



Performing Embodiment: Choreographies of Affect, Language, and Social Norms, ed. by Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, *Cultural Inquiry*, 39 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 151–79

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Dancing Tango
The Realm of Appearances

CITE AS:

Dorothea Olkowski, 'Dancing Tango: The Realm of Appearances', in *Performing Embodiment: Choreographies of Affect, Language, and Social Norms*, ed. by Alberica Bazzoni and Federica Buongiorno, *Cultural Inquiry*, 39 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2026), pp. 151–79 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-39_07>

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ABSTRACT: Tango, in its most creative appearance, is a dance of the close embrace. This is not the elaborate stage tango one often sees on television or online, but Argentine tango or salon tango. This kind of tango is focused on traditional music and moves, with a partner with whom one creates a dance based on that music and those moves, but which is not confined by them. This works best when there is connection and communication between two dancers. But tango also takes up what Hannah Arendt has called the universal 'urge toward self-display'. This implies the existence of a spectator. Thus, every subject is also an object appearing at some time and place to some spectator. In turn, this presupposes that living things depend on the world as the site of their appearing, their blooming, and their eventual fading away. Only this, Arendt claims, guarantees our reality in a manner that consciousness alone — both feeling and thought — cannot. This chapter explores the implications of these conditions in the context of the history of tango, its music and dance.

KEYWORDS: appearance; self-presentation; contrapposto; the Other; intentionality; cabeceo; milonga

Dancing Tango

The Realm of Appearances

DOROTHEA OLKOWSKI

INTRODUCTION

There was a time, not too long ago, when I thought that dancing tango was about the body and affective life. This is because tango is not a dance that is choreographed but one that is improvised between two dancers who must have a certain amount of technical skill but who must also have a special physical connection in order to dance well together. However, after some years of practising tango and performing tango, I have come to see it differently. There is no way to gloss over this. Of course, one must have a body of some kind to dance, and affective life is universal, but these criteria might really amount to existence. What it takes to dance is, minimally, existence, so that someone who loves movement may find a way to do this regardless of even extreme bodily limitations. Dancing is in the desire and the intention of the individual, and each individual

creates their own idea and sense of movement. Traditional tango does, of course, call for more than just the minimal. Dancing tango may be something like two skilled musicians playing improvised jazz: they know the moves, the riffs, the phrasing, and they play off one another to create something new. Tango is like this too, but as a performer I would argue that there are additional elements to tango that are not as pronounced in jazz performance, although they are perhaps not completely lacking.

Tango, in its most creative appearance, is a dance of what is called the *close embrace*. This is not the elaborate stage tango one often sees on television or online, but what is often called *Argentine tango* or *salon tango*. This kind of tango is focused on the dancer's ability to enact a number of traditional moves with a partner and then to create a dance that is based on those moves but not confined by them. This works best when there is connection and communication between two dancers. Tango does not begin with the embrace; the technical skill must come first. However, lacking the embrace, one cannot dance tango at its finest. Nevertheless, 'The embrace does not judge, but demands respect and acceptance.'¹ In the embrace, each dancer wants to be fully aware of and responsive to the other, but the connection cannot be thought, willed, or judged. Some tango professionals claim that it can be taught, but this does not seem to be quite right. One can learn many skills that may lead to a truly connected close embrace, but there are no guarantees that it will happen. One can read accounts of the embrace stating that it involves physical intimacy, communication through muscles,

1 Stefani Kang, 'My Tango Quotes' <<https://stefanikangtango.com/my-tango-quotes/>> [accessed 25 November 2025]. There is nothing special about this website except that it states this clearly and strongly.

breathing, and gestures, but again, this is no guarantee of connection either.² Having observed and (I think) experienced close embrace, it seems to me that the embrace is an effect of other things; it is an outcome and not the place to start. The place to start might be something like appearance — the love and appreciation of appearance as the sensitive starting point or initial condition for tango.

Every tango appears to start in the same way, but small variations in initial conditions can lead to very different dances. The DJ or (if you are lucky) the tango orchestra begins to play a set of tangos (either three or four, closely following one another) and two dancers who may or may not know one another look at one another, often across a room, and invite one another to dance. Traditionally the (male) lead looks first to the (female) follower, but these conventions have long been superseded by gender-fluid practices and anyone may freely invite another dancer. But what brings about this *cabeceo*, the glance across the room of one dancer to another, is initially entirely a matter of appearance. The dancer receiving the glance has the option of looking away, breaking the power of the glance and refusing the invitation to appear with the other dancer. Perhaps they have accepted another invitation already, or perhaps they simply do not want to dance at that time or with that appearance.

‘All is appearance’ is a statement plucked by Hannah Arendt from the work of W. H. Auden, who wrote, ‘Does

2 The website ‘Ultimate Tango’ claims that tango is the ultimate dance for introverts because it is reverent, subdued, and structured. Of these three characteristics, only the latter seems correct, and while statistically there may be more introvert tango dancers than extrovert ones, this tells us little about it. See <<https://www.ultimatetango.com>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

God ever judge us by appearances? I suspect that he does.³ God is not the only one who does so. Arendt repeats these words to us living beings who speak and are spoken to, who touch and are touched, who see and are seen, who move from place to place, whose senses are affected consciously and beyond, whose feelings and thoughts are alive in a world that precedes us in every possible way and will continue long after our departure. But in the temporal span between our arrival and our disappearance, we do appear; we *make* our appearance. We care for our bodies, we dress ourselves, and we decide how to appear to others. Whether we are pragmatic or dramatic or something else, this might be said to be part of a universal 'urge toward self-display'.⁴ But this also means that no living thing that exists does so without the presumption of a spectator.⁵ It means that every subject is also an object appearing at some time and place to some spectator, and the urge toward self-display may also include the presence of spectators because living things depend on the world as the site of their appearing, their blooming, and their eventual fading away.⁶ Only this, Arendt claims, guarantees our reality in a manner that consciousness alone — both feeling and thought — cannot.⁷

