through his old shells. In order to survive from the world-within-a-film, he suffers from his erotic otherness with her, yet they come together to break the cocoon in which the patriarchal society binds them. The characterization of Elena-with-Laura, and Elena-with-Mario, doubles the efficiency of the erotic transgression.

Yet for Elena the most powerful transgression is found in her ability to avoid the masculine gaze that Mario casts on her by considering her as a passive displacement for Laura. In a solo *mise-en-scène* (Saura, 1999: 0:48:03-49:33) she, dressed in red, dances alone against the green backlight screen, and then moves toward her own shadow, finally to be detached from it. While she is rehearsing in the shadow, dancing along with the tango music of "Nostalgias" played by Juanjo Dominguez and Orlando Marconi, Mario gazes at her and his back silhouette becomes a barrier between her and her shadow. As a prototypical figure in the male imagination, Elena is mistakenly considered sexual because her value lies in male's surveillance. However, she has realized the importance of unravelling the assumption that reproduces phallogocentric sexual fantasies of transgression. In the film, her fictional shadow dies twice: a collective image of female victim; an immigrant. Each time constitutes a dramatic climax that functions as a critique of gender relations and mimicry of brutal violence restricted by male gaze. Apart from that, her shadowy death reflects Mario's deepest awareness of the dark forces of eroticism that could lead to destruction, associated with Bataille's preliminary statement in *Erotism* that address eroticism and its relationship with death, transgression, taboo, and violence. Consequently, she must free herself from a totally different mode of existence and become more autonomous and independent. Mario understands her in the grip of the unconscious shadow, indicating that his psychic movement is the same as hers since the dark eroticism requires an outlet to release the inner suppression. In the end, it is not the director who decides who will die; instead the actress decides to survive her death by

opening her eyes to gaze at the grief-stricken Mario. This time she is the victor: an empowered female with an ability to look.

The dual operation of taboo (interdiction) and transgression, the mechanism of Bataillean eroticism, can be applied here to explore the dialectical opposition in the relationships among Mario, Laura, and Elena. The sacred, being opposed to the profane, is associated with interdiction, which in French refers to both the rule of exclusion and to the object rendered taboo. Eroticizing, based on a sense of self-recognition, provides a conscious experience of transgression which poses not a question of real struggle to the death, but of a fictional death. The basic mode operates through a strategic alignment of the oppositional pairs, namely continuity/discontinuity, sacred/profane, interdiction/transgression. Bataille writes:

Transgression is complementary to the profane world, exceeding its limits but not destroying it. Human society is not only a world of work. Simultaneously—or successively—it is made up of the profane and the sacred, its two complementary forms. The profane world is the world of interdictions. The sacred world depends on limited acts of transgression. (1957/1986: 67-68)

The Bataillean transgression, with the aim of allowing these peripheries to be permeable, negotiates a relationship with limits whose transcendental flexibility challenges the conventional norms without destroying them. The progression to transgression lies in finding boundaries that ambivalently acknowledge the potentiality of being surpassed. What Saura proposes to indicate here in his film is a double play of taboo and transgression. As an erotic object, Elena is a necessity for Mario's transgression as she provides for the recognition of erotic sovereignty. She is needed to represent the transgressiveness of erotic possession. The illusion of her death, for Mario, could be an experience of the absolute recognition of eroticism, while her fictional death at the hand of Angelo's bodyguard offers a perfect solution to treating Elena as the "other"

of the patriarchal world of work, even while her excess is a luxury used to forge a patriarchal community. Elena's abject corpse plays on the various meanings of border—not only between reality and fiction, but also between the sacred and profane: the trigger for the enactment of Mario's loss of masculinity. Embracing Elena's corpse, Mario, whose fate is linked with the corpse, experiences a sorrowful self, just as if he was an end in himself. Elena's fiction of death performed and staged here is to evoke Mario's self that experiences a dynamic transgression breaking down discontinuity. The fictional death of the two figures of Laura and Elena is codified in the film as a token of erotic danger and its after-revival. Responding to that endangerment, Mario realizes that he has to set himself free to construct selfhood independently of moral convention. In the process of facing the female death as his death, Mario has recognized that the transgressive violence really executes a return to eroticism. Some would argue that Mario's transgression could not be real because it takes place inside a fiction, due to Saura's "playfulness" with death in this tango film, it is persuasive to allow that the audiovisual filmmaking is the sublimated surrogate for real tragedy.

