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# Materialising Exile in Solanas' *Tangos*: *El Exilio de Gardel*

Romina Miorelli

*'desligado de todo, fuera del tiempo, un extranjero, tejido por la trama del destierro. ¿Cómo será la patria dentro de cien años? ¿Quién nos recordará? A nosotros ¿quién nos recordará?'*<sup>1</sup>

Ricardo Piglia, *Respiración Artificial*

In the early 1970s, Argentina's popular leader, Juan Domingo Perón, who had governed the country in the mid-twentieth century, returned after decades of exile and political proscription. His long-awaited return and his eventual election as Argentina's president for the third time in 1973 exposed and exacerbated the differences between the various sectors and ideologies, on both the left and the right, that had developed under the label of 'Peronism' during the leader's years of physical absence. Perón died only a year after this election, and the differences between these groups, which ranged from trades unions to urban guerrillas, were aggravated by disputes regarding the legitimate inheritance of the movement and the direction the country's politics should take. On 24 March 1976, the armed forces entered the scene with a military coup that initiated six years of what was to be one of the harshest and most repressive regimes in the history of Latin America. In the framework of the state terrorism that was established, thousands of people were illegally arrested, tortured, disappeared and forced into exile (Wright, 2007). Today, the memory of the dictatorship and its perpetration of human rights abuses still lingers in the social and political life of the country and continues to shape political decisions, allegiances and identities.

This article sets out to explore one aspect of this process of memory reconstruction. It focuses on Argentineans' experience of exile during the years of dictatorship as captured in a specific cultural production – Fernando 'Pino' Solanas' film *Tangos: el exilio de Gardel* (*Tangos: the Exile of Gardel*) (1985). The film is analysed in these pages as an object of culture that pays homage to and memorialises that exile. The particularity of this film lies in its success in

1 'detached from everything, outside of time, a foreigner, knitted in the weave of banishment. How will the motherland be in a hundred years' time? Who will remember us? Us, who will remember us?' (author's translation).

condensing the complexity and the multiple facets of the exile experience in general, and for Argentineans in particular. Key to this success is the use of a variety of materialities as means of communication, to convey this message of complexity. In doing so the film stresses the endless array of alternatives for processing the identity ruptures and traumas faced by exiles as well as the importance of language beyond the encounter with a new tongue.

Analysing this cultural production as an object in itself and looking at the role of specific objects and places within it involves focusing on its materiality. By focusing on the materiality of the film, this article seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to bring the voice of exiles into the current debates about the reconstruction of the memory of the dictatorships in Argentina and other Southern Cone countries. Until recently, the voice of the exiles has remained at the margins of these debates, as the key concern with the disappeared and transitional justice has occupied centre stage (Roniger and Sznajder, 1998; Franco, 2007; Serpente, 2011). Recent efforts have sought to recover the memory of exile (e.g. Roniger et al, 2012; Serpente 2011; Roniger and Sznajder, 2009). But going back to the then fresh memories of exile materialised in this 1985 film, which highlights all the richness and contradictions of the experience, can reignite the interplay between subjects and objects of memory and contribute to a reconsideration of the markedly polarised views that dominate the current struggles for the construction of the memory of the dictatorships in the region. These views tend to portray those who suffered the dictatorship's human rights abuses as either victims or villains, forgetting in this polarisation the dimensions of resistance, action and reconstruction that persisted despite the suffering, as the experience of exile depicted in this film reminds us.

In turn, the material perspective adopted in this article requires a number of theoretical considerations. At the turn of the century, a shift from a focus on meaning and discourse, drawing on postmodern insights (e.g. Butler, 1990; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), to a focus on the materiality of the physical world was starting to become apparent in the field of cultural studies (e.g. Latour, 1993; Tilley, 2004; Miller, 2005; Ho and Hatfield, 2011). But in this shift the material world is not regarded just as the world of discrete entities. Instead, mostly building on structuration theories (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1986) and philosophical views dating back to Hegel, objects and places came to be seen as embedded in social relations. As such, the material world is seen as both constituted by and constitutive of those relations (Miller, 1987; 2005; Geismar and Horts, 2004; Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Ho and Hatfield, 2011). Moreover, the shift does not necessarily entail a rejection of the social ontology underpinning perspectives that focus on discourse and meaning. Indeed, if the material world is understood as embedded in social relations

and the latter are regarded as having social existence – meaning, significance – only when they are signified (Panizza and Miorelli, 2013), then objects and places are also carriers of meaning. This relational materialism that will guide the analysis here acknowledges the critical relevance of ‘matter’ in temporarily fixating social relations and identities, but at the same time it incorporates the impossibility of permanent closure of the meanings embodied in the matter.

