

## Evolution and meanings of tango from a psychoanalytic perspective

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### **Abstract**

*The tangos are generated on intense melancholic feelings cause by memories. Its lyrics are about the one who lost a plentiful experience but tries to transform this feeling of loss into something fulfilling. This idea of loss as fullness, apparently paradoxical, its present in the tango. Consequently it can be enjoyed with melancholy. This is the base message of the tango (Peri, 1981).*

*The nature of the music to transcend words and dance offers a subtle transition (through the means of regression) to pre-verbal modes of psychological functioning. In the oldest psychic organization (pre-ego, pre-verbal), the archaic psychic mechanism tends to perceive sound as a direct threat and reacts reflexively through anxiety (Freud, 1952; Siegel, 1996).*

*This early acoustic trauma can be relived with each musical experience, and with a chance of healing in the context of music and dance. Therefore the Argentinian tango offers this frame.*

*The psychoanalyst and tango dancer Monica Peri states that “Through tango we return to the embrace of mother, and the sound of bandoneon are her heartbeats. It is the taste of paradise” (Peri, 1981).*

**Keywords:** *Tango, psychoanalysis, pre-verbal modes, ego, melancholy*

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## I. ROADS WEAVING BETWEEN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND TANGO

Between the years 1880 and 1900, while Sigmund Freud was setting the bases of psychoanalysis in Vienna, in the suburbs of Buenos Aires the first chords of tango were heard. Thus, if in 1898, Freud was already speaking about the Oedipus complex, at the intersection of Pueyrredon and Paraguay the first official tango “El Entrerriano” (“The one between the rivers”) was launched (Freud, 1960).

In 1900, the first edition of “Interpretations of dreams” was launched, in the same time with the tango “Don Juan”.

The tango and the psychoanalysis have intertwined roads. One can say that tango is, among others, a true treaty of melancholy.

In 1915 Freud was composing “Mourning and Melancholia” which later became a base article for most subsequent approaches of the subject in psychoanalysis. Melancholia was described as “a profound and painful restlessness, cancellation of interest for the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibited productivity and sense of self, which manifests itself through self-reproach and self-shaming and, to the extreme, by a delusional expectation of punishment (Freud cited in Clewell, 2004).

Searching for absolute values marks the suffering of the melancholic person: the bigger the values, the bigger the effect. The melancholy is the suffering of an untouchable idea, or worse, a lost one.

The tango has a close relationship with melancholy. Many tangos are about memories of loss, deceptions and betrayals of love, shattered dreams, about the past, loneliness and longing.

The tangos are generated on intense melancholic feelings cause by memories. Its lyrics are about the one who lost a plentiful experience but tries to transform this feeling of loss into something fulfilling. This idea of loss as fullness, apparently paradoxical, its present in the tango. Consequently it can be enjoyed with melancholy. This is the base message of the tango (Peri, 1981).

The tango is sad trough vocation and inheritance, since it entered Buenos Aires trough the black slaves. In many African dialects the word “tango” means enclosed space. Ernesto Sabato connects the tango to “the essence of argentinity”, and sees it as the result of national history metaphysics:

“few countries have that feeling of nostalgia that repeats itself so often: in the first Spaniards, because they missed their far away homeland, then the criollo locals because they yearned for their lost freedom; later “los gauchos” displaced by the foreign civilization, exiled in their own country, remembering melancholically their wild and independent golden age, the holders of the criolla culture, which sensed that the beautiful time of generosity and courtesy

became the petty materialism of lying”. And to this hybrid base of happenings, another is added, significantly final: “immigrants, because they lost their old European homeland, their ancient habits, snow and the Christmas fire” (Sabato, González Fraga, Beteta, Beteta, Moreno-Brid, Gonzalez Garcia, ... & del Busto, 2000).

