

Dancing as Seduction - 1: Bolero

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When I was studying dancing in Costa Rica a few years ago I fell in love with bolero. It is something like the national dance of Costa Rica, yet it is not well known beyond that. It is so sensuous and sappy beyond belief, but I love it. My teachers taught me all sorts of “moves” and fancy stuff, but when I went out to dance in Costa Rica I found that most people simply hold one another as closely as possible and dance it in the most basic sense. I am well aware that most non-Latin young people find this music almost intolerable, but then the popular reggaeton grinding dancing has none of the subtlety of bolero and surely little of the romance. A couple years ago I went to a large concert venue in Broomfield, near Boulder, to see a Luis Miguel concert. My date and I were among about half a dozen non-Latin people there, yet I surely enjoyed it as much as they did, although I’m well aware that Latinas have a whole different sort of connection with Luis than I could ever have. I think that what I want to talk about in the next several lectures can actually be pointed to by the difference between the grinding dancing of reggaeton and the romantic closed frame of bolero.

Bolero is a Latin American romantic style of music and social dancing¹ that emerged, so far as it can be traced, in Cuba around 1885 or 1886. Soon thereafter it developed also in Puerto Rico and Mexico and spread throughout Latin America. The music is played slowly and features romantic and dramatic, even melodramatic, lyrics. It is typically danced in the closest possible embrace with the partners holding tightly, their legs intertwined to permit close contact. Many bolero dancers do no break-aways and those who do often keep their heads in contact as much as possible through the move. Erect upper body and long parallel lines accentuate the elegance of the dance. Dancers use pauses and dips to interpret the music. The rhythmic step of the basic bolero² is similar to the basic step rhythm in contemporary salsa dancing and its predecessors and relatives *son* and *danzon*, yet stylized differently to produce an elegantly romantic affect in contrast with the high energy sexuality of salsa.³ Africa⁴ and

¹The entry on bolero in the *International Encyclopedia of Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999?) is limited to a presentation of a nineteenth century Spanish dance. The many index entries for bolero extend the coverage only to the use of Ravel’s composition “Bolero” as the music for numerous modern and ballet dances. Though bolero is among the older and certainly among the most widespread and important of Latin American dances there is no mention of it in the *IED*.

²The description here is for bolero classico. There are other forms of bolero that adapt to the slow chachachá and other musical and cultural variables. To my knowledge there is no study of the many variations of the dance, or even the music for that matter, from country to country throughout Latin America. Although “One Hundred Years of Bolero” [spanish] makes available to listeners the scope of bolero music.

³Dance and music identified by the term “salsa” is used here rather broadly according to contemporary use. Actually the term “salsa” arose in New York in the early 1970s and the dance/music forms had predecessors such as Cuban *son*. There is significant variance in opinion about the use of the term and what exactly it refers to. Some say it simply means Cuban music and dance, others see it as a broadly generic term encompassing all recent forms of Latin American music and dancing.

Spain (and more broadly Europe) are the principal cultural ingredients in the Cuban and Latin American crucible that created Latin American music and dancing, but as Ned Sublette has shown this mixture is certainly not simple.⁵

There are many styles of bolero dancing from the cultural forms found in social venues all over Latin America to the highly stylized forms that occur in competitive ballroom dancing and dancesport. Let's start with a clip of the "classico" style that is danced commonly in social settings throughout Latin America.