This shift of attention towards the material world has also taken place more recently in the study of migration processes (Basu and Coleman, 2008; Anderson and Tolia-Kelly, 2004). Looking at the material world as both product and producer of social relations as well as a carrier of meanings is particularly relevant in studies of exile and in the challenges to identity that this experience brings about. As Basu and Coleman state in their exploration of the intersection between migration and materiality, objects and spaces can evoke ‘multiple forms of experience and sensations that are both embodied and constituted through the interactions of subjects and objects’ (2008: 317). In the case of forced migrations such as exile, the possibility that objects provide of remembering and fixating meaning is especially crucial. Unlike the migrant, for whom hope and new opportunities prevail over the desire to return, the exile leaves unwillingly and seeks to retain their sense of belonging to the land and people from which they have been excluded and to which, ultimately, they long to return. Objects and places can then become the guardians of memory of the pre-exilic existence. But, like the exiles’ own identities, these objects will be resignified in new iterations as they are transposed to new contexts. *Tangos: el exilio de Gardel*, as will be shown below, points precisely to this double existence of objects and places – both as materialisation of meanings and memories and as pivots of endless iterations, which, as in the case of the exiles’ identities themselves, can result in complex and very diverse re-creations.

Part of the complexity of the experience of exile concerns the encounter with a new language, a foreign language. However, a focus on the material aspects of the film demonstrates that the depiction of the exile emphasises the difficulties not merely with a new ‘*langue*’<sup>2</sup> but with language as a system for communicating and being understood beyond verbal communication. At the same time, images of objects and places in the film communicate what words cannot express, which, according to some observers, is the pain of the

2 The term *langue* is used here in line with Ferdinand Saussure’s differentiation between *langue* – the language spoken in a given society – and *langage* – the fundamental structure underpinning *langues* that allows linguistic communication. In this case, however, objects are able to aid the structured system of linguistic communication through allegories and metaphors.

abuses carried out by the dictatorship (Rodríguez Marino, 2003). But, looking at the film as an object that memorialises exile, using objects and places to communicate ideas, is partly an allegory of the exiles' difficulties in finding a way to communicate with their environment, and partly a resource to depict an experience considered too complex for the linearity and logical structure of verbal language to express.

In order to analyse the interplay of the material aspects of *Tangos* as a socially embedded object with questions of identity and language that traverse the exile experience, this article will refer to three aspects of the film's materiality. First, the film is analysed as an object in itself; second, the focus is on the *Tanguedia*, the cultural production that the film's main characters are trying to put on; and third, the article looks at the material world of exiles' everyday life as portrayed in the film. Each of the three core sections of this article analyses one of these aspects. A final concluding section summarises the main points raised in the analysis and relate them to the current debates on the politics of memory.

## The Film

The film, as an object, embodies social relations because it is an effect of the experience of exile. Yet, at the same time, the film also has agency attributes since it challenges and questions the social views and practices of those who relate to it – the audiences. As a cultural production the film objectifies the exilic experience and the emotions associated with it, while at the same time embodying the director's desire to contribute to shaping the perception and practice of memory work in wider society. This section, therefore, looks at the film as an object that is an effect of exile and has, at the same time, agency attributes.

*Tangos: el exilio de Gardel* tells us about the life in Paris of a group of exiles from the River Plate, both Argentineans and Uruguayans, but with a focus on the former. The film's main character, Juan Dos (Miguel Angel Solá) is writing a play defined as *Tanguedia* – a mix of tango, comedy and tragedy – which reflects the experience of exile and what precedes it. It is not he, however, who tells us the story in the film, but María (Gabriela Toscano), the daughter of an exiled woman who is the main actress in the *Tanguedia* and the partner of Juan Dos – Mariana (Marie Laforêt). Along with another couple, Alcira (Mirta Ca-Medeiros) and Gerardo (Lautaro Murúa), the latter a university professor and writer, and one further character, the Uruguayan nicknamed 'Miseria' (Misery) (Jorge Six) these characters form the core of the River Plate community that is depicted in the film. Each of these characters

presents a different face of exile and a different mode of recomposing the fundamentals of their identities, which have been shaken by the experience of their exile. The attempt led by Juan Dos to put up a show called *Tanguedia*, which tells the story of the South American exile, is the core plot that holds together the diverse stories and experiences of this film's characters.

Solanas' own exile and political involvement are crucial in the materialisation of a cultural product that both portrays and seeks to give voice to the 1970s Argentinean exiles. However, *Tangos* is not a biographical account of his exile experience, a type of account that has characterised the reconstruction of the memory of the 1970s Latin American exile (Roniger et al, 2012: 4). Solanas has taken a very open political stance as a filmmaker since the very beginning of his career in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Aligned with the Peronist left by the 1970s, in the turmoil that surrounded the return and death of Perón, he received death threats and soon after the 1976 coup he left Argentina. Like the characters in *Tangos*, he established himself in France until his return to the country with the return of democracy.<sup>4</sup> But far from being a reflection of his own experience, *Tangos* portrays exile in all its heterogeneity, as homage to, and a recognition of, those who went through it. Although the actors were not necessarily exiles themselves, the choice of a cast that included both Argentines and French reflects an attempt to integrate into the film the cultural encounter brought about by exile and the positive reformulations that can emerge from this traumatic experience. The film's characters represent these different and contradictory faces of exile and various alternative forms of resolving the doubts and uncertainties that exile can generate. Through different processes of reflection and identity recreations, some of the exiles decide to return and others to stay. As the plural of tangos in the title suggests, each of them metaphorically dances to their own tango.