Thus, the fantasy of rational violence and punishment surface as a vital theme of making amends for death where love is aligned more strongly with eroticism. By dissolving the boundaries, Elena and Laura represent erotic death which compensates Mario's ruined self in an artistically sublimated way. It is thus from death that Mario revives himself. Yet the intriguing subversion that Saura uses here is to make a bridge acknowledging Mario's erotic otherness by transgressing the taboos of murder and sexuality. To transgress the erotic otherness means to go over to the other without defeat. Mario's self is passing the threshold of the other by experiencing his imagining scene of committing murder. In consequence, his self is safe and knows how to communicate with his eroticism without really trespassing on the other's threshold via the performative rituals of fictional death of playfulness. However, the notion of transgressive playfulness not only is realized from the "other" female

perspective, but also actualized from the opposite gender, typically Mario himself and his connection to other males. First, the authorial lens concentrates on Mario to reflect his inner child with the aim to bring back the nostalgic past of the tango history and wounds. Then, aided with the camera, Mario's "bodily projection" becomes porous via Ernesto and Angelo who constitute an eternal return of Mario's split self lost in reality and imagination.

III. A Double Body

It is possible to liken the mind to a film, here demonstrated by a number of parallel analogies between Mario and the camera, a "cine-brain", as mentioned by Perkins in his book, *Film as Film* (1972: 133). He explicitly addresses the issue of fiction in film, speaking of the mind as if it were the film. In *Tango*, a synthesis between photographic realism and dramatic illusion has been explored extremely. Mario has been recognized as Saura's cinematic self in his role as a director. At certain points in the narrative, Mario is often juxtaposed with the camera machine that almost perceptibly intrudes in the scenes and becomes an observer or even a character. That fits a basic concept presented in *Tango* since it is a movie about making a movie about a movie. Through the authorial lens, we gain new insights into the mind of Mario whose desire interrogates indeterminate relations between words and images, reality and imagination, a kind of transgressive disruption of various binaries. The self-referential *Tango* presents some characteristics of the reflective double: several paired images of child/middle-aged Mario, Mario/Ernesto, Mario/Angelo, and Mario/Saura (mirror-camera) that produce mediations on temporality, death, and transgression.

Mario, whose surname Suárez is extremely close to the director's, is passing through some sort of marital predicament highlighted through his depressed voiceover in which he calls himself "a solitary animal—one of those old lions who roams the African savanna" (Saura, 1999: 01:01:35-01:01:41). However,

Mario's essential grief could be traced back to his childhood. This "old lion" is trying to make a connection with his primal self, the child Mario. Thanks to set designer Waldo Norman (Ricardo Mourelle), Mario is able to travel between time and space through the nostalgic golden-yellow color giving this sequence of childhood in the elementary school a nostalgic affect. "The individual," Julia Kristeva illustrates, "in his return to him or herself, experiences division, conflict, pleasure and *jouissance* in this fragmentation. This is the modern vision of psychic truth" (1998/2002: 100). Kristeva opens up the possibility of a politics of questioning identity that molds the truth of self-construction. While opening the self into the shape of a series of questions, a potential stand to subvert it is formed. The eternal return of the split self directs us to realize the fact that singularity exists in the plural where the reciprocal foreignness reinforces the self to face its primal imagination.

In a similar vein, Bataille puts it well, "But surely the very means of avoiding reduction to the reflection of things constitute a desire for the impossible" (1957/1985: 44-45). Bataille's "childhood" status constitutes "a desire for the impossible." In an essay discussing Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights*, Bataille explains the return to childhood: he expounds, "Literature is not innocent. It is guilty and should admit itself so. Action alone has its rights, its prerogatives. I wanted to prove that literature is a return to childhood" (1957/1985: i-ii). Bataille highly praises *Wuthering Heights* as a novel exploring the asocial and amoral aspects of childhood and the transgressive energies thus incurred. Central to Saura's scene of going back to the child Mario is his understanding of the Bataillean "childhood" self. By observing children as different from adults, it is quite clear that the child Mario is the "other" self; more important, his otherness is more valued, more cherished, more desired since the child Mario may naturally transgress by doing something the middle-aged Mario might not. The child Mario understands that he is like Mario, so that he moves from a system outside it to one that is personal. However, not only is the