If it is true that even the most demure or restrained of creatures may at times appear like those exotic birds that flash their brilliant breast feathers to attract or warn off other birds — or like those creatures that change their skin and camouflage themselves to harmonize with the sur-

3 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* [1977/78] (Harcourt, 1981), p. 17.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20. Even Descartes's cogito presumes a reader or listener.

rounding untamed forest — then all living beings appear and disappear.⁸ The point is that there are many ways of appearing and many forms of self-display. It is not always the brash revelation of a being; it may be the urge to appear as an individual distinguishable from other individuals, expressing, however one may, nothing other than oneself.⁹ If we live as appearances among appearances then what is universal is that our biological, neurological, and physical processes exist for the sake of appearances. They allow appearances to appear and so our satisfaction with those appearances is reliant to a very great extent on what does not appear at all. But this is not a question of function.

What is really at stake in appearance is its infinitely varied and highly differentiated aspect.¹⁰ This exceeds both self-preservation and sexuality, and, as Arendt argues, is more likely to be discerned in a glance, a sound, or a gesture. It is not singularly a thought, a feeling, a passion, or an emotion, so it tends to be subtle.¹¹ The urge to self-display of appearance is distinguishable from self-presentation as, unlike the latter, the former does not permit of choice. For dancers, the trappings of clothing, hair, makeup, and shoes are there, but they are not the main show. Appearance shows what is there to show without pretence; it cannot help but show it.¹² Yet, illusion and deception remain a possibility insofar as living beings are capable of manipulating appearance and deceiving themselves and any spectators. This is because they all exist in the common world of appearance, which serves to distract the mind and activity of

8 Ibid., p. 20.

9 Ibid., p. 30.

10 Ibid., p. 28.

11 Ibid., pp. 31–32.

12 Ibid., p. 36.

thought.¹³ In the traditions passed down from the ancient Greeks, the original spectators were the gods who viewed humans as 'a spectacle for their entertainment'.¹⁴ Struck by the beauty of harmonious appearances, humans sought to partake in this godly perspective and boldly embraced the virtue of the performance, its virtuosity, as how it appears was taken to be divine.

Both the world and men stand in need of praise lest their beauty go unrecognized. Since men appear in the world of appearances, they need spectators, and those who come as spectators to the festival of life are filled with admiring thoughts which are then uttered in words.¹⁵

This admiration, this wonder, is what we philosophers have been told is the source of philosophy.¹⁶ According to Arendt, this experience of appearance is the ground of thinking, willing, and judging. If so, then Arendt's deep insight into the foundational role of appearance as the ground of our thinking, willing, and judging should shake us to our core and undo most if not all of our presuppositions about self-display, feelings, and thought. The inner organs, the muscles, the sensory networks, the flow of blood, and the neurophysiology are what do not appear. If we can accept this insight, many things will follow and many of our assumptions will fail us. Arendt sees the darker side of this in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*, whose hero, coming upon appearance, stands before the diversity and individuality of things, their sheer existence. He experi-

13 Ibid., pp. 39, 87.

14 Ibid., p. 130.

15 Ibid., p. 132.

16 Ibid., p. 143.

ences the shock of their appearing and falls apart, unable to admire or wonder or affirm sheer existence.¹⁷

In a similar way, Sartre also becomes painfully aware of the necessity of the spectator. Like Arendt, Sartre confirms that when the spectator, whom he calls the 'Other', looks at what appears, the Other holds the secret of its being, the proof of its existence, that which makes the appearance a visible being able to show itself in the world.¹⁸ If the Other disappears, ceases to see who or what appears, the appearance disappears as well. Unlike Arendt, Sartre insists that even if there is a conjunction of two independent beings, this looking and being looked at is a game of conflict, a matter of which one will gain the upper hand and be free to define the Other, while struggling to remain free of that other person's domination.

For Sartre, the spectator dominates, to the detriment of the appearance, as a connection between two beings. Yet Sartre remains very much aware of the primacy of appearance. He encounters it again in his failed meeting with Pierre, who is not in the café when Sartre arrives to see him to meet with him. He has an appointment with Pierre but arrives late as usual. Pierre does not appear. The café offers nothing because the appearance of Pierre would have been the foundation, the ground, and without Pierre, there is no appearance, and so nothing.¹⁹ Perhaps in the face of historical reality, war, and suffering, this is to be expected, but if Sartre's nothingness is one aspect of appearances, Arendt's is another. Sartre's situatedness between two world wars, as well as his crude male gaze in other circumstances, is a clue that we might want to take social and historical realities

17 Ibid., p. 148.

18 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* [1943], trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (Washington Square Press, 1984), p. 473.

19 Ibid., p. 41.

into account. We can do that with tango by briefly examining the historical and social context in which it arose. This is, we will see, crucial to the reality of its appearance.