With her strongly feminist and minority-sensitive perspectives, Frances Aparicio presents an extensive analysis of bolero⁶ in her *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (1998). Aparicio focuses on bolero lyrics⁷ which she analyzes and interprets in the context of Latin American, specifically Puerto Rican, social and cultural history. Her concern is the representation and impact on gender roles and their construction.⁸ Aparicio finds bolero lyrics to be "a musical space in which Woman (or the feminine) is constructed mostly as absence, an absence that stimulates the expression and articulation of male desire through the text/song and through the act of singing. . . . This romantic musical genre has been a central subtext of heterosexual love and an influential tradition that informs the discourse of desire and sexual politics in salsa music."⁹ For the most part boleros have been sung by men and the subject of the lyrics is almost invariably woman. She is often depicted as an ideal woman, sometimes so superior as to be an unattainable goddess. But some bolero lyrics construct woman as a witch or seductress. As the woman is the object of unquenchable desire, unfulfilled desire, love in bolero lyrics is invariably unrequited. The woman is absent. Rarely does she actually fulfill male sexual desire and erotic pleasure. Aparicio finds that "the separation motif is central to most boleros"¹⁰ with the lyrics and record jackets depicting the lonely abandoned drinking and smoking male singer.

⁴While I use the general term Africa here I more specifically indicate the areas of West and Central Africa that were the source of slaves sent to Cuba and Latin America. While I believe it highly inappropriate to generalize about Africa—there are, after all, dozens of countries and many hundreds of cultures—it is in some general sense appropriate to refer to and oppose African to European (which itself is hugely varied). The assumption is that despite the major variations, all Africans, in terms of rhythms and dances, are more closely associated than they could be with any element of Europe, and vice versa.

⁵Sublette And also in terms of posture and body comporment bolero is closer to danzon.

⁶Her research is highly influenced by and dependent on Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* and on Iris Zavala's "De héroes y heroínas en lo imaginario social: El discurso amoroso del bolero," *Casa de las Américas* 30 (March-April 1990): 123-29 and René A. Campos, "The Poetics of the Bolero in the Novels of Manuel Puig," in *World Literature Today* 65 (Autumn 1991): 637-42.

⁷Notably a large portion of studies of Latin American dance music, while acknowledging that it is music for dancing, ignores even the simplest descriptions of dancing, and focuses analysis of music heavily on lyrics. As I will show, the ignoring of the musical and dancing dimensions of Latin American dance music is—shouldn't this be obvious—to miss the point. It is to be overwhelmed by the male production centered orientation of Western cultures.

⁸Interestingly there are many parallels between bolero and tango lyrics. For an analysis of these see Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Politics of Passion* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

⁹Aparicio, p. 125-26.

¹⁰Aparicio, p. 132.

Yet, Iris Zavala has pointed out that, despite the absence of the woman, she is made a presence as she is evoked in the lyrics of the male bolero singer. This theme of absence and presence offers a fascinating framework for the understanding of bolero in the context of Latin American cultures. In one frame the theme of absence and presence reflects the dynamics of courtly love where the indifference of the beloved, often reflected in physical illness, is cause for increased longing and desire. Aparicio also sets this theme in the modern social context of the Latin American domestic space where it is most commonly the male who is absent, who abandons the family thus diminishing his own power and influence.

Bolero is seduction. Zavala noted of the lyrics that they are the “words about absence [that] seduce us into a presence.”¹¹ Key to Zavala’s depiction of bolero lyrics is her understanding of seduction: it is, to anticipate terminology yet to be introduced, the reversibility of the woman’s absence and presence, that seduces; it is the presence of the promise of fulfillment, always denied, absented, that engenders desire; it is the reversibility that fascinates, that seduces.

Taking inspiration from bolero social dancing and bolero music, I want to study more deeply what distinguishes bolero, but more importantly, I want to take the large leap to consider what distinguishes dancing itself, that is, as we have continually been stretching to touch, the dancing “in itself.” And this effort to touch on dancing would be to identify it as seduction, yet seduction reconsidered and reframed by the work of Jean Beaudrillard, most particularly in his book *Seduction* (1979).

