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The Tango of Esthetics & Politics

AN INTERVIEW WITH
FERNANDO SOLANAS
by Coco Fusco



Much has been said about the new New Latin American Cinema. It's more accessible, more commercially viable, more concerned with comedy and psychology than politics and historical analysis. Fernando Solanas, codirector with Octavio Getino of the landmark Latin American political documentary of the Sixties, *The Hour of the Furnaces*, has contributed with his own work to creating the sense that something has changed. Solanas spent eight years in exile from his native Argentina, five of which were spent making *Tangos: The Exile of Gardel*. Combining music, dance, theater and melodrama, the film follows the ups and downs of exile life among a group of artists and intellectuals in Paris, and their attempts to put on a "tanguedia" about their experience. It was awarded prizes in Venice and Havana in 1985.

Solanas also coauthored the essay "Towards a Third Cinema" with Getino, in which they proposed a model for filmmaking integrated into Third World liberation movements as a kind of urban media adjunct to the guerilla 'foco.' Opposing this model to the First Cinema of Hollywood and the Second Cinema of European auteurism, they argued for a collective cinematic practice, grounded in radical documentary tradition, dedicated to decolonization. Eighteen years and three films later, Solanas's position on the nature of Latin American cinema has changed. In his discussion of *Tangos* he argues for a Latin American auteurism, which continues the project of developing a national culture but is more comfortably integrated into the esthetics of international independent cinema. Like many other Latin intellectuals of his generation, Solanas here speaks as one involved in a process of reassessment.

Cineaste: How did you combine esthetic and political considerations in making *Tangos*? How was this strategy different from those of your other films?

Fernando Solanas: I have made three feature films with my own scripts and a fourth feature on assignment in France. In each of these films I've tried to present a series of problems as a cinematic author. In *The Hour of the Furnaces* I wanted to make the film equivalent of an historical, sociological and political essay. That is why I divided the film into chapters. It was a film in which the shock of the montage aimed to stimulate reflection on the issues presented. The first part was agitational. The second and third parts were moments of reflection for action, in which the film was to open up to the spectators and be continued by them. The second and third parts were directed specifically to the Argentine people. With my codirector Octavio Getino, I told the story of the march of liberation of the Argentine people. We saw the film as prologue, as a detonator for a moment of reflection in the theatre.

My second film, *Los Hijos de Fierro*, was inspired by the

poem *Martin Fierro*, which was written in 1872. I chose some myths and central characters from this poem and, with these figures, I wrote a story set in Argentina between 1955 and 1974, freely adapting those characters. I wanted to create a popular epic.

In *Tangos*, several different esthetic levels coexist. I wanted to question the notion of cinematic genre. Few are established, and those that are began in the U.S. and Europe. As a filmmaker of the South, I wanted to escape from those closed models and genres, to find our own. Many other filmmakers have tried to find their freedom, and, in that sense, I don't feel very original. What I want to do is compose films with greater liberty. From the Argentines, to the Argentines, and other Latins. In *Los Hijos de Fierro* there were moments of popular poetry, poetry of the underworld, symbolic and mythical moments, and documentary moments. *Tangos* is a European coproduction, enabling it to reach a greater public. It is a spectacle.

Cineaste: Did you specifically change your approach to reach this larger public?

Solanas: The film's objective was to be a grand spectacle, unlike my other films. In *The Hour of the Furnaces* and *Los Hijos de Fierro* I speak from the position of certain sectors, from a political point of view. In *Tangos* I was speaking from a more generalized ideological position, rather than a polemical one.

Cineaste: What position was that?

Solanas: It is a reckoning with Argentina. I don't speak from the political position of certain exile sectors. I speak from the position of a united Argentine people, faced with one overwhelming enemy—the military dictatorship and its foreign accomplices. In the other films I spoke from the polemical position of certain sectors of the Argentine public. If you were a Peronist, you identified with the film. If you were a Socialist or came from another political position, you would be shocked by the films. *Tangos* is more of an auteurist film, but it is made by a director who has certain political commitments. Obviously.

Cineaste: Spectacle could mean any number of things, from special effects to traditional theatrical entertainment. In what sense are you using it in your description of *Tangos*?

Solanas: With *Tangos* I tried to take the notion of spectacle to the limit. I was working against a certain idea of cinema as spectacle — this was my reaction against the mediocrity of contemporary cinema, which is becoming increasingly enslaved by preexistent models and an esthetic of naturalism, of realism or hyperrealism, which are falsely realist, of course. I'm speaking of the esthetic of *Rambo*, *Rocky* and *Year of the Dragon*. They are the most absolute lies, the greatest mystifications, but they are constructed in terms of models that are being imposed with increasing frequency in the world. This is due in part to television, which is inundated with American programs. In written fiction the suspense story is a very small, relatively



An impromptu performance in Fernando Solanas's *Tangos: The Exile of Gardel*

unimportant genre. In cinema, suspense turns out to be the underlying formula that allows other formulas to be accepted, whether it be a love story, a thriller, or a war movie.