HISTOIRE DU TANGO

The first dance to lay the groundwork for tango was called *candombe*. The Atlantic slave trade brought twelve million enslaved people to South America from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. In Argentina, they organized themselves in *barrios* — small nations — and fought in the War for Independence. In 1812, their children were declared free. By the 1760s, Afro-Argentines held public dances, called *candombes*, attended by as many as two thousand people.²⁰ One of the difficulties of writing about tango is that the music is integral to the development of the dance. For example, *candombe* is highly syncopated music divided into four beats (quarter notes) per measure. Often, the drumhead is allowed to resonate freely when struck with either the hand or a stick, hard or softly, either at the edge or in the centre of the drum.²¹ Rather than trying to simply

20 George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 158. The history of tango and the cultural politics of its institutionalization and globalization have been the subject of thorough critique in recent years. See, for example, Kathy Davis, *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World* (NYU Press, 2015); Melissa A. Fitch, *Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); Morgan James Luker, ‘Tango as Intangible Cultural Heritage: Development, Diversity, and the Values of Music in Buenos Aires’, in *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, ed. by Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan (Duke University Press 2016), pp. 225–45 <<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822374947-011>>; and Marta Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Routledge, 2018).

21 For an excellent explanation of this complex music, see Clifford Todd Sutton, ‘The Candombe Drumming of Uruguay: Contextualizing Uruguayan Identity through Afro-Uruguayan Rhythm’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Miami, 2013) <<https://scholarship>.

describe the rhythms of *candombe*, I am providing links in the footnotes so that readers can see and hear it for themselves.²²

The dance usually begins with two lines, then couples dance one by one, before everyone dances in pairs in a circle, and as the rhythm picks up speed the pairs go their own way with greater intensity. In the barrios, men and women would have dressed in their very best clothing. The men wore hats, heeled boots, and scarves tied loosely around the neck, and the women wore full skirted dresses. The Afro-Argentines took the dance to the working-class communities of Buenos Aires — to bars, dance halls, and brothels. Many had come from the Bantu region of Equatorial and Eastern Africa. In some native African languages, the word *tango* refers to a closed place and there are some African places called Tango as well. In Latin, *tangere* means to touch.²³ Whatever the precise origins, the word came to be applied to Afro-Argentines' dances held outdoors with drummers. In Argentina, Afro-Argentines frequently needed the permission of the governing rulers in order to hold their *candombes*, although local town councils frequently objected to them as immoral and as opportunities for enslaved people to form communities and possibly threaten the power and authority of their masters.²⁴ In

miami.edu/esploro/outputs/doctoral/The-Candombe-Drumming-of-Uruguay-Contextualizing/991031447556402976> [accessed 25 November 2025].

- 22 See 'Candombe Milonga performed by Central Ave Dance Ensemble', YouTube, 1 May 2011, <<https://youtu.be/Ck8nfvS10Y>> [accessed 25 November 2025]. This *candombe* is performed by the Central Ave Dance Ensemble in Santa Monica, California, in 2011. *Candombe* persists throughout the Americas, but especially in Uruguay.
- 23 Simon Collier and others, *Tango: The Dance, the Song, the Story* (Thames & Hudson, 1995), p. 41.
- 24 Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines*, pp. 156–59. On the origin of the word *tango*, see also William W. Meggeney, 'The River Plate "Tango": Ety-

spite of this, the communities persisted in their gatherings and brought their drums and dances into the cities, spreading their unique rhythms and movements to those outside of their barrios.

From its founding in the sixteenth century and for approximately three centuries, Buenos Aires was a 'remote, thinly peopled and rather neglected backwater of the huge Spanish-American empire.'²⁵ Argentina consisted of a vast pampas, a level plain conducive to ranching and agriculture. This was initially the habitat of Indigenous people, before they were joined by mostly mixed-race (Afro-Argentine and Creole) nomadic gauchos, horsemen who served as the cavalry for rival warlords.²⁶ Driven eventually to the edge of the cities by the division and fencing of the land into private ranches, these *compadres* brought both their music and their macho tendencies with them to the by then thriving Buenos Aires, where they influenced the native-born and mostly poor city dwellers, the *compadritos*, along with sailors, immigrants, and others who called themselves *porteños* (port city dwellers), a name widely used to the present day.²⁷

Quite possibly it was the *compadritos* who ventured into the barrios of the Afro-Argentines and took their

mology and Origins', *Afro-Hispanic Review*, 22.2 (2003), pp. 39–45. For a critical perspective on race in Argentina in relation to tango, see Matthew B. Karush, 'Blackness in Argentina: Jazz, Tango and Race before Perón', *Past & Present*, 216.1 (2012), pp. 215–45 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gts008>>.

25 Collier and others, *Tango*, p. 19.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20. See also Julia Chindemi and Pablo Vila, 'Another Look at the History of Tango: The Intimate Connection of Rural and Urban Music in Argentina at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century', in *Sound, Image, and National Imaginary in the Construction of Latin/o American Identities*, ed. by Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste and Pablo Vila (Lexington Books, 2017), pp. 51–109.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 38–39.

movements and gestures to the brothels and bars where the *milongas* — their dances — took place.²⁸ There, the partners danced together, sometimes outdoors, sometimes in rough dance halls, brothels, and bars. The gauchos also brought their guitar music and songs to the dances, and especially their sentimental song lyrics, sung by *milongueros* (singers or dancers) and reflecting the life of the lonely gaucho, which became an important part of the emerging tango. For those who know tango music, the guitar music of the gauchos will sound quite familiar and the themes of the songs will resonate.²⁹

The *milonga* — the combination of the songs of the *payadores* (folk singers of the pampas) and a guitar accompaniment — came together as a mixture of different musical and dance forms. In addition to the *candombe* and gaucho music, the *compadritos* incorporated the *habanera*, which came from Cuba as a modified form of the French *contradanse* and the English country dance.³⁰ In these forms, the dancers followed rigid patterns, but the Cuban version was more fluid, alternating between slow and fast rhythms and danced to music filled with syncopation and offbeats played by wind instruments.³¹

28 Ibid., pp. 44–45.

29 Listen to ‘Roberto Lara: Argentina — The Guitar of the Pampas’, YouTube, 21 December 2013 <<https://youtu.be/Jt1HnKB5WEc>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

30 Collier and others, *Tango*, pp. 40–41. See ‘Contredanse française La réverbère’, YouTube, 10 October 2014 <<https://youtu.be/ib6h1sSnYZ0>> [accessed 25 November 2025]; and compare it with the ‘Baroque Haiti Contredanse’, YouTube, 9 June 2020 <<https://youtu.be/RH5pydsxpMQ>> [accessed 25 November 2025], danced to drums and a flute.