In the only reference, slight as it is, Aparicio makes to bolero dancing, she writes, “Woman as sign of absence becomes present through language, through the act of singing, and through bolero as performative act. The sensual evocation of the lyrics allows the heterosexual couple to give meaning to dancing and intimacy ‘in the squared eternity of a floor tile’ as foreplay and anticipation of sexual pleasure.”¹² With no analysis or even description of bolero dancing, Aparicio understands that in this musical-dance-social context, it is the lyrics that “give meaning to dancing and intimacy.” Ironically, especially given the strength and emotion of her feminist perspective, it seems her views betray in this instance a surprisingly male-centered understanding. Her focus only on lyrics is logocentric and she seems to hold that the performative act, the dancing, cannot make sense or exist as meaningful apart from its conjunction with the lyrics, with how she interprets the lyrics. Indeed, given her broad analysis, I am not all that sure I quite know what she means. It appears that she thinks bolero dancers must listen to the lyrics to subsequently come to understand that what they are doing is foreplay to actual sexual pleasure (another, yet quite different, performative act), to be experienced later, at least we would hope later. Bolero dancing is, it seems she is saying, sexual foreplay. How does the depiction of woman as absent communicate this to the couple with the woman so obviously present? Does it somehow inspire the couple to reject this imagery and use the dancing as a way of being together? It would seem

¹¹As quoted in Aparicio, p. 130.

¹²Aparicio, p. 127. Her quote in this passage is from Sánchez and she notes that the timelessness and universality of bolero is also discussed by Héctor Madera Ferrón in “El bolero es eterno,” *Un siglo de bolero*, 3-5. The square eternity of the floor tile refers to teaching dancing on black and white checkerboard floors with dancers instructed to stay within a square while dancing.

that for Aparicio bolero dancing that does not produce sexual pleasure would be rather meaningless.

An understanding and appreciation of bolero dancing, as all dancing, must be approached independent of associated lyrics, yet address the significance of the interplay between lyrics and dancing, all, of course, in the context of culture and history. The most obvious observation is that in bolero dancing the woman (and the man)¹³ is anything but absent. The man and woman hold one another as closely as possible. There is nothing more certain in bolero dancing than the presence of woman and certainly also the presence of man for woman. So how might we understand that bolero dancing is seductive—which I believe, indeed I know from experience—it is? Where is the absence that creates desire that remains unfulfilled? And, to take a feminist position, how is this not the experience of the woman as much as the man?

The seduction of bolero, I suggest, is a way of understanding dancing, the dancing behind the dances. One rather graphic way of clarifying is by considering, in this particular case, what distinguishes the interaction of the man and woman as a couple dancing bolero from a couple unclothed in a private space holding one another in the same embrace. The difference is enormous, but how to articulate it? The unclothed couple holding one another in embrace interacts with the other's body in *actual* foreplay creating full sexual arousal leading, we suppose, to a *real* sexual act.¹⁴ This outcome is not a possibility in bolero dancing, though, of course, it may occur later. Bolero can be foreplay, but that is not what it is. The interaction of the partners in bolero dancing is intimate, it is romantic, it is a kind of body play, it may allow partners to experience a kind of physical unity with one another, but the dance is over when the music ends.

Perhaps another example of bolero dancing would be good about here. This is a style that I have seen in Costa Rica and is danced as an improvisational social dance. It is too bad that the camera angle on this clip doesn't show it off as well as it might.

In contrast with Aparicio's understanding of bolero as principally foreplay, I prefer to take away the "fore" and see it as play¹⁵ to invoke a perspective we have developed earlier. Bolero dancing is rule bound and the rules do not permit actual foreplay or real sexual contact.¹⁶ In bolero all is appearance, all is sign, and the rules prevent any breach of actual sexual reality. Bolero dancing—like game, like

¹³There is another way in which Aparicio's analysis fails to be adequately feminist. In focusing entirely on how the male created and sung lyrics impact female gender constructions, she ignores the female perspective, she too experience of the woman as much as the man? absents the woman. In excluding dancing and focusing only on the lyrics, Aparicio fails to see that the woman is indeed present and present in a much more bodied way than in the lyrics. She is physically present as one of the dancers. A man cannot dance bolero without a female partner. From the perspective of the dance, we can ask what is the woman's point of view.