In real life, such suspense doesn't exist. Suspense in real life is more vague, more diffuse. Life is full of unforeseen things, full of chance encounters, or unforeseen encounters. In genre cinema everything is planned, or if something is unplanned, it is planned by the script and the delivery. It is a completely programmed cinema in the service of efficiency. It is like entering a tunnel in a car and only looking forward so as not to hit the person in front of you. You don't see anything going on around you, but what is happening around you is nothing less than life itself. I wanted to get out of that, to react against it. I said I was going to make a story that would not be the only story. I was going to tell the story of many of us, about the unforeseen incidents of daily life. Not great unusual things, but everyday things.

Cineaste: How did you structure the film?

Solanas: *Tangos* is like a book of stories. In reality, it is an extended tango libretto. The tango lyrics usually tell a story. Musically speaking, the film is a suite of tangos and *milongas*, a faster, more satiric form of tango. These tangos have different characters.

I wanted to present *Tangos* as a spectacle in four movements because cinema is a synthesis of the arts—it has an affinity with music, theatre, ballet and opera. I divided the film into four movements of a cantata. This combination of spectacle, music and stories, is the structure. I decided what was important in the film was the structure and not the genre. If you have the structure, you can change anything within it for something else. Working within that structure, I wanted the film to be a move toward liberty.

Cineaste: Liberty in what sense? For whom?

Solanas: Life doesn't take place in just one register. Say we're laughing now, a friend might come and tell us an anecdote or something ridiculous happens, like the waiter spills yogurt on us. Well, so we laugh and clean ourselves off, and then the phone rings and there's bad news. I come back with the news and you comfort me, but it makes you recall something sad that happened to you in your life. Life is not programmed.

I think that my film is an experience of liberty for the spectator. It obliges you to let yourself go, not to arm yourself with a code for reading, but to play with the film. If any work must be completed by the participation of another, that participation must take place on terms of liberty. I wanted to create a work that was a kind of play. Afterwards, the spectator either leaves the cinema or enters into the film, a game which at moments is sad and serious, at other moments, grotesque, and, at others, enjoyable.

Wanting to create a spectacle, I sought to incorporate on the screen languages from all sorts of spectacle. Not just theatrical dialog, which is often used, but also choreographic metaphors and musical metaphors. What did I want to use from the theatre? What interested me most was theatrical convention. You go to the theatre and you think you're before Hamlet if they've put that scene on stage and the actors are good. I can go to a spectacle without scenery where they tell me I'm at the edge of the sea. I don't see it, but I feel it. That is the poetic image. The problem of artistic creation is the problem of the creation and transmission of poetic images.

But what, then, is the poetic? For me, it is emotion, emotion tied to an expression with a certain degree of esthetic refinement. Conscious that creation in any language is the creation of poetic images—in verse, painting, in ballet, movement—I wanted to take this to the limit. I

no longer work simply on dialog in traditional cinema's terms. I reject that as cinema and, in opposition to it, I present a composition of poetic images, moments of poetic concentration. That is why I speak of poetics within the film.

Tangos is not just a film about exile. Exile is multiplied in its meaning. I speak of the exile of those within their countries and outside their countries. I talk about how you can exile yourself within your own country, as Pierre did. The children of exile are also exiled as adolescents, which is everyone's first experience of exile. Old age is our last. The other exile I discuss is that of creation. The authentic creation is an act of exiling oneself, moving out of the 'boarding school' where your parents put you, so to speak. If you get out of that culturally, you begin to live in exile.

Cineaste: How does focusing on the process of writing and producing a performance fit into these issues?

Solanas: The theme of creation is as important as the theme of exile. I theorize in the film about a certain conception of creation that is based on my notion of liberty. We give more value to the process by which a work is created than we do to the finished work. That is why each section ends on the theme of the *tanguedia*, the creation of the *tanguedia*. In the first part, a European, Pierre, our best French friend who understands the most about us, understands nothing when we reveal our most intimate codes. In *Tangos* we're not the ones studying them. It's they who should study the key works of our literature and art. Pierre accuses Juan Dos of creating a chaotic adventure. Juan Dos answers him by saying something that is very fundamental. He says, "It is not disorder, but another order, another form." The man of the North, the European, when faced with phenomena from the Third World that do not fit within his codes and models, says, "Chaos!" I think this is the first time that a Latin American film points to that Eurocentrism, that Cartesianism and Parisianism, and critiques them.