31 See ‘Habanera, History of Cuban Dances’, Institut national de l’audiovisuel (INA), 17 June 2003 <<https://fresques.ina.fr/danses-sans-visa-en/fiche-media/Dasavi00706/habanera-history-of-cuban-dances.html>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

Talented Afro-Argentine musicians who had studied in Europe, upon their return to Argentina were often snubbed by the high society that had once flocked to hear them in the concert halls, in favour of their white European counterparts. However, art forms of African origin continued, especially that of the *payada* or *payada de contrapunto*, the poetic duel of two guitarist-singers spontaneously composing verse in response to one another.³² The two melodies of the *payada* could be played simultaneously, and this practice — derived from the combination of gaucho practices and European counterpoint — became central to both the music called *milonga* and to the tango music that emerged from it.

The waltz also came to Argentina from Europe, brought by immigrants who arrived in the nineteenth century. Native working-class Argentines, called *criollos*, grew up to the sounds of the waltz along with the polka and the other dances described above. They incorporated the waltz into their dance and modified it to produce the variation called the *vals criollo* or *vals cruzado*. The waltz's association with the European upper class, for whom it was the first dance to feature a close embrace, made it more acceptable for Argentines of all classes.³³ Like its European counterpart and unlike the traditional tango, the music of the *vals criollo* has a 3/4 time signature — three beats to the measure rather than four — but it is usually played at a faster tempo, and its steps are not the same as the European waltz. The *tango vals* consists of many

32 Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines*, p. 170. *Payada de contrapunto* was developed by Afro-Argentine musicians who had studied in Europe, upon their return to Argentina.

33 See 'The Three Faces of Tango', Los Angeles Tango Academy, 21 July 2015 <<https://www.latangoacademy.com/blog/the-three-faces-of-tango>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

giros, turns in both directions, and the *molinete*, in which followers dance small circles around the leader. Again, a video helps us to see and feel the difference.³⁴

Milonga originally referred only to a specific version of the tango — one that persists to this day. All tango dancers also learn to dance the *milonga*, and if tango music and lyrics are akin to ancient Greek tragedy, then the *milonga* is its comedic counterpart, its satyr play. Originating in the region of the Rio de la Plata, *milonga* music combined the Cuban *habanera*, the polka, and the *payada de contrapunto*, derived from its European origins. In European counterpoint, ‘two separate but equal melodies are played simultaneously. Separate means they peak and valley in different places and that they move at different times. Equal means that they are both interesting lines in their own right.’³⁵ These principles carry over into the *milonga* and the tango dances. Given its origins in the rural areas of Argentina and in the lower-class neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires and Montevideo where whites and Blacks met and mixed, *milonga* is fast and energetic.³⁶ Some sources claim that the *milonga* was created by the young white toughs, the *campadritos*, to mockingly imitate the *candombe*, both the dance and the music.³⁷ The pace is a fast 2/4 tempo, syn-

34 Watch ‘Best Tango Valz Sebastian Arce and Mariana Montes’, YouTube, 21 January 2010 <<https://youtu.be/RfOM8pxafzg>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

35 Ryan Leach, ‘The Contemporary Musician’s Guide to Counterpoint’, Envato Tuts+, 9 March 2010 <<https://web.archive.org/web/20240820191745/https://music.tutsplus.com/the-contemporary-musicians-guide-to-counterpoint--audio-4630t>> [accessed 25 November 2025]. All references to the nature of counterpoint are drawn from this clear account by the musician Ryan Leach.

36 ‘Milonga Dance and Music’, Dance Facts, n.d. <<http://www.dancefacts.net/tango/milonga-dance/>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

37 Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines*, p. 166.

copated so that accents are placed on the first or second beat as well as the fourth, fifth, and seventh of an eight-beat series. The music creates a rhythmic dance, with often humorous movements called *quebradas* — slightly jerky movements and pauses, or *cortes*, that break up the flow. Advanced *milonga* dancers make double steps or take three steps between two beats (*milonga con traspie*).³⁸ Again, only a video can give the non-dancer a clearer idea of the intricacies of the *milonga*.³⁹

TANGO IN THREE PARTS

As stated above, the word *tango* seems to have been strongly rooted in Afro-Argentine culture. The exact origin of the word is difficult to pin down, but at first the term was widely used to refer to the dances of Black Argentines.⁴⁰ Tango, as a new way of dancing the *milonga*, is referred to in newspapers as early as the 1870s as a dance of the Afro-Argentines, and it is the pianist Rosendo Mendizabal, a musician of so-called ‘mixed African blood’, and the son of a famous Argentine poet, who is credited with writing the first tango that can be fully attributed to its composer. Written in 1896, ‘El Enterriano’ remains a well-known and often played tango.⁴¹ Additionally, most if not all of the early tango musicians were Afro-Argentine.

38 ‘Milonga Dance and Music’.

39 Here are two of the finest *milonga* dancers in the world, Miguel Zotto and Daiana Guspero: ‘Zotto dancing milonga at Tango Magia’, YouTube, 30 December 2012 <https://youtu.be/_4G03HpzArc> [accessed 25 November 2025].

40 Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines*, p. 165.