The film, furthermore, not only exposes the trauma of exile per se but also includes the specificities of this particular exile experience. While other Latin American countries such as Chile, Uruguay and Brazil were under military rule at that time, the level of repression and the numbers of disappeared people – between 9,000 and 30,000<sup>5</sup> – sadly differentiated Argentina from these other dictatorships. Moreover, unlike the Chilean dictatorship, which offered

3 Solanas was, for instance, the co-founder of the group 'Cine Liberación' (Liberation Cinema), which in its founding manifesto defined itself as 'an attempt at cultural decolonisation' (Solanas and Getino, 1969, cited in Bernini, 2004: 157. See also Traverso and Crowder Tarraborelli, 2013).

4 Pino Solanas' official website: [http://www.pinosolanas.com/el\\_exilio\\_info.htm](http://www.pinosolanas.com/el_exilio_info.htm).

5 The former figure reflects the investigations undertaken by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de las Personas – CONADEP) and the latter is the figure calculated by several human rights organisations, including the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo.

a number of political opponents an exit route and officially banned them from returning, exile was not an option either given or imposed by the Argentinean military government but rather a result of direct threats and the general state of terror, violence and abuse that reigned at the time. Therefore, one of the consequences was that, as theirs was perceived to be a personal decision, guilt and recurrent doubt haunted these exiles. Another consequence was that the Argentinean exiles included people who were not directly involved in any form of political activity, which resulted in their being a significantly heterogeneous group (Yankelevich, 2012: 204, 209). Also, outside of Argentina Peronism was generally perceived to be a version of fascism, and the guerrilla movements as revolutionary and thus deeply uncommitted to the values of democracy (see Franco, 2012: 190 for instance), which resulted in only a few countries offering refugee programmes to the almost 350,000 Argentineans<sup>6</sup> who left the country in those years. France received around 2,000 of them between 1974 and 1983 and, together with Sweden, was one of the few countries to offer Argentineans the possibility of asylum rights (Franco, 2007: 53). Still, notwithstanding the difficulties of being politically understood abroad, once there the exiles, together with international solidarity organisations, played a key role in giving global visibility to the cause of those opposing the dictatorships and their abuses in the Southern Cone (Brysk, 1993; 1994).

So, while sections of the film such as *'Las cartas del exilio'* (The exile letters) and *'Solo'* (Alone) show, respectively, how much the exiles' lives revolved around the lives of those left behind and the feelings of isolation and detachment of the exiles in the host countries, issues specific to the Argentinean exile, such as the disappeared, figure prominently throughout the film too. For instance, a number of scenes follow Alcira in her struggles to find her daughter who was kidnapped by the military together with her baby. In turn, these scenes highlight the support received from French society by showing, for example, the participation of the French in the exiles' solidarity group meetings and in helping to finance Alcira's trip to Buenos Aires. The diversity of the characters and the circumstances that brought them into exile illustrate well the heterogeneity of the Argentinean exiles of the 1970s. For instance, although all the characters are traversed by the political condition of their exile, Juan, Mariana and María are involved with it from a more artistic perspective, Alcira and Gerardo cover the more political angle and *'Miseria'* brings in the economic aspects of the exile condition. Finally, the film particularly stresses how exile was not directly imposed but rather emerged as an exit possibility within an environment of violence and threats

6 According to data from the Argentinean National Institute for Statistics and Census (INDEC) 334,126 people left the country between 1975 and 1984 (Lattes, Comelatto and Levit, 2003: 87 cited in Yankelevich 2012: 201).

– Juan Uno explains that he had to leave the country because his productions were censored, Gerardo appears in a scene remembering the telephone death threats he received before leaving, and Mariana and María decided it was best to leave the country after Mariana's husband was violently taken captive.

And yet *Tangos* is not only the embodiment of the experience of exile or of this exile in particular; it is a product that also carries agency attributes. As such, the film as an object is both constituted by an array of social relations and at the same time it is the carrier of the possibility and of the intention of constituting and re-constituting these relations (Miller, 1987). Alongside the author's political commitment, also the historical context in which it was launched, and the format of the film all play a role in shaping these agency attributes. Through fictional stories, the film both denounced the trauma and dehumanisation that the political exclusion and violence of the military dictatorships generated, and placed the issue of exile in the public sphere, giving it political existence as Argentina was returning to democracy in the 1980s and deciding how to deal with the legacy of the dictatorship. The multi-faceted picture of exile that the film offers also challenges the dualistic view that prevailed in the 1970s: a 'golden exile' constructed by the dictatorship, which contended that those who had left were enjoying a good life abroad (Franco, 2007), versus the testimonies of the exiles themselves, which emphasised the traumatic aspects of the experience.

Additionally, the very format of *Tangos* seeks to provoke. The film evolves in sequences and events, separated by numbered parts and introductory titles. These constant interruptions in the storyline, a format which Solanas had already used in his film *La Hora de los Hornos* only later became common in post-exilic cinema (Naficy, 2010: 15), seeks to keep the audience's attention and prevent them from being passive somnolent observers (François, 2005). This format, together with the mix of genres and the use of allegories and surrealist visions, contributed to generating reactions that were a mixture of international recognition and scepticism. For instance, despite the several international awards the film won,<sup>7</sup> a Spanish national newspaper defined it, at the time of its release, as 'oscillating between sublime and ridiculous',<sup>8</sup> but at the same time as reflecting a country's need to finally speak freely (Martí, 1985).