To Sabato, tango envelops nostalgia, sadness, frustration, drama, discontent and resentment. And, although it might seem paradoxical, it was considered a positive fact, because through artistic expression (lyrics and dance) it constitutes not only an expression of “argentinidad”, in the endless search for identity, but also a vehicle to relieve this nostalgia and sadness (Sabato et al., 2000).

Without detailing and integration, given by a psychoanalytical initiative, in reality this process never ends.

The tango was born in the suburbs of Buenos Aires, between the 19th and 20th century, in a scenery full of cultural and social transformations, with a political class and culture under European influence.

More than a million single men, European immigrants with the dream to “make America”, and hundreds of migrant families lived in collective houses, conventillos. The coast area from the south of the city, the brothels, and inner yards of the collective houses, street corners, all above served as initial brand of music and dance, which during the years to come will transform in the undisputed symbol of Buenos Aires: the tango.

Hence tango is born, as a dance that blends two forbidden scenes: the criollo mourning and sexual relation. Tango as a social occurrence was born on an unstable emotional ground, generated by the uprooting phenomenon, and becomes an expressive language of emotions (Peri, 1981).

## **II. ABOUT PAIN AND SADNESS**

The classical theme of the tango is that of a hopeless individual, forsaken by his beloved one, and the measures he undertakes to re-establish his emotional balance. After their dramatic separation, ending a heavenly relationship, the woman remains unaffected; but the man is devastated by the pain and bound to her memory. The woman is portrayed in most tangos as a mélange of rejection, foulness, treachery and triviality. In his attempts to diminish the pain, the man sings her and dances her in tango (Horvath, 2006). He turns towards his mother, who has all the attributes that are missing from his loved one, and so re-establishes the heavenly relationship in which all desires are fulfilled immediately.

It is said about Argentineans that they would be a sad nation. The tango is a sad song. Not by chance perhaps, the psychoanalytical theory that captured the minds of the Argentinean psychoanalysts is that of Melanie Klein (Dimov, 2011).

The tango comes from the hearth of suburbs, while the psychoanalysis seeks to enter the suburbs of the soul. Both were transgressors, being at the beginning the 20th century: psychoanalysis was transgressor for the European Victorian age and the tango for a society that wanted to know about the human “dirt and suffering” about which it sings (Peri, 1981).

They both have pain and sadness as common points – in tango to express them, in psychoanalysis to set them free.

While the tango was becoming the “therapy” of the poor and disinherited folk, psychoanalysis was being developed as therapy for the mid-higher professional and intellectual class of Buenos Aires (Caminotti, 2007).

The tango is a sad song that is danced. It is a song about sadness and melancholy, resentment and the anger generated by disinheritance and marginalization “Between poetry, song and music, tango is passionate, angry and erotic” (Benzecry Sabá, 2006). At its origins a simple construction, the music of the tango becomes in time a refined product through the creations of renowned composers: Osvaldo Pugliese, Juan D’Arienzo, Anibal Troilo, etc.

Most of them are immigrants’ sons, many of them Italians who expressed the feeling of estrangement through their music.

### **III. CONCLUSIONS**

The nature of the music to transcend words and dance offers a subtle transition (through the means of regression) to pre-verbal modes of psychological functioning (Reister, 1996). In the oldest psychic organization (pre-ego, pre-verbal), the archaic psychic mechanism tends to perceive sound as a direct threat and reacts reflexively through anxiety (Freud, 1952; Siegel, 1996). This early acoustic trauma can be relived with each musical experience, and with a chance of healing in the context of music and dance. Therefore the Argentinian tango offers this frame.

The psychoanalyst and tango dancer Monica Peri states that “Through tango we return to the embrace of mother, and the sound of bandoneon are her heartbeats. It is the taste of paradise” (Peri, 1981).

An ongoing complex dialectic forms the universality of the tango from its origins to the present. It resides in the connection of people through the means of the collective unconscious as a true continuity of the old rituals related to existence and death, and also as a symbolic art of

high esthetics. The tango passes through a constant elaboration in the convergence with other cultures through space and time.

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