41 ‘1868, April 21 — Birth of Rosendo Mendizabal’, Today in Tango!, 21 April 2011 <<https://todayintango.wordpress.com/2011/04/21/1868-april-21-birth-of-rosendo-mendizabal/>> [accessed 25 November 2025]. Here is an early version played by Aníbal Troilo’s orchestra: ‘Aníbal Troilo — 1944 — El enterriano’, YouTube, 19 July 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ouub5Cjc8ok&list=>

As the tango spread from the barrios to parts of town inhabited by European immigrants, and to wealthier neighbourhoods, the European influences toned it down into the *tango liso* or smooth tango.⁴²

The period from the 1880s through the 1920s, known as the *old guard* or *guardia vieja*, saw the rise of richer and more sophisticated music with more varied instrumentation, including the bandoneon (a more complex version of the accordion), violins and other string instruments, and the piano, in addition to the more traditional guitars and flutes.⁴³ The bandoneon has been called a formidably difficult instrument to play. It became the central instrument of the tango trios who played in the cafés of La Boca, usually without dancers. These musicians were the first true stars of tango, whose creativity and musicianship have not been forgotten, especially as they began making records as early as 1902. Eventually, professional dancers emerged from the cabarets and the *tango milonga* prospered.⁴⁴

The Golden Age of tango is replete with too many highly rated composers, singers, orchestras, and dancers to name, and is still firmly the tango of the *porteños*, the lower classes, the mixed-race Argentines, and the female prostitutes/cabaret performers who were the best women dancers. Men had to learn to dance well to even have a chance

RDOuub5Cjc8ok&start_radio=1> [accessed 25 November 2025].
The song title refers to a person from the country's interior.

42 Collier and others, *Tango*, p. 50.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., pp. 58–60. Here is a video of Rino Fraina and Graziella Pulvirenti dancing to composer and orchestra leader Francisco Canaro's 'Mimosa' (1929), filmed in Portland, Oregon, 20 April 2018. The music and dance beautifully evoke the aesthetics of the era: 'Rino Fraina & Graziella Pulvirenti — Francisco Canaro (Mimosa) Portland', YouTube, 20 April 2018 <<https://youtu.be/1ArwQgyvsM8>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

of dancing with the women.⁴⁵ Some orchestras remained committed to traditional rhythms using novel instrumentation to produce a more danceable tango, but many evolved the tango through the formal study of melody, harmony, and classical music in addition to the musical traditions passed down to them. This led to the creation of a more complex and refined tango, but one that retained the sextet of two bandoneons, two violins, a double bass, and a piano.⁴⁶ Sometime around 1913, the tango was taken up by the high society of London and Paris, opening the way to greater acceptance from the Argentine upper classes and to the Golden Age of tango.⁴⁷

The orchestras of this time dressed formally — their elegant sartorial appearance correlated with the elegant musical one. We see this especially with the appearance of singers such as Carlos Gardel, an illegitimate son of French parents, who grew up in Buenos Aires listening to opera as much as to the *payadores*. His unmistakable, expressive baritone voice led to success in the clubs, on stage, and in recordings across South America and Europe.⁴⁸ Often the singers — usually men but increasingly, over time, women as well — along with the orchestra performed for the dancers, in the sense that they paid attention to the phrasing, the tempos, and the pauses of the songs, creating expressive opportunities for the dancers' movements and gestures. The words of the Golden Age songs were expressions of urban life: of immigrants, of the attempts of men and women to climb out of poverty by selling their bodies in one way or another, of shattered illusions, inequality,

45 Collier and others, *Tango*, p. 118.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 119–20.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

and social injustice, and, of course, of love — unrequited love and longing.⁴⁹ Thus the tango was called ‘a sorrowful thought that can be danced.’⁵⁰ For this reason, as well as for the wild popularity of this music and the sensuous appearance of the dance, political leaders — including those who gained their position through coups — frequently tried to ban the tango, especially when the lyrics reflected politics and poverty.

The 1930s were a period of tremendous growth and development of all aspects of tango. The music initially emphasized rhythm, and this brought out the dancers. It is impossible to do justice to this period of the tango with a single composer, orchestra, singer, or pair of dancers; the list of accomplished performers and dancers is too long. The spine-tingling 1971 video of Juan d’Arienzo directing his orchestra and the singer Mercedes Serrano in a performance of the 1938 song ‘Nada más’ conveys the urgency of the music and the brilliance of both the composition and the singer.⁵¹ A second video, of a 2016 performance by two unnamed but extraordinary dancers, exemplifies the essence of salon tango dance and music.⁵² Another brilliant composer and pianist of the period, Carlos di Sarli, revived the melody without losing the rhythm.⁵³ The plenitude of exceptional music accompanied the prolifer-

49 Ibid., p. 132.

50 Ibid., p. 136. These are the words of the lyricist Enrique Santos Discépolo, whose most beloved song compared twentieth-century life to a junk shop, corrupt and immoral.

51 D’Arienzo’s orchestra with Mercedes Serrano, performing ‘Nada más: “Nada más” d’Arienzo “Mercedes Serrano” 1971 Tango’, YouTube, 7 February 2010 <<https://youtu.be/adI4-3CvCSU>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

52 ‘Tango Night 2016! Juan D’Arienzo “Nada Mas”’, YouTube, 11 August 2016 <<https://youtu.be/yAcXTX7DOJ4>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

53 Collier and others, *Tango*, p. 149.

ation of exceptional dancers at this time, the best of whom competed against one another in dance contests that continue worldwide to the present day. Even as the favoured music remains that of the Golden Age, the music and dance has evolved considerably and the dancers' appearance has taken on even greater importance.