In Argentina, films on the theme of the authoritarian past constituted a quarter of all releases between 1984 and 1986 (Brysk, 1994: 127). *Tangos* was one of them but it was not among those that initially had most viewers. Back in the 1980s, most of the population in the Southern Cone countries was

7 These awards include the Grand Special Prize, Venice Film Festival; Jury's Grand Special Prize, Biarritz Festival; and First Prize, Havana Film Festival. Source: Fernando Pino Solanas' official website: [http://www.pinosolanas.com/el\\_exilio\\_info.htm](http://www.pinosolanas.com/el_exilio_info.htm).

8 Author's own translation.



awakening to the full degree of the dictatorship's human rights abuses but some could process it only by finding relief for their silent complicity in films such as the Oscar winner 'The Official Story' portrayed the drama of a family who discover that their adopted child was the son of a disappeared person (Puenzo, 1985). Only a few people were prepared to grasp the complexity, contradiction, absurdness and ironies of the exile experience as depicted in *Tangos*. Yet gradually, and especially after positive reviews by specialised local and international critics, *Tangos* started to be regarded as a key contribution towards the reconstruction of the memory of the dictatorships and became a cult movie of the transition decade (Andermann, 2012: 3).

### **The *Tanguedia***

Within *Tangos*, there is another cultural product – the *Tanguedia*. This show the exiles are trying to put up focuses further on the exiles' struggles to reconstitute their dislocated identities and the dilemma between attempting to reconstitute them and let them flow. The *Tanguedia* itself and a specific object – dolls of different types – materialise in the film this intricate conflict and, in a variety of ways, represent the difficulties faced by the exiles in surmounting the language barriers that go beyond the encounter with a new language and the diverse efforts to overcome them.

The *Tanguedia* is never finished in the film. The *Tanguedia* seeks to tell the story of exile through a mixture of dance and music that proposes an innovative art genre. It includes scenes that depict the violence of the persecution preceding departure and the melancholy of the departure itself, symbolised by a dance with suitcases. The lack of an ending is part of the story the *Tanguedia* tells, since it condenses precisely the idea of exile that the film seeks to portray by stressing that exile cannot have a preconceived format or end. Juan Dos, the writer of the *Tanguedia*, is, in fact, in a constant struggle to keep the end of the *Tanguedia* open in the face of resistance and opposition from the directors of the show, and the potential financiers who demand a final, an end, a closure for the *Tanguedia*. Juan Dos himself is split in two. Juan Uno,<sup>9</sup> the other, though imaginary, part of his self has stayed in Buenos Aires and is, as Juan Dos explains, the real author of the *Tanguedia*. Juan Dos explains that the end of the *Tanguedia* will be sent by Juan Uno and thus arrive from Buenos Aires, in a direct reference to the need for the end of the dictatorship to end the exile. Underpinning these tensions between the closure of the *Tanguedia* and Juan Dos' insistence on his choice for an open ending, the process of creation emerges as the path chosen by Juan Dos to stay in

9 Translated into English, Juan Uno is Juan One and Juan Dos, Juan Two.

touch with the parts of his self he feels were torn apart by his departure into exile. Juan Dos thus enacts what Gerardo puts in words by citing the writer Julio Cortázar, another exile of Argentinean history, '*... hay que inventarse un proyecto, hay que inventarse... cosas para hacer*' (we must invent a project, must invent ourselves... things to do).<sup>10</sup>

While the *Tanguedia* project per se may help to keep Juans Dos and Uno together, a central object related to the *Tanguedia* appears to embody the oscillation between the closure of identity and the multiple possibilities of redefining identity that the exiles' experience also opens up – dolls, which in most cases are broken, dismembered, incomplete and naked, stand out as the most enigmatic object in relation to the *Tanguedia*. These dolls are included both on stage during the rehearsals and among the audience of the *Tanguedia*. They are also part of the exiles' everyday life. They are especially present in the moments in which the characters are creating parts of the *Tanguedia* or are involved in more political activities (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 Mariana in a political meeting; behind her may be seen one of the many mannequins that are included in the film.]

Different interpretations of the dolls have been offered. Some see their empty and lifeless bodies as a representation of the disappeared (François, 2005) and their fragmentation and dismemberment as a reference to Argentina's social, cultural and economic fractures (Rodríguez Marino, 2003: 72). Both of these interpretations find a correlate in the film. In the demonstration organised by the exiles and their solidarity groups in Paris, to raise awareness of the situation in Argentina, the dolls, all covered in bags and

10 Author's translation.

tied with ropes, are placed on a military truck in a clear reference to illegal detentions and kidnappings. Baby dolls may indeed represent the babies born in captivity, as in the doll with flowers attached to its bald head that is shown behind the bars of a chair in one take during the rehearsals of the *Tanguedia*.