¹⁴ Is there a parallel here w/ Baudrillard's discussion of pornography? Don't want to suggest that actual sex is pornographic, but this might be a better discussion than what I have.

¹⁵Taking away the "fore" shifts the consideration of bolero dancing from an unsatisfying functionalist explanation to address a consideration of what distinguishes bolero as a dance, and, I will argue, what distinguishes dancing among other forms of human action.

¹⁶Below I will discuss more fully the importance of rules in terms of seduction.

play—is focused on itself, not anything external to it. The end of a bolero dance does not have the same release that accompanies sexual orgasm; indeed, the end which is physical separation may heighten the seduction. It does so because, by rule, the experience of intimacy, unity, romance is confined to the dancing. When the dancing ends so do these experiences. The end of the dance shows the lie of the experience. What is absent in bolero dancing is the correspondence in reality (sexual actuality) to all the signs being played. The dancing is directed principally toward the mastery of the play of signs. This is not a sex act, it is the play of sexual signs clearly distinguished from sexual actuality. Dancing bolero plays with the signs of a relation of intimacy, but with no bridge or correspondence to any real relationship. The absence that seduces is what distinguishes the dancing. Bolero dancing, though fully bodied, exists in the world of signs, signs that seem to correspond to the real world outside dancing, but do not, indeed, are prevented by the rules of the dance from realizing the connection. Bolero may lead to or even express male-female relationships of intimacy and sexual union, but these, strictly speaking, are never part of the dancing. The dance seduces by what it intimates, or signifies, but only by always keeping the actuality absent. It is what is missing that makes the heart sing while dancing bolero, but the missing is all the more powerful, the more bittersweet and heart-wrenching, by the overwhelming presence, presence of body touching body. The dance is over when the music stops; as a result the seduction never ends. In bolero dancing most of the human senses—certainly touch, smell, vision, hearing—scream of presence, but the dance seduces by a designed prevention of the fulfillment of these sensual signs in a non-symbolic world, in the world of sexual actuality. There is no cathartic orgasmic release to dancing; the only choice is the response to all seduction, to continue to be seduced and to seduce by dancing, dancing all night. Seduction/being seduced is autotelic, sufficiently motivated¹⁷ in the doing/being done.

Thus, bolero dancing accomplishes this absence made present in a way much more powerful than the lyrics and, importantly, it has a rather different gender dynamic than do the lyrics. The lyrics make the woman present only by describing her in her absence. The lyrics facilitate an imagined presence. Dancing makes her, and his, absence felt by both partners, known by the bodies aching with the physical experience of the signs that exist only in the world of artifice. While the male still leads in bolero dancing, both male and female are wholly present to one another, yet, by the rules of the dance, both are, outside of being signs, also absent.

The explicitly seductive character of bolero dancing may, I suggest, serve as a metaphor for all dancing. Let's see how we can see dancing in this way, because I believe that we learn something important, we understand dancing more fully, if we allow ourselves to recognize that one thing that distinguishes dancing is its seductive character. Dancing seduces by its constant pointing to some potential, pointing through bodily experienced signs, yet by always, and by design, by rule¹⁸, denying the existence of the actual referents to the signs, in extra-dancing reality. It is precisely because the "fore" of foreplay, or at least the "aft" promised by the "fore," is denied by the rules of dancing that it is seductive. It is the full

¹⁷I don't say sufficiently "satisfied" because it is in the absence of the fulfillment of desire—thus in some sense keeping one unsatisfied, wanting more—that is the attraction of all dancing.

¹⁸Develop this rule aspect more fully below! Based on Baudrillard's discussion of rule.

bodied experience of the reversibility of presence and absence that so heightens the seductivity of dancing. And it is in seeing dancing as seduction that we begin to comprehend the enormity of the power it provides access to. The seductive aspect of dancing is inseparable from a sense of incipience, an energy of potential, a sense of almost manifest, yet holding the manifestation, the realization, always in process, a promise, an almost.