By the 1940s there were hundreds of tango orchestras in Buenos Aires, many of which, like that of Osvaldo Pugliese, had become quite large and professional, and there were so many more dancers that every district of the city had at least one and as many as five tango clubs. These were places where friends could meet and dance, and where men and women of diverse ethnicities and socio-economic classes could mix.⁵⁴ This period also coincided with the rise of the populist president Juan Domingo Perón, who lifted the ban on tango lyrics that had been imposed by the dictatorial military regime. Most of this success melted away in the 1950s with changes in government and cultural shifts in the population. Out of these changes, the work of composer Astor Piazzolla stands out for its introduction of dissonance, chromatic harmony, and non-traditional rhythms, all of which made the music difficult for dancers but challenged others to develop the *nuevo tango* and *tango escenario* (new tango and stage tango).

THE URGE TO SELF-PRESENT

The history just presented covers the multiplicity of competing and contributing cultures that make up what we call *tango*. But in choosing to visualize each of these through YouTube videos of dancers whose performances fully articulate the appearance of each of these eras and genres,

54 Ibid., pp. 154–55.

I have tried to bring to light the role of appearance for the dancers as well as for the spectators. Anyone who has watched videos of their performances modulates their feelings and thoughts entirely on the basis of their appearance. As philosophers encountering this situation, we are pretty safe when we restrict ourselves to the life of the mind, but we are in increasingly unstable territory when we start to think and speak about something like tango and its non-philosophical fascinations. We still feel relatively secure addressing nature, literature, and visual art. We make sense of the poetry of songs because it is language, and music provides us with many points of departure, beginning with musical scores and a multitude of recordings. But what can we say about the dance, which for dancers and lovers of dance exists almost entirely in the realm of live appearance, especially given the reality that salon tango is entirely improvised on the basis of a few fundamental moves?

To situate appearance, Arendt points to the findings of zoologist and biologist Adolf Portmann, whose research focused on ‘the external shape of the animal [which] serves to conserve the essential, the inside apparatus, through movement and intake of food, avoidance of enemies and finding sexual partners.’⁵⁵ In nature, Portmann discerned visible shapes and sounds that appear to us — as to other living creatures — as definite and pleasing. Although Portmann favoured symmetry, and recent studies have shown that asymmetry or antisymmetry or *contrapposto* (as tango dancers call it) actually makes for more pleasing features, what remains salient is the evidence for an unmistakable urge toward self-presentation, unnecessary merely for the preservation of life, almost always exceeding even the requirements of sexual attraction, yet extremely gratifying

55 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 441.

to the 'sheer receptivity of our senses'.⁵⁶ In short, living creatures wish to please and to be pleased, and this display makes it possible to feel, to see, and to hear what pleases our sensibility.

Feeling, seeing, and hearing, that is, the tactile, the visible, and the sonorous, are how we enhance the value of the *surface*, the site of the maximum power of expression. If the surface that is felt, seen, and heard is the site of maximum expression, what is being expressed? Not something deeper and invisible, hidden from our senses, but actually the surface expresses itself, its own emotion, its contours and contrasts, its delicate or explosive colours, rhythms, harmonics, form, movement, and sensibilities — its multiple dimensions.⁵⁷

Non-dancers frequently express the view that tango is sensuous or erotic, and perhaps it is, but what appears as sensuous and erotic to non-dancers is, for the dancers and musicians, bound up with their technique, their connected embrace or orchestration, and especially their contraposto, their counterpoint. Counterpoint requires at least two voices, two appearances, but when we add the musicians and possibly also a singer as well as a room full of other dancers, there can be many voices or appearances in the tango. Every historical cultural contribution to tango adds a voice to the overall contraposto appearance. Musicians play and sing to the dancers who dance both with and independently of the music, both with and counterpoised in relation to the dance partner and to the other

56 Ibid., p. 458. See e.g. John P. Swaddle and Innes C. Cuthill, 'Asymmetry and Human Facial Attractiveness: Symmetry May Not Always Be Beautiful', *Proceedings of the Royal Society B, Biological Sciences*, 261.1360 (1995), pp. 111–16 <<https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.1995.0124>>.

57 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 473.

dancers in the *milonga*. ‘The great composers throughout history, from Bach and Mozart, Debussy and Stravinsky, John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith, all share the common trait of a mastery of counterpoint.’⁵⁸ In counterpoint, the musicians and dancers may move parallel to one another, both in the same direction. They may also move contrary to one another, and so move in opposite directions. And finally, they may move obliquely to one another, one voice moving while the other stays in place.⁵⁹ In doing so, they are the expression of the history of tango and the many cultures that created it. In this video (cited in the note), several excellent pairs of Argentine street dancers reflect these tango movements beautifully at different tempos and also with the *milonga*.⁶⁰

These three types of counterpoint produce tension and its resolution and are probably the source of much of the appearance of sensuousness and eroticism. In the dance, there is a sensible connection that resonates between dancers realizing their appearance, their movements, within the dynamics of the music, which itself appears to the dancers as modulation, mutation, contrapuntal variation, and inversion, but also as something independent of their dance. There are the moments of slowing down into the *adagios*, which then give way to a gradual speeding up into an *accelerando*, and again a slowdown, even a complete cessation of visible movement — although dancers never truly stop moving — as the intensity of the music fades or increases.

58 Leach, ‘The Contemporary Musician’s Guide to Counterpoint’.

59 *Ibid.*

60 This is a typical scene in the San Telmo barrio of Buenos Aires: ‘Amazing! Real Tango Street Dance in Buenos Aires, Argentina’, YouTube, 10 July 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-l7O9Ocydw>> [accessed 25 November 2025].