But the dolls do not seem to have a single meaning, and Solanas himself refused to provide his own interpretation (François, 2005). Thus, looking at them from the perspective of the role of objects that can tell us about a particular migrant experience, that of exile, these dolls that are torn, mutilated and maimed can very well be seen as an expression of the fragmentation of the exile identities and the difficulties of reconstructing them. The dolls that are stiff like mannequins depict the immobilising effects of attempting to keep pre-exilic identities intact at the same time as they reflect how efforts to synthesise the experience of the exile in a closed account can result in undifferentiated rigid bodies, so rigid that they break. Equally important in this latter respect are the processes of objectification of the characters when they get caught up in their desperation to find a closure to the *Tanguedia*.

A process of objectification is shown in a scene in which the director of the *Tanguedia*, performed by Solanas himself at this point, vehemently and in despair resigns as he realises that finishing the *Tanguedia* will be impossible. In his tempestuous reaction, and in the midst of a deafening and alienating buzzing, his body stiffens and partly dismembers, revealing a metallic structure underneath. Pierre (Philip Leotard) is the French friend of Juan Dos who takes over the direction of the play, and later on in the film he goes through a similar process as he also demands a final for the *Tanguedia*. Juan Dos had anticipated this in a discussion with Pierre regarding the need for an end for the *Tanguedia*. He had told him: '*tenés miedo, no querés romperte, ¡no querés romper la cáscara esa que te envuelve!*' (you are afraid, you don't want to break, you don't want to break that shell that covers you!).<sup>11</sup>

Yet, whilst dolls and objectified bodies can be related to the impossibility of the closure of identities, the dolls also appear to be carrying the possibility of re-creation and flexibility. The stiff broken dolls can be seen as incomplete and unfinished, thus indicating the vitality involved in the processes of disarticulating and re-articulating them. Juan Uno refers to this idea in a letter that Juan Dos reads to Pierre: '*lo perfecto y acabado muerto está, viva la imperfección, viva la vida.*' (what is perfect and finished is dead, long live imperfection, long live life).<sup>12</sup> And not all the dolls are stiff and dismembered; some of them are flabby and loose. When Pierre becomes the new director of the *Tanguedia* he and Juan Dos start discussing different aspects of the *Tanguedia*, especially the need to take risks, including daring to mix genres, break down barriers and

11 Author's translation.

12 Author's translation.



Figure 2 A rehearsal of the Tanguedia in which dismembered mannequins can be seen at the back (left), and part of the company watching a rehearsal as Mariana holds a rag doll (right)]

experiment with new languages to communicate the experience of exile. As this discussion starts to gain pace, Pierre and Juan Dos are walking up the stairs and one of these flabby dolls rears its head over the balustrade of the spiral staircase. Similarly, in another scene, Mariana is watching a rehearsal of the *Tanguedia*, a cultural product that could integrate and communicate the disparate experiences of exile in new and innovative ways, and as she contemplates that product taking shape in the rehearsal, she holds a rag doll on her lap (see Figure 2). In these two cases, thus, the dolls also appear reinforcing the idea of the possibility of softening barriers and of creating a new language.

The issue of the encounter of the exiles with a new language emerges throughout *Tangos*, and bilingualism, as in most exile cinema (Naficy, 2010), is a distinctive feature of the film. Yet various scenes stress that the language divide is not the only barrier that separates the world of the exiles from their new environment. The scene of the first rehearsal of the *Tanguedia* in front of the French actress who might finance the show is especially illustrative of this divide. In what seems to be a lower-ground floor of a Parisian café, the rehearsals are carried out in Spanish as the dancers follow the music of tango, a genre already characterised by words from the language used in the marginal sectors of society where the dance was born. Above, from the balcony, Pierre and the French actress discuss in French the rehearsal they are watching, surrounded by ornamented balustrades, classical frescos and colourful vitraux. Both the play *Tanguedia*, with its effort to mix different artistic languages, and the word *tanguedia* itself, which reflects an attempt to create a hybrid genre, constitute the epitome of a search for the need for new forms of communicating in the exiles' new country and of communicating the complex experience of exile as well.

The possibility of connecting these two worlds is a topic of debate in the first scene, in which the film shows a meeting of the solidarity group, and here the dolls represent the encounter of these two worlds and the possibility of bridging the gaps. While the Spanish-French language divide is overcome by the adoption of French in the meeting, Pierre, as he leads the debates, is holding two dolls in his hands – one that is stiff and broken, which could represent a fractured Argentina, and another that is floppy and hangs loose. The discussion brings up the need to create a new language and, very explicitly for the only time in the whole film, one of the participants refers directly to the possibility of using the dolls for that creation. The possibility of metaphorically merging these two types of materiality of the dolls – after all, they are both dolls – is what seems to be in the background of these debates.

The *Tanguedia* is to be eventually staged in the theatre where the solidarity group meetings take place. As it turns out, the synthesis between the stiff, broken doll and the loose, deflated doll that Pierre was holding in that first meeting never happens, as the *Tanguedia* as such is never finished or staged. Juan Dos then appears as an inflatable doll and, uttering the phrase, '*el único final es la vuelta*' (the only end is the return),<sup>13</sup> he deflates and abandons the project of the *Tanguedia*. The only *tanguedia*, after all, is the film itself which manages indeed to materialise the diversity of the exilic experience by subsuming the world of the stiff and broken dolls with the more flexible and unstructured account of the experience that the rag and flabby dolls represent.