The third part ends with the theme of the *tanguedia*, when Juan Dos says now the two Juans are not necessary. The *tanguedia* is over, it is the death of the authors. At the same time, the *tanguedia*, which is the exile of Gardel, is the grand metaphor for this trip, for an uncertain amount of time. This is exile. Exile causes uncertainty and anguish because you do not know when it will end. That is why they're always looking for the end. The time to give an end to exile is determined by exiles within. The two exiles have collaborated but those outside are waiting for those inside to send the ending.

The fourth part is an epilog, which ends by recounting what others had already mentioned tangentially—the story of the political violence of the characters' past experiences. A traditional film would have begun by saying that Maria is the daughter of a *desaparecido*. That is why her mother left. It would have started with the harassment that Gerardo suffered after the disappearance of his daughter, or the song of the children of exile who speak of the humiliation suffered by young people who stayed in Argentina during the repression. I leave these things to the end. Why? Because I want the spectator to get close, to be able to discover the characters in a natural, spontaneous way. In reality, all of us have terrible stories of violence behind us, but we laugh, we live, and we play. It would be a mystification to present someone who had had such experiences as constantly suffering because of them.

I also wanted to take the notion of an open-ended story to the limit. It was in my favor in this situation that exile is a state of openness. When you return to your country you feel like a foreigner, because the country is different and everyone has changed. Then you start to feel the need for the country you left behind.

Cineaste: To what extent did the actors in *Tangos* actually participate in the making of the film?

Solanas: I am happy if I go halfway in approaching my actors and they go halfway. I have to adjust myself to their characters. Each one brings what they can. If I choose an actor, it's because I have a sense of their capacity. I know what kind of sensibility they can bring to the film.

Cineaste: Can you talk about the use of historical figures in *Tangos*—how are San Martín and Carlos Gardel different from Che and Perón in *The Hour of the Furnaces*?

Solanas: All my filmmaking is an attempt to create a space for memory, to recapture memory. The imperialist politics of neocolonialism has worked to destroy our cultures. It marginalizes them, silences them, or penetrates them, thereby distorting them. The real story of our people is always silenced or deformed. The real problems are not presented. There isn't even any space for that. In our countries, penetrated and colonized as they are, a director should be a provoker. If you aren't, then you're an imbecile of the system. Filmmakers should assume their role as avant-garde intellectuals and provoke the neocolonial system with a great deal of information, with the great themes of our countries, and the memories of our struggles.

What bothers the system is that I didn't make another *Hour of the Furnaces*. They would like me to confine myself to being a militant, political documentarian. When I invade their space, they say, "Oh, he's a political documentary filmmaker. He doesn't engage in artistic creativity. His films show in union meetings and university cine-clubs." They wanted to exclude me from cinema, so I said I'm going to annoy them. I'm going to make a film about the everyday problems of exile. I'm going to present it as a spectacle, as a work of art. Then some said, "Oh, but this film estheticizes exile." It doesn't. What you have to sense is what key it is written in. I wanted to take revenge on the system that didn't want me to make any more films with a creative work that is cinematic, pictorial and musical.

The historical figures are there as part of my attempt to recover history and memory. This is a story of exile in France, which in no way pretends to analyze exile, or to be the film about exile. It is, rather, a few stories, a few songs, a few confessions, a few poems about exile that I have seen and lived in Paris. This film is also an *hommage*, a testimony of the old relation of friendship and solidarity between Argentina and France. That is why I brought together two characters who are very loved by the Argentines, and who have to do with France and Argentina. One is General San Martín, who, in a sense, is the symbol of a nation being born. He lived his last twenty-five years of exile in France. And the French sent us a young boy from Toulouse, a boy of humble origins whose mother was a seamstress. This young man was to become Carlos Gardel.

Cineaste: What is the importance of *The Hour of the Furnaces* for you, in retrospect?

Solanas: As a film, I think it still carries within it an important truth. Even though it is very much a part of the political movements that were current in '67 and '68. Though those ideas may not have the same validity now, the film's analysis of reality, of the enemy and of history still holds. Many films have appeared since that have drawn from its style. I know that, having made *Tangos*, anyone in Latin America who wants to make a musical will have to see it. I have not made a musical comedy. I made a *tanguedia*—tango with comedy and drama. And anyone who wanted to make political documentaries after *The Hour of the Furnaces* has had to see it. I'm glad about that.

Tangos: The Exile of Gardel and The Hour of the Furnaces are distributed by New Yorker Films, 16 West 61st Street, New York, NY 10023, phone (212) 247-6110.