The dancers can *feel* skin and muscles and breath as a *passion* by which they are engaged in the world and are in danger in the world — in danger as they add yet another independent line, consonant or dissonant with the music as they dare. Along with technique, these feelings and passions create the dancer's appearance.

THE MELANCHOLY OF TANGO AND THE SOUL

The lyrics and music of an early tango of 1903, 'La Morocha' (The Creole Woman; lyrics by Ángel Gregorio Villoldo), convey perfectly the melancholy soul of tango. 'I am the dark woman with smoldering eyes, and the love-heat is ablaze in my soul. I am the one whose love is on fire for the noble and daring Creole.'⁶¹ These lines are not meant to exemplify heterosexuality. Instead, they universalize the appearance of the one who suffers and offers the *cabaceo*. Arendt refers to seeing and hearing as aspects of the soul, and when we speak of the soul, we might think back to the French word *esprit*, which can be translated as either 'mind' or 'spirit' — in other words, the inner and invisible life, whether sensible, psychological, cognitive, or spiritual. Thus, *esprit* has generally been opposed to the body, and taken to be part of the 'silent, non-appearing activity [...], the soundless dialogue of me with myself.'⁶² But this is not correct, Arendt insists, for it is the case that the life of the soul is expressed much more effectively through melody, harmony, rhythm, gesture, and glance — that is, through movement and sensory life, feeling and emotion. Nevertheless, as she argues, these are not the actions of a mindless creature merely responding to an external stimulus. What

61 Isabelle Muñoz and Évelyne Pieller, *Tango*, trans. by Rosanna M. Giammanco-Frongia (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1994), p. 56.

62 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 502.

matters is both our sensitive and sensible embodiment and the unstoppable consciousness of our sensibility. To feel is to be conscious and how the dancer feels in relation to the partner, the music, and the environment is intrinsic to the appearance.

Like Arendt, Sartre confirms that when the Other — meaning another human being — looks at me, he or she holds the secret of my being, the proof of my existence, that which makes me a visible being able to show myself in the world.⁶³ If the Other disappears, ceasing to see me, I disappear as well. This is not trivial, for to be invisible to others is a painful experience, giving way to a sense of not existing at all. But unfortunately, much of the time, the connection between people does not arise in our conjunction with one another, in the tango-like embrace and appearance, but proceeds logically. Sensation is added to sensation, each moment is reflected upon, and they are consciously added together until the judgement arises: that the Other belongs to my Gestalt, my organized experience of the whole, or else they don't. Often, Sartre insists, even if there is a conjunction of two independent beings, this looking and being looked at, sensing and being sensed, is a game of conflict, a matter of which person will gain the upper hand and be free to define the Other, while struggling to remain free of the Other's domination. In other words, one voice dominates to the detriment of the other and counterpoint is lost.

For the most part, this is not the case with tango. In describing the structure of one who is in balance with another, engaging with the other in a consonant composition, Sartre observes that this balance, which he calls 'desire', is non-reflective. If it were intellectual we could turn it on and off, reducing that other person to an object and reducing

63 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 473.

the engagement with another to the sum of cognitive judgments. Nor is it sexual desire, what we generally refer to as 'lust' or 'infatuation'. After all, in public dances, bodies are usually covered by clothing. Given the urge to self-display and to feel, see, and hear, what we sense is the figure at the surface, the interesting lines, the delicate or explosive movement, colour along with form, usually all quite ambiguous and with no guarantee of the connection intrinsic to tango. Sometimes when a human being, a living counterpoint to our own independent existence, appears, our soul and all our senses awaken and call forth our own historical and cultural existence in a variety of modes: contrary, parallel, or oblique (slanted — keeping the same pitch constant in a single voice). Sartre calls this type of conjunction 'affective intentionality', a hyper-sensory awareness of our own feeling and sensation, as well as of embodied affections in relation to another, which infuse the attentive mind with its invisible preoccupations.⁶⁴

Unlike cognition and its theoretical realm of ideas, affective intentionality is quite effectively fluid and translucent, yet Sartre finds it to be troubled water for a largely cognitive consciousness. When consciousness flows from what is felt, its logical clarity and Gestalt-like completeness is disturbed by affective intentionality, which, like fine solid particles in a stream, disrupts thinking. This bears no resemblance to other sensory functions, such as being tired or hungry. Hunger does not require the presence of another human being; it involves no counterpoint.⁶⁵ But affective intention — desire — happens only in relation to another; it compromises us as rational beings; it clogs

64 *Ibid.*, p. 501.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 503.

our intellect; it can take hold of us and overwhelm us.⁶⁶ In tango there is a *shaping* of the body of the other in tandem with one's own: motion awakens motion, sensation awakens sensation. The caress given to another is felt on one's own body as much as on the body of the other; it is the placing of one sensory surface against another surface, one appearance against another appearance. At its best, it is counterpoint.

This can occur in the dance when dancers are able to become the motion for the form that is the dance. The perfection of technique is not for the sake of the ego but for the sake of the common appearance. There are two independent beings, two different but equally interesting types of movement, yet they are in balance. The freedom of movement of each one makes possible the freedom of movement of the other. These freedoms create the dance. Music adds a third or fourth voice to the counterpoint, as the dancers move in consonance or dissonance with these other sensations as well. The freedom of each dancer is realized in this way as the mystery that the incarnation of another's body reveals regarding one's own. It is a double and reciprocal incarnation, an awakening.⁶⁷

Let us say, then, that from this point of view, no body is ever an object; the body is the *translucent matter* of consciousness, a *revelation* for consciousness, a *condition* of consciousness, suffered as pleasure and/or pain, as love and/or hate.⁶⁸ Yet as philosophers, we constantly forget the soul. We objectify sensations and sensibility, movement and musicality, and we objectify others, even or especially when they show themselves as independent

66 Ibid., p. 504.

67 Ibid., p. 508.

68 Ibid., pp. 437–44.

beings. We leave the soul behind and focus only on our thoughts, permitting our thinking to make the body into an object and the other into one dimension of our own consciousness.