13 Author's translation.

### **Objects and Places in the Exiles' Everyday Life**

Objects and the material surroundings in the everyday life of the exiles as portrayed in the film contribute to depicting the struggles of, and the paths taken by, the different characters in processing their exile. They constitute the third level of materiality identified in this cultural production. At this level the depiction of the experience becomes more focused on the particularities of the Argentinean experience rather than on general references, as it includes references to several strongly crystallised icons of Argentinean identity. At the same time, however, these icons are presented as placing particular emphasis on their own iterability rather than as fixed carriers of national identity. In the context of the *Tanguedia*, objects – the *Tanguedia* itself and the dolls – tell a story and, critically, represent the possibility of creating a new language both to communicate the experience of exile and to communicate with the new environment. At this third level of materiality, objects and places play the role of an alternative language to express and reinforce the different stories of exile told in the film.

The places in which the scenes are set strongly contribute to reinforcing the messages the film conveys. An element of the settings that emerges in the very opening scene, and which will become a pivotal point in the development of the film, is water – an element that condenses permanence, connection and transformation in the film. The film begins with an image of a couple dancing a very stylised version of tango on a bridge over the River Seine. Under the same moon, but below, on the river bank, another couple dances a different tango – that of the *milongas* (tango dancing rooms) of Buenos Aires, where the closeness of the bodies retains the memory of the origins of tango in the slums and brothels on the fringes of the city, on the banks of other rivers – the River Plate and the Riachuelo. They are the exiles Juan Dos and Mariana, who have arrived with their suitcases in hand. These two forms of tango dancing tell us about the encounter, but river water is what connects the two tangos and, in turn, tango itself with its origins. However, in the same way as water represents permanence in this scene, water also flows and thus changes. It is also by the water – this time the Atlantic Ocean – that later in the film Mariana's struggles to reconstitute her identity reach a transition point. In the midst of a suggestive mist that covers the cliffs overlooking that water, a body of water that on the other side bathes the shores of Buenos Aires, Mariana's approach to her exile starts to change and from this point onwards she gradually becomes more determined to return.

Another setting that is crucial to the narration of Mariana's processing of her exile is that of museums. These sites which, unlike water which is associated with fluidity, represent stability and preservation, also have a transfor-

mational effect in the film. Mariana's contact with the Atlantic Ocean takes place as she is visiting, together with her daughter and Gerardo, the house in Boulogne-sur-Mer where José de San Martín, a hero of Argentinean independence, lived and died while in exile. It is perhaps this close proximity to death in exile that triggers her transformation, but a previous transformational point in Mariana's approach to her exile also occurs in a museum, this time the Pompidou Centre in Paris. A friend of Mariana's from Buenos Aires, Ana (Ana María Picchio), is visiting her. It is three years since they have seen each other, and their lives have clearly gone down different paths. After an effusive re-encounter at the airport, the friends can be seen in front of an abstract painting in the Pompidou. Ana gets the painting's author wrong and Mariana corrects her; they are in front of Picabia's 'Udnie (Young American Girl, The Dance)' – Picabia being a painter who himself constantly retransformed, by exploring different styles and techniques; Mariana, the girl who dances. After the visit to the Pompidou, the friends' different views about the dictatorship and exile clearly emerge while they are in Mariana's rooms. A place of preservation and a static painting thus mark the beginning of Mariana's process of change and redefinition.

Mariana and Juan Dos both return, but their processes in reaching that decision are strikingly different. The rooms in which they live and the objects in them, in fact, tell us about their different ways of dealing with exile. Juan Dos' room is covered with photographs and paintings carved in the stone of the walls and ceiling. The pictures show key figures from Argentinean tango and culture (see Figure 3). These pictures surround him and embrace him like the inside of a shell, like the shell he accuses Pierre of not daring to break. The space is illuminated by numerous candles and the window is closed. Mariana, in contrast, lives in a spacious, bright apartment. Light comes from various lamps, which constitute the only decorative objects in the apartment, and through the frosted glass of tall curtainless windows. Rather than pictures, the walls in Mariana's apartment have only the marks made by pictures that are not there anymore. Moreover, Mariana's rooms are inhabited by mirrors, mirrors that notably reflect her and her daughter (Ciallella, 2010: 308), and herself and her friend Ana as they grow apart in their views about the exile and the dictatorship. Hence, the static images in pictures of the past in Juan Dos' room are in sharp contrast with the variability of the images reflected in Mariana's mirrors and, while Juan Dos can only see pictures of others, Mariana can sometimes find herself in her mirrors, as she does in a cut when she is on the phone speaking to her mother in Buenos Aires. For Juan Dos, whose other part, Juan Uno, was left in Buenos Aires, the only end of the exile is to return. Mariana goes through a more complex process of reflection and transformation to reach the same decision.



