



**Evita: The Globalization of a National Myth**

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## *Evita*

### The Globalization of a National Myth

by

*Marta E. Savigliano*

Have you seen *Evita* (Parker, 1996a)? Not Eva, not Eva Duarte, not Eva Perón, but a version of her historical/mythical character in the diminutive; not just a foreshortening but a downsizing, right from the beginning, to situate spectators comfortably, to help them take a close look at a tamed Eva, an Eva made familiar. This is not the *Evita* addressed by her *descamisados*, who used the diminutive as a term of endearment, to evoke a shared past of deprivation—their empathy a product of her refusal to forget her origins.<sup>1</sup> This is a different *Evita*—another *Evita* myth that acquaints the audience with a story of a woman who makes her way up to a position of great power not because she is so special (after all, we know many women like her, with her aspirations and her ability to manipulate) but because she was lucky enough to live her life in a wealthy banana republic, one of those places where golden tanks, macho boots, corrupt bureaucrats, and a mysteriously emotional religiosity (based on Catholicism's connections with primitive superstitions) ensure that the people are adoring masses or persecuted victims. A Hollywood-made *Evita* myth requires no more than these elements to convey a clear image of the engines of history at work in places like Argentina at any given time.

In this *Evita*, *Evita*'s controversial role in history is presented in a dramatically undisturbing way, and it becomes moving because her public, political figure is thoroughly personalized and thus banalized. *Evita* is a melodramatic remythologization, conforming to the narrative conventions of melodrama identified by Peter Brooks (1980). It tells a tale of a self-made woman who, like many women of her time and place, beds her way up and is sensitive enough to exert grand-scale token charity among her people but not sensible enough to restrain herself from indulging in Diors, furs, and jewelry. Finally, she must face the limits of power as she faces the limits of her body; she must

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renounce the vice presidency, and she must die—like a woman and, more specifically, like the femme fatale of film noir (see Kaplan, 1980; Doane, 1991). The story begins with a glamorous, fascinating woman's death, but the tale continues: She was loved, then and now. Look at those interminable lines of dark faces in sorrow, that tango musical lament and danced mourning: They *must* love her.

But this recent, US\$60 million remythologizing of Evita could not be successful without its entangled attempt at also remythologizing Argentina's national history. For that purpose, it is sufficient to present a few glimpses of a virtually mute Perón, some dazzling flashes of mobilized military equipment, street violence and corpses now and then, the masses and a balcony. After all, *Evita* is about Evita, isn't it? Why bother complicating her myth with the nation's history? Familiar snippets are enough to trigger all the appropriate stereotypes, situating the viewer comfortably in the mythical terrain of that kind of nation's history. And, if you don't get it, a Che/narrator will provide the necessary anti-Peronist gossip so that we don't fall prey to Evita's intricate charms as so many of those down there did. This Che, too, is subjected to a careful remythologization. He is not the revolutionary conscience one might expect but the voice of "reason," a sensible Che haunting Evita, warning her and us against any romanticization of Evita's life. What makes his point of view privileged and authoritative is that he speaks from all possible class positions, as a participant and observer of Evita's most eventful interventions in Argentine history. His tone is both accusatory and disdainful, and he brings into question Evita's *modus operandi* both from a moral point of view and from the perspective of an experienced skeptic who can foresee, from the beginning, her destruction.

This *Evita*, then, is this ubiquitous Che's interpretation of Evita, as myth, and of her role in the making of history, and he is reporting to a transnational audience from a pseudo-liberal, "universally" bourgeois perspective that amounts to an anti-Peronist perspective. His rationalist anti-Peronism is not, however, the self-interested anti-Peronism of the oligarchy responding in confabulatory choruses to Evita's attacks on its property and values. This waiter/journalist/student/factory worker/bartender/ valet/peasant and occasionally tuxedoed Che is a transclass cultural translator whose ideology and interests can only be pinned down in his gender-specificity and heterosexual appetites. No matter how much we learn about Evita's promiscuous sexual adventures, her eroticism is displaced in the form of desire for power.<sup>2</sup> Perón is a fatherly figure or a teammate in a passionate pursuit of power, and the only erotically invested romance seems to be in the realm of Evita's dream, in which she dances a frantic, tangoesque waltz with an attractively defiant Che, who manages, like no one else, to put her in her womanly place. In his

arms Evita is sincere. But this is a dream, a fantasy, a delirious moment entered simultaneously by Evita and Che when they meet in a state of lost consciousness (she collapses in a church, he faints after being beaten up in a student demonstration). And it seems as though this moment was what Evita had longed for all along: true romance.

### THE MADONNIFICATION OF EVITA

The casting of Madonna as Evita and the presence of tangoesque dance scenes throughout the film contribute to producing a version of Evita's history that engages with a personal politics suitable for globalization. Madonna the superstar shapes the ways in which Evita's image and story reach the film audience. There are obvious reasons for this: Madonna is a star-commodity, a contemporary cultural product that is aggressively circulated in the entertainment market (see Bordo, 1993; McClary, 1991). In addition, and unlike traditional film stars, Madonna offers a surface of high visibility on which it is possible to project a variety of personalities and styles. Film stars usually cultivate a strong presence that pervades all the characters they represent on screen. In contrast, Madonna is called a "superstar" because of her lack of depth. Her flatness is precisely what allows her image to shine brightly as an icon (see Tetzlaff, 1993). Rather than inhabiting or playing different characters, she appropriates them. Her ability to put on whatever suits her at the moment imbues her with an aura of power signaled by success and manipulation. This chameleon-like, superficial versatility, combined with the power accrued by the management of her fame, creates a tense connection between Madonna and Evita. Madonna as an all surface/screen superstar projects an unspecific image of Evita, invading Evita's own strong personality, historical depth, and cultural characteristics with a spectacular blurring of boundaries. She dissipates Evita's national and historical specificities as she renders visible a transcultural Evita in terms of universal woman-ness.

Once Evita is Madonnified as a female superstar, Madonna and Evita seem to become a perfect match in ambition, manipulation, and celebrity. Despite their quite different aims and circumstances, both stand for women with power and thus enter hand-in-hand into the pantheon of femmes fatales. Feminist theorists interested in the visual arts, who often make use of psychoanalytic understandings, insist that "woman" as a concept and woman's body as a construct offer a privileged surface on which to project (male) sexual fantasies and fears (see Doane, 1991; Hart, 1994; Allen, 1983; Dijkstra, 1986; Rose, 1986). By definition, woman is the unknown and unknowable dark continent. Always enigmatic, women are all the same and

yet constantly changing. The capacity for multicentricity already mentioned in Madonna's case is replicated in the controversies surrounding Evita's personality while alive and her contrasting mythifications after her death: Evita the saint, the whore, the revolutionary, the powermonger (