Sartre proclaims that desire is one of the great forms assumed by the revelation of the Other's body.⁶⁹ But we misunderstand what this means. Our passion for being with others comes to us, he says, not from the pleasure or pain arising with our mental states, but from our affective engagement in the world, our consonant or dissonant counterpoints. Sartre is aware of how extremely fragile this can be, because fundamental to our own existence are the many possibilities of our own non-being, which is not merely absence. Imagine that you arrive at the dance looking for one person in particular, but do not see them. As Sartre would describe this, 'there is an intuition of [...] absence.'⁷⁰ This crucial intuition can affect us powerfully. If the dancefloor is the background from which emerge the figures of other people who are not the one with whom you will have that possibility of real connection in the embrace, their faces and figures melt back into that background.

For Sartre, if you were to see the one you seek to *cabaceo*, the entire room would organize itself around that person and come to life. Perceptually, this is a Gestalt, and Sartre demands the Gestalt as the fulfilment of his perceptual intentions, but that already goes beyond the realm of appearance. Lacking the sought-after appearance, the room reflects the nothingness of one's own existence, which, because it is so powerfully soulful, is also most fragile. But this happens only if one conceptualizes others

69 Ibid., p. 502. Crucial here is the idea of revelation rather than fascination.

70 Ibid., p. 41.

as belonging to one's own Gestalt, and thinks of oneself as nothingness, the not-there at the heart of existence, thereby feeding the terrible sense of fragility. It is as if no one else in the room can see you, as if no one will ever offer a *cabaceo* to you purely on the basis of appearance. It is as if Sartre still assumes that the self must be there like something deeper and invisible, but hidden from our senses, and not an appearance, but because it is not there — there is no essential self — then there is nothing. So let us augment Sartre's melancholic tale and say that the nothingness of the room and of the self is an illusion and the Gestalt is a false ideal. What is real are the contrary, parallel, or oblique motions between oneself and the sensibilities of others, all of whom are independent existences in motion. It is this independence and the motion that Sartre fears, and in his demand for oneness, for a figure in his perceptual ground, he ends up always in conflict and in pain.

CONCLUSION: APPEARING AND THINKING ABOUT SOUL

Why is it the case that the failure to appear opens the melancholy, soulful abyss of fragility and nothingness? In part, because Sartre does not grant the appearance its independent existence in the structure of the relation taken as counterpoint. And related to this, Sartre still makes the mistake of referring to this one person as an 'Other' to himself and not, as Arendt suggests, as a distinct and unique human being. This indicates a failure on his part to fully take in the other as appearance. Otherness belongs to all more or less inert objects, and to refer to human beings as 'Other' says a great deal about our refusal of their self-showing, and thus our need to dominate them in order to situate ourselves. But living beings are various and quite

distinct, and mostly they distinguish themselves, expressing not merely hunger or thirst, affection or hostility, ease or fear. Each is unique, independent. For Arendt, soulful movement or action alone is not enough to reveal this uniqueness. A human being is not, in the end, merely a dance or a conduit for music or thought. An independent human being also speaks by whatever means possible. This is to take counterpoint to another dimension.

Cognition does eventually play an important role. A dancer or musician or philosopher who knows nothing of the complex history of tango music and dance, and who cannot speak about their dance, music, or philosophy, may not be able to show themselves in their full existence as an appearance.⁷¹ There are some dancers who, at a *milonga*, either out of shyness or indifference, refuse to speak with a dance partner whom they do not already know. Perhaps they revel in the mystery of appearance or secretly fear objectification. But to continue to invite them to dance, we want to understand *who* they are and not merely *what* they are; we speak with them and are spoken to. This is the point of the brief break of a minute or so between three of the four dances in a tango set. Their invisible thoughts matter. A person's 'qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings are still hidden when they are silent', and are revealed only as they begin to speak about dance or music or philosophy, when they speak about what matters to them.⁷² For Arendt, it is not enough to only manifest the dancer or musicians, or to only let concepts pop up in one's head. Speaking matters because in speaking — for better or worse — a unique and personal appearance, which silence would turn

71 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* [1958] (University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 176.

72 *Ibid.*, p. 179.

into the mystery of non-being, is revealed to others who hear and know the unique story of the unique human being and speak directly with them.⁷³ This, too, is what makes each of us independent even as we manifest the dance, the music, or the concept in our appearance.

No two pairs of dancers dance alike. No musician plays a piece of music exactly the same way as another. No philosopher thinks the same thoughts as another. Through speaking about our thought, dances, and music, we partake of the human world, initiate movement, set our attachments into motion and express their value with our words. Every feeling and thinking human being wants to act and to speak because in so doing they can begin something unexpected and new — it is a birth. This birth, this *natality*, as Arendt calls it, eliminates the fantasy of non-being and the undifferentiated background, and replaces it with a distinct and unique existence, and not merely with the empty placeholder of an ‘Other’. Our intuition can work here as well. We may intuit by means of soul, not merely an ‘Other’, an other object-like non-being, but the revelation of a unique and distinct being who appears, acts, and speaks, revealing who they are, appearing to us in the human world, in the ‘unique shape of the body and the sound of the voice’, as an independent existence with whom we may fully engage in the counterpoint of dance, music, and philosophy.⁷⁴

73 Ibid., p. 183.

74 Ibid., pp. 178–79.

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