concretization of a temporal frame the trigger for transgression, but also for Mario's personalization of uniqueness and difference from the other men. Through the presence of the child Mario in the years of the Dirty War, the audience senses that Mario, the handicapped director who wears a kind of melancholy uniqueness, is allowed to say, "I was there." The film is, Saura claims, "a political aspect because the protagonist has lived through a horrible period of Argentine history, that still is having serious consequences. That has left its mark on an entire generation of Argentine people, and I didn't want to ignore it" (Ponga, 2003: 153). Indeed, the historical wounds are imprinted and developed through Mario.

There are two scenarios where Mario looks at the same boy also named Mario: one (Saura, 1999: 00:43:45-00:44:19) is in Mario's elementary school where a teacher calls the child Mario to concentrate on his lesson regarding dinosaur and mammal species; the other (00:49:47-00:50:40) is in the film studio where a female tango teacher calls the child's name and teaches him how to dance. In these two scenes, Mario and the child Mario have a tacit understanding shown from their exchange of looks when being called. Their minds are in sync with each other. Responding to the enigmatic Child Mario, Saura elucidates the possibilities,

He [the child Mario] could be Mario from the past, as a memory of himself. I left it unclear because I wanted it to be ambiguous. . . . I thought that he could be Mario seeing himself as a boy, or he could be a different boy entirely. I felt it like that, very mysterious. (Willem, 2003b: 162)

For Saura, his childhood was filled with tangos because his father was a passionate tango fan during the time of the Spanish Civil War. A childhood family portrait is coupled with war memories and tango music that reflect what the child Mario experienced. Saura's autobiographical reference reveals that Mario's dedication to a tango film depicting the traumatic wounds of the Dirty War is related to Saura's memory of his father's love for tango in the era of

Spanish Civil War. Mario's transgressive gaze upon the child Mario transcends the national boundary between Spain and Argentina. The paired depressing war memories deliberate upon the universal struggle between democracy and dictatorship. The confrontation foregrounds the essence of the tango whose contradictory power of resistance to the tendency of patriarchy in the contemporary society and whose "politics of touch," with its gender-breaking subversion of social framing, perform an intimate transgression.

The image projected in the construction of the self is also underscored in the film *Tango*. Saura recognizes that the formation of the self entails conscious differentiation between the exterior world of reality and the interior world of imagination. Most of Saura's visual perception is through Mario, who is capable of objectivizing himself by taking a giant step from the consciousness of the body to the consciousness of the self. The notion of "bodily projection" culminates in his recognition in the mirror/camera where he discovers himself through the gaze of an "other." Wearing different faces, Mario's multiple personality is reflected via the mirror/camera to demonstrate his alienated, ambivalent, and radical self. As a dangerous and deceptive tool, the mirror/camera creates duplication to let dissimilarities creep in. In the *mise-en-scène* of "Tango for Three" (Saura, 1999: 00:56:25-01:00:06) accompanied by the music of "*Tango del Atardece II*," Mario is rehearsing a tango dance made by Laura, Elena, and Ernesto. Playing Elena's new lover and dance-partner, Ernesto in this performative scene becomes Mario's substitute torn between Laura and Elena. In this seductive tango scene, there is a huge mirror in the backdrop reflecting the distorted images of three dancers while the director's fierce jealousy is demonstrated through the violent lime-green color. Saura, working with Storaro, believes ". . . colors were very important for indicating the situations and even the spirit" (Willem, 2003b: 160). While lime-green stands for sickness and jealousy based on the color psychology, the color can be interpreted to paint Mario's possessive characteristic toward the woman he loves and the woman he used

to love. In this triangular love jungle, the color might create too much vitality on the issue of vicious envy and overwhelm the audience visually. In the last part of the dance, the camera intrudes to the front of the scene accompanying Mario to observe the scene of “Tango for Three.” Like Mario’s delirium, the deformations reflected in the mirror image depict a decomposition of the self in an imaginative space where a boundary between reality and fiction is hardly recognized.