Figure 3 Juan Dos in his room surrounded by the drawings of key figures from Argentinean tango and culture]

Letters and printed photographs were a constant presence for these late twentieth-century exiles. They were the locus of anchored memories and the fine thread that kept them in touch with their homeland and its affects. The memory of Buenos Aires is portrayed in static pictures, as if time and distance had frozen them. But the telephone is, in the film, the object chosen to condense the significance for the exiles of keeping the contact with their origins alive, and the arduousness of the task. The telephones are, in most of the scenes in which they feature, public telephones, and 'Miseria', the group's Uruguayan musician, attempts, through the use of various improvised systems, to make them work without paying – but without success. In his various attempts, the telephones are broken or burst into flames, and even the police make an appearance and frustrate his attempts. Juan Dos tries to connect with Juan Uno, aided by 'Miseria' and his tricks; the whole group of exiles waits in vain outside a telephone booth in the cold of a Parisian train station to speak to their families in Buenos Aires. The telephone as an object that represents the possibility of connecting with the homeland is indeed, in many cases, located at a train station, placing in the same scene the idea of stability that a connection with home can give and the temporary space of platforms where trains constantly come and go – a temporary space, like the site of exile, is felt as temporary and alien to the exiles.

A very distinctive object of the Argentinean and River Plate identity and the everyday life of the inhabitants of those lands is *mate*, a green tea infusion usually drunk using a pumpkin as a container and a metallic straw. And yet



*mate* is not an object that invariably accompanies the images of the everyday life of the exiles that the film offers. Rather, *mate* appears to indicate very specific junctures in the development of the storyline. It first appears when the group is introduced. Drinking *mate* is customarily done in groups, sharing the same container and straw, and in this scene the exiles are sharing not only a taste from their lands, but their concerns, views and laughter, and the *mate* seals this sense of community and bonding. *Mate* appears again in another scene related to this sharing and bonding of the community of exiles but this time the custom of passing it around is slightly modified. In this new context, in this new environment that is the new land, the exiles not only have a shared identity related to their countries of origins; the sharing also becomes solidarity. As such, in a brief scene, while the band rehearses its tangos for the *Tanguedia*, a woman helps one of the musicians to drink his *mate* so that he does not have to interrupt his work. A third appearance of *mate* is when Juan Dos and Pierre are starting to discuss the details of the *Tanguedia*, and how to work together. Pierre is offered some *mate*, and he tries it but puts it to one side arguing it is too bitter. He prefers to drink a good French wine instead, a gesture that predicts that the syncretism of different cultures and the breaking of barriers they are discussing will be difficult to achieve.

In its final appearance, the iconic *mate* is combined with highly crystallised notions of national culture, and in this context *mate* becomes a symbol of identity closure, of ossified resistance to change, and death. The scene in which the university professor Gerardo is dying in bed and shares a *mate* with the hero of independence, San Martín, and with Carlos Gardel, the famous 1930s tango singer whose name features in the title of the film, points in this direction. The *mate* still represents communion and bonding, but with an immovable past in this case. For Gerardo, the books, which he so feared were being burnt by the dictatorship in Argentina, and the weight of the official histories (Fernández L'Hoeste, 2000: 64) precluded his being open to re-inventing himself in exile. In Gerardo's view, '... *el exilio es ausencia, ¿y qué es la ausencia sino una muerte prolongada?*' (exile is absence, and what is absence if not a prolonged death?).<sup>14</sup> While Mariana and Gerardo are together on the train that takes them to Boulogne-sur-Mer, where Mariana makes her decision to return, the trip has a different effect on Gerardo. Gerardo views the past – what made him what he is – as of a static and fixed nature. As such, in his imaginary *mate*-sharing with San Martín and Gardel, the latter explains that he cannot sing anymore as he is too old; his singing can only be heard on a gramophone because it has been immortalised, forever fixed on a record.

14 Author's translation.



Figure 4 María (left) is wearing her black tango hat and the white glove as she rehearses her street performance.

María, the narrator and Mariana's daughter, is at the antipodes of the path followed by Gerardo and is the door that the film leaves open at the end to highlight the endless character of the resignification of identities, like a *tanguedia* itself. María, the youngest of the characters, represents this openness and hope, and the key material anchor of this syncretism in her everyday life can be found both in her clothes – in particular a white glove that she wears – and in her use of the public spaces that are her own everyday space. María is also preparing a play, a street play telling the story of the Argentinean exile. But in this case the music and choreography represent her own form of appropriation of the new environment and her own assimilation to it. The play includes, for instance, tango and mime, the latter taken as a typically French artistic expression. Her black tango hat and white glove represents the fusion of both of these in her play (see Figure 4). María and her group rehearse in open public spaces and this is where most of María's everyday life as shown in the film takes place. These spaces include the roof of a train station and the gardens next to the river in the first scenes. Notably, in these rehearsals the spaces are empty – only dogs and her own circle of friends share the scene. But in the closing scene María and her friends perform their street play in a Parisian public square. For the first time in the film, the public space in which María and her friends perform is shared with the locals.

The relevance of the materiality of the space returns in the closing scene. From an opening scene that could not be detached from the materiality of the river water, the water that enabled the persistence of the tango and its origins, the lives of the exiles start to be portrayed in public spaces of transit such as train stations and airports. These spaces are empty or purely transitional, as in the recurrent images of the escalators taking characters back

and forth to departure gates. And then, in María and her appropriation of the Parisian public square, the film ends by underlining the openness of this closure, with María directly stating that she comes and goes, and maybe, one day, will return.

## Conclusions

*Tangos: el exilio de Gardel* is an artistic creation that manages to simultaneously materialise the experience of the 1970s Argentinean exile and emphasise the open-ended meanings of the experience that it embodied. Objects and places play a critical role in portraying and communicating the exile experience, as they complement the film's use of a variety of languages, beyond the use of speech and words, to reflect the complexity of the experience of exile. This article has focused on exploring three aspects of the materiality of this film: the film itself as an object; the *Tanguedia* and its related objects; and the materiality of the everyday life of the exiles as portrayed by the film.

The film itself expresses the relational character of materiality: materiality both embodies social relations and has an effect upon them. The film reflects the specific context in which the Argentinean exile occurred and in which the film was released. At the same time, because of its very format and characteristics as an object memorialising exile, it proposes different ways of conceiving of this exile experience that seek to affect the audience's conceptualisation of exile and of the Argentine exiles in particular.

In the *Tanguedia*, the objects emphasise the issue of identity dislocation and the efforts to recompose it. In particular, dolls are the main pivots used to represent the intricacies involved in these efforts. It is here, moreover, that the difficulties derived from the exiles' encounters with a new language, and more specifically with a new framework of understanding and communicating that transcends the mere encounter with a new tongue, are presented more explicitly. Dolls, but also the *Tanguedia* with its mix of genres and the condensation of words implied in the name, represent the efforts of both the exiles and the host country to find new ways of communicating with each other.

Thus, the film, the *Tanguedia* and the dolls can be seen as constituted and constitutive of social relations. Yet, in the case of the latter two, the film puts an emphasis on the creative side of these mutually constitutive processes that occurs in the interaction between subjects and objects (Basu and Coleman, 2008). This can be seen through the lenses of the relational materialism proposed in this article, in which view the *Tanguedia* and the dolls are material objects that fixate social relation and can shape them, but

at the same time are carriers of meanings which are open to reinterpretations and re-creation.

In the case of the objects and places that appear in various scenes of the everyday life of the exiles the emphasis is, instead, on the constitutive aspects of the material world. These objects appear not only as representing crystallised social relations but also, crucially, as shaping the variety of paths taken to confront the dilemmas posed by the loss of certainties that exile brings about. The retention of a link with his or her origins, represented by the telephone or pictures for instance, is crucial for the exiles as these perform the role of guardians of their past identities. The film shows that these objects can acquire different meanings in different contexts, but above all what the film highlights about these everyday objects is how the relations crystallised in them can shape subjects in different, and sometimes opposite, ways. The *mate*-sharing of Gerardo demonstrates how the resilience of the social relations embedded in that object have trapped him in the past, and the Picabia painting has a crucial role in informing Mariana's decision to return.

Perhaps the very complexity of the exiles' experience, which *Tangos* highlights, contributed to leaving the voices of the exiles outside of the debates on the reconstruction of the memory of the dictatorship for a long time. Reviving the experience of exile embodied in this film not only means bringing a new actor into the disputes of who has the legitimacy to shape that memory. It also challenges persistent views of these experiences; views that contribute to perpetuating the exclusion of the exiles' memories from the reconstruction of the memory of that past and which are paradoxically shared by sectors that stand in the opposite poles in their struggles to define that memory. The idea of a 'golden exile' (Franco, 2007), was promoted by the dictatorship but was also adopted by some of those who had also been its victim but did not leave the country - in their view the exiles escaped and abandoned the struggle. Exiles themselves were not indifferent to this perspective; their guilt for having left their companions behind also made them feel undeserving of a space in the process of memorialising that past.

The memory of exile as captured in this 1985 film shows the complexity of the experience at the same time that it exposes how its traumatic aspects were also traversed by actions of resistance and struggles to rearticulate the exiles' identities. It is timely thus to make use of the resilient power of the objects that embody memories and reignite the memory of exile captured in *Tangos* in which the struggles and resistance traits of the experience are incorporated. Placing Solanas' film in the context of the current disputes about memory formation can contribute to going beyond the dual view of those who suffered the abuses of the dictatorships as either victims or villains. But also, as Elizabeth Jelin noted at the time in which human rights movements

were still carving their space as key actors in the politics of memory, '[w]hat a collective memory retains is the part of history that can be integrated into a current value system; the rest is ignored, forgotten, although at times it may be reclaimed and remembered.' (1994: 50). Thus, reclaiming the space of the exile as part of the memory of the dictatorships is also seeking to challenge and reshape the current boundaries of the value system that defines what views and not only what actors can be part of that collective memory. In turn, these reflections on the exile's complex and contradictory processes of identity rearticulation may pave the way to reconsidering the very politics of polarisation that tend to characterise Latin America – a type of politics in which the exclusion of the opponents, as happens with exile, is a key inherent feature.

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