Giving itself a bit of self-referential personality, the intrusive camera, like the mirror, bonds with Mario; together, they become characters involved in “Tango for Three,” their presence making the audiences realize that this tango dancing is a part of a rehearsal scene within a film. This gives the audience an alternative perspective to perceive the film as part of a dream-like vision since the rehearsal ritual of the tango sequence evokes the fleeting imagination of the entire course of jealousy in a single moment. The initial retrieval of Mario’s jealousy and the subsequent disavowal of it in the name of rehearsal is the dialectic with the self that allows the audiences to feel a sense of revelation and redemption hidden within the deep anguish of erotic love. Bataille writes, “Those arts which sustain anguish and the recovery from anguish within us, are the heirs of religion” (1957/1985: 16). He considers that fantasy or imagination betrays reality and sustains its nutrients from arts that play a psychological role similar to that of sacred belief. To this end, Saura observes that the tango and cinema can be completed together to define human anxiety mirrored from the self that loses itself “as completely as the ecstatic mystic loses himself in God” (177). Echoing Bataille’s assignation of a sacrificial legacy in ritual, Saura traces the roots of Greek theatre to interpret sacrificial rites as crucial to the postmodernist cinema. Yet to designate it as merely sacred illusion would be to ignore the fact that when an illusion molds a way of life, it has already become real, creating an ironic tone tinged with death in the account of time’s redemption.

Likewise, the scene of “Tango for Three” invents its own desire

for death-driven jealousy: a passion that is perceived to be primordial. By observing Mario watch his double substitute Ernesto replace him in the triangular love relationship between Elena and Laura, seeing Mario's past emotion fused into the present before us, it would seem that Saura seeks to find a time-destroying narration that honors the memory and imagination. Ernesto could be Mario's present self stuck in a love dilemma; Mario's present self could be Ernesto's future self that will face a similar disaster of jealousy. Time is liberated from the delicate slavery of the cinema and restored to the limitless domain of human memories and fantasies. Filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet considers that images in film are imaginings, "something like an interior film continually projected in our own minds . . . the total cinema of our mind admits both in alternation and to the same degree the present fragments of reality proposed by sight and hearing, and past fragments, or future fragments, or fragments that are completely phantasmagorical" (1965: 11-12). Robbe-Grillet seems to suggest that imaging in our mind is reflected in the film images: both are languages of the unconscious, being buried deeply yet suddenly becoming transparent through the screen tunnel that transcends time and space. Undeniably, our mind, like Mario's, is here and there; it turns to the past, then to the present and future. In mirroring Mario's random turns of thought, the dancer Ernesto overcomes the forms of the outer world, namely space, time, and causality, sublimating Mario's physical passion to the fictional zone of tango performance.

The film provides us with a variety of scenarios in which two figures merge into the same self. The identification through the otherness of multi-self is most frequently employed to express a sexual fantasy. Mario puts himself in the place of his lover Elena since she has an incestualized relation to her rich boy-friend Angelo; therefore, Mario identifies with Angelo with whom Elena has had sexual relations. Simultaneously, the scene in which Elena breaks Angelo's heart is just the same as that in which Laura broke his. In the same way, it recalls the scene where Mario's intrudes upon the

dance of “Tango for Three” and identifies himself with Ernesto with whom Laura has fallen in love. Generally speaking, jealousy is the domineering passion in the patriarchal society. Instead of manifesting his jealousy toward Ernesto and Angelo, Mario internalizes his love for Laura and Elena and identifies with them. This process of internalized identification justifies his sacred eroticism toward his female lovers and proves his transgression against the taboos of sexuality and murder. Thus, Mario and Angelo/Ernesto are two sides of a single character who transcend the limitations of the patriarchal society considering jealousy as one of the most important features in a love-and-hatred mode. Not to be provoked by the patriarchal ideology, for Mario, jealousy is sublimated via the act of his true identification with the third party. Furthermore, this intriguing and complicated psychic double mechanism of erotic identification makes the film transcend the purely empirical succession of time and presents a temporal structure that allows memories and fantasies to coexist in a non-chronological zone.

Saura’s *Tango* complicates Mario’s erotic experience not only in its treatment of Laura/Elena as the object of Mario’s transgressive desire, but also in his involvement with the other two male characters, Ernesto/Angelo. Mario and Laura cannot properly experience continuity without the thought of Ernesto whose existence by reinforcing the existence of internalized taboos when transgressed creates a sense of continuity in Mario’s mind. The important existence of Ernesto has been highlighted in order to fulfill Mario’s performative dancing-self since he was crippled physically in a car accident and mentally injured by his ex-wife. Ernesto is not given many lines and remains “silent” in verbal communication. Tango, thus, becomes an expressive way of understanding his inner thought correlated with Mario. His dancing steps, gestures, even facial expression in accordance with lighting, color, and setting contribute to reinforce his different psychological moods in four tango scenes that constitute his intimate connection

to Mario. In "Barbarous Tango," where he plays the role of a shadowed spectator or even a co-conspirator involved in Mario's murdering brutality against Laura, the audience might detect an exchange of looks and silent promise between these two men before the killing. Paralleling the man-to-man compact, there is one essential thing that cannot be ignored. It is the careful placement of a camera beside Ernesto when the music starts to play in the beginning. This precise deployment of man-and-camera is perceived in the prelude song "Barbarous Tango" (Saura, 1999: 00:53:50-00:54:34) before "Tango for Three," the music reminding us that Laura's murder is attainable based on the two men's agreement. Like Ernesto's first image of being linked with a camera, the precise placement locates Mario beside a camera with a mirror behind him, making the audience see his front, his back, and the camera simultaneously. A man, a mirror, and a camera coexist as a symbol of comradeship. The equivalent "barbarous" music and the matching camera placement work together to imply that these two men are an identical double: Mario finds himself projected into, and becoming, Mario-with-Ernesto. Meanwhile, in "*Tango Para*" ("For Tango") (Saura, 1999: 00:31:22-00:33:07), it might be observed that the initial back-to-back posture shown by Ernesto and Laura changes to an intimate embrace in the final pose, suggesting that he becomes Mario's substitute to ask for Laura's forgiveness after Mario's forcing a kiss with her. The scaffolding to the side at Mario's back is sophisticatedly hidden behind the white screen projected as a dark silhouette, and suggests an in-process state of healing reconstruction is working between Mario and Laura. In "Tango White & Black," indicating his conflicting emotions, Mario initiates a duel, a game wherein two opposing forces of deadly masculine contenders compete with dragging feet. Finally, in "Tango for Three," he, like Mario, is a fated man reflected by his mind playing with the wild eroticism of the death-approaching jealousy between the two *femme fatales* Elena and Laura.

Gradually, from being the initial collaborator to the final two-

in-one integration, Ernesto becomes Mario's double. Ernesto's tango images could be interpreted as Mario's male confessions that overwhelmingly confront the questions of competing for women and competing for masculinity in compensation for his physical disability. Mario's exterior handicap and interior injury show a striking difference in a world of physicality, of dance, beauty, and grace. Being excluded from the world, he can only participate as a passive voyeur, so Ernesto compensates for his physical and mental loss. Mario's transformation via Ernesto could be associated with the most oft-quoted remark about the Argentine tango from Enrique Santos Discepolo, a renowned composer and lyricist, who said that "a sad thought danced" (as cited in Thompson, 2005: 26). Most importantly, Ernesto could be Mario's tango ghost who shadows his revenge self, the deadly, fantasmatic double whose disguised gaze veers Mario beyond the anguish of death, toward the me that is not me, to a real that is not real. On a similar note Bataille illuminates in the domain of erotic transgression:

myself, or something that, presenting itself from the outside, partakes of me, something that, being me, is nevertheless not me (it is not me in the sense in which I take myself for an individual, a thing): it may be a god or a dead person, because, where it is concerned, to be or not to be is a question that can never be seriously (logically) raised. (1976/1991: 215)

Bataille specifies a sovereign moment experienced by a transgressive consciousness for which the division between outer and inner, real and unreal, object and subject are not obviously delineated yet are painted more from a dream-like perspective that creates a contradiction, thus multiplying subjectivity without destroying it. As Bataille precisely puts it: "a thing is real but at the same time is not real, is impossible and yet is there" (1976/1991: 215). This transgressive consciousness is developed in *Tango* where Mario tends to identify with the character-dancer Ernesto in his film-within-a-film since he is no longer himself while shooting as a

director. Being presented without a center, his true identity is just like the dreamer he believes himself to be.

This is the same psychology that is displayed in the triangular love relationship of Mario, Elena and Angelo. The episodes of the Dirty War have been connected with the sentimental intrigue of triangular love. The so-called “disappeared” incident should be linked with the threat of Angelo, who intimidates Elena by telling her that “No one can play games with me” (Saura, 1999). In consequence, Elena’s fear and crying when danced in the lead role reflect the masculinity and patriarchal authority of Angelo. Here there is also a “double” of the scenes alluding both to the oligarchy of Argentina’s politics and the personality of Angelo Larroca whose last name means “so hard and cruel as a rock.” His ferociously possessive love toward Elena recalls the political disciplining of bodies during the Dirty War that addresses the issue of violence. While representing the history of political terror, Angelo also expresses a history of male dominance. He, hence, invokes an ancient kind of patriarchal violence: the violence of men against women.

Apart from his connection to the political authoritarian, he belongs to a circle of commercial bourgeoisie that considers the tango to be as decorative embellishment. He owns a tango ballroom in Buenos Aires where the people have survived from the terrible political era and desired to enjoy the rest of their life with tango. Taylor, in her book, *Paper Tangos*, describes the expression of the urbanization and commercialization after the junta in the city. She writes, “The city center represents wealth, success, fame—a chance to climb the social ladder at the price of the human values left behind. The emptiness of these goals provokes the tango’s lament for the lost neighborhood or barrio on the edge of Buenos Aires . . .” (1998: 6). Angelo’s tango salon is the best representative for the city Buenos Aires where the tango was created and fermented. So it is that Mario’s tango film produces a sophisticated visual-model of tango culture and history.

In Angelo's salon, the audiences perceive a typical *milonga* gathering that interweaves the nature of the tango within two domains, namely the nostalgic "*Tango de Salon*" and the "*Tango de Escenario*" ("Tango for the Stage"). The former, characterized by its wide disparity rather than by a specific position, is the style fashioned by the collective masses on the floor where the dancing steps are highly improvised, with the only restriction being the experience and repertoire of leader and follower, demonstrated by Elena who follows her partner, Angelo's father (Vito Melino). This is the moment and space for socializing and physical contact with other people. Apart from the couples on the dance floor, Mario is enthusiastic about working out his tango film by discussion with the production team lead by Angelo; meanwhile, he also intensively pays attention to Elena on the floor. The camera follows his POV to highlight an inner voyeurism toward the seducing Elena who is totally ignorant of the male gaze, her body so gracefully and naturally responding to the calling of her paternal partner that it creates a tantalizing appeal of sophistication to Mario. Rather than simply dancing for fun or socializing, the second stylistic genre of tango is "Tango for the Stage" that is also exhibited in Angelo's tango salon by the tango teacher Carlos Nebbia (played by Juan Carlos Copes). As a living legend, Copes has been a distinguished tango icon since the 1980s when the popular tango show *Tango Argentino* became a sensational hit in Hollywood and Europe, contributing to the worldwide revival of tango. His acting in the film as a tango teacher is definitely an autobiographical reference, a part of tango history. In *Tango*, paired with his own daughter Johanna Copes, he performs Osvaldo Pugliese's first tango song "*Recuerdo*" (1924). A new horizon for bodily interaction and a recalling to tango's nostalgic past, the dance establishes a typical standard model for a ballroom performance dance. "*Recuerdo*," meaning "remembrance," is itself a tribute to Pugliese, one of the most talented composers and pianists. The Uruguayan-Argentine poet Horacio Ferrer once praised the song as achieving a major milestone

for tango, claiming, "One could speak, with total justice, of compositions before and after Pugliese's '*Recuerdo*' and the instrumentalists before and after '*Recuerdo*'" (Rauscher, 2010). Indulging in melodic structure and complex density, the song is also a tribute to the *milongero* Copes whose tango steps become a popular chic, the Copes style, that combines Ballroom Tango and Tango *Orillero*. In this mini dance-drama, the dancing couple is austere yet sensual, explosive yet implosive. After a series of graceful steps, there is a drastic-speed sequence where the father-and-daughter couple takes turns to switch movements structured by "*gancho-ocho*" variations. Whereas an "*ocho*" indicates the feet stroke the floor by tracing a figure 8 on the floor, a "*gancho*" expresses a powerful shape of a hook between the legs. "There is torsion on *ocho*," adds Copes, "while she faces the man with her torso, her hips and her legs take another direction" (Thompson, 2005: 285). It is this body twist that makes feminine *ochos* delicate, and masculine *ganchos* commanding; yet the most amazing part is the dancing couple play "*gancho-ocho*" variations in tandem. It makes their tango performance more intriguing and inspiring as it transgresses the conventional line of gender and opens a door to the modern tango show.

In his salon, Angelo observes people dancing the traditional paired tango with flashy steps, and Elena is a favorite in his collection; meanwhile, Mario, in his tango film, covers a very complicated spectrum from love to revenge that also treats Elena as a leading dancer in rivalry with his ex-wife Laura. Saura purposely arranges a repetition of the same conversation between Laura and Mario, Elena and Angelo, respectively, when the ex-wife or girlfriend says good-bye to the ex-lover.

Indeed, both men love Elena, yet in different ways. Initially, Mario identifies with Angelo as they have grown up in a patriarchal society that values sustaining male pride and winning a female's love. Jealousy is a product of the patriarchal society that nourishes them to manhood, and it is not something to be trifled with. The dramatic

transgression for Mario in the nexus of differences from Angelo comes with Elena's fictional death in the arrival scene of immigrants. It transforms his role of a passive spectator/director into an active performer/actor who embodies Elena-like vulnerability, confronting fears and memories in the junta era. On one hand, he cannot bear Elena's death in his film as he has totally dedicated himself to her and truly feels for her so that he could transcend the line of director and actor; on the other hand, Angelo thinks Elena's death is only a part of the scheme, so he complains about his performative role as a film producer is not professional enough to speak out his line in the right timing. Angelo still remains a flat character covered with a superficial mask to represent the patriarchal authority and commercial sector. It's time for Mario to unmask Angelo: "Because the MASK IS CHAOS MADE FLESH. It is present before me as a likeness, a fellow man, and this likeness, which stares at me, has taken into itself the figure of my own death" (Bataille, 2002: 64). The "death" of the mask transcends Mario's killing of self to face his own mortality/death. However, it is in this crucial moment of removing the mask that we sympathize with Mario, who ruminates that the nature of the world has doomed him to disillusionment, to an individual erotic being fused with the beloved as he confronts the impossibility of perfect love and the intimate death it implies. Indeed, the tango is a dance of love-and-death and revival based on the condition that you truly experience it with eroticism in life.

Linda M. Willem declared, Saura "employs multiple-character casting of actors to capture the dynamics involved in the concept of the double" (2003b: xiii). The key structure of the film's characterization essentially lies in the metaphorical usage of the "double." Mario does not love Laura spontaneously in the first place, but his love is fortified with a mimetic desire induced by the third party Ernesto who deeply cherishes Laura. Mario's fascination or weakness towards the mediator Ernesto is rather intriguing, and it is also exhibited in his obsession with the other similar character, Angelo, whose beloved Elena is also loved by Mario. In both cases,

Mario's self is, gradually, possessed by the mediator's otherness, and desires shift, from the self to otherness. It is a process of transforming a beloved woman into the simulacrum of a beloved woman, focusing intently on the coupling bodies and redoubling Mario's excitement by entering the labyrinth of desire. The revolutionary lesbian undercut between Laura and Elena, their sensual and instinctual close embrace acknowledged and responded to with a subtle kiss further builds up the double image narrative that Saura uses extensively in the film *Tango*. Witnessing the bond between these two women that he admires, Mario's patriarchal masculinity reaches the extreme of castration. Such a physical and mental bond with the double is thus visualized in images of sexual diversity that break through the conventional taboos of sexuality.

IV. Finale: Transgressive Playfulness

To conclude, Bataille outlines in *Eroticism* the interplay between taboos and their transgression. As two sides of a coin, taboo and transgression constitute the contradictory core of self-formation since taboos are a set of rules demanded from a rational society to regulate people's social behavior but can be transgressed. In terms of transgression and taboo, eroticism has the power to liberate men from the discontinuous realm dominated by the need to work and obey conventions. This transgressive/erotic experience involves the pleasure of passing from an ordered domain to an unordered phase. Only when the individual subjectivity crosses the encoded boundaries does it become conscious of the ecstasy of continuity without the complete destruction of its discontinuous self. Bataille elaborates an essential association of two forces of eroticism, "What we desire is to bring into this world founded upon discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain" (1957/1986: 19). Eroticism generates the unity of continuity that the discontinuous self is constantly searching for. In describing Bataille's erotic experience, Zeynep Direk delineates,

The erotic act, whose sacred nature is manifest in the pagan world, suspends discontinuity of the world of work. It not only transgresses—acknowledges and negates—the sexual prohibitions that historically constructed borders between different sexes, genders, classes, races, cultures, and ages, but it also dissolves personalities. (2007: 96)

Saura's *Tango* visualizes transgressive eroticism only being opened up in moments of shock which overwhelm the self and witness the existence of the other double. Mario advocates a spirit of sexual diversity that is reflected in his imagined scenes in the name of shooting a tango film. His sexual fantasy is mirrored in the pairs of Ernesto/Angelo and Laura/Elena that transcend different borders of "sexes, genders, classes, races, cultures, and ages." Mario becomes more gentle and tender as he understands the real meaning of eroticism through his identification with erotic otherness.

The metaphorical tango in Saura's dance-within-a-film is expressive of dynamic and poignant conflicts of eroticism. At the core of the film, the blending of reality and fiction become a potential inflection of the imagined relationship of erotic communication and the articulation of the violent threat of death. What saves *Tango* from pedantry is its erotic tinge that can be crossed over. In the film, every scene of the tango from setup through tryout to rehearsal is a manifestation of that process; there is no "finished" performance. Saura says, "It's all a game: a story that can exist or never did exist" (Ponga, 2003: 151). In the film, Saura/Mario has interwoven all the crucial characters into a web of playfulness, in Bataille's words: ". . . he is the transgression of all such limits. In the midst of all the others, he is not work that is performed but rather play" (1976/1991: 222). Bataille's theory of transgression aspires to evoke a "world of play." Undeniably, the film returns to a Borgesian metalinguistic game and Bataillean erotic festival in which fiction is mixed with reality to replicate the process of film-making, a progression of a continuous series of rehearsals without a final production. The embedded playfulness drives a

“three-minute love affair” conceit into some smartly constructed *mise-en-scènes* of the tango.

With this tango the tango was born and like a shout
It left the sordid mud seeking the sky.
Strange spell of love made into beat
that opened a path without any law but hope
mix of rage, pain, faith and absence,
crying in the innocence of a playful rhythm. (as cited in
Taylor, 1998: xxv)

—from “El Choclo” by Enrique Santos Discepolo and Juan
Carlos Marambio Catan

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《情慾飛舞》踰越情慾

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摘要

卡洛斯·薩烏拉的音樂電影《情慾飛舞》，為一部精緻華麗的視覺詩歌，訴說身兼導演及劇作家雙重身分的馬利歐，在拍攝《探戈》影片時所產生的情慾危機，導演愛情生活經歷緊密地與當時阿根廷的探戈文化與歷史相互重疊與呼應。他的男性氣概在與前妻勞拉與女友愛蓮娜的情慾關係中，受到挑戰、折磨後重生；而製作人安傑拉與編舞家艾恩斯托也與他產生亦敵亦友的相生相剋關係，這繁複的五角關係如同阿根廷探戈論述所追求文化他者的建構過程。薩烏拉透過趣味盎然與意象豐富的探戈舞蹈與音樂，輔以後設電影繁複的敘事結構，以戲中戲跨越類型的想像，進而嘲諷男性霸權所受到的威脅，此恰可呼應劇中看似矛盾卻相生的自我／他者、性別／慾望、死亡／重生、禁忌／踰越等議題。筆者嘗試透過法國哲學家喬治·巴代伊有關禁忌與踰越的情色論述，波赫士的迷宮敘述學，與後設電影中五重角色綿密的情慾關係，解構馬利歐如何在一連串「展演」式的探戈舞蹈場面調度中，彰顯主體與被男性社會所邊緣化的「他者」，在面對死亡與性別等禁忌議題時，反轉、形塑而重生。

關鍵詞：巴代伊與波赫士、自我與他者、虛構死亡、阿根廷探戈、後設電影的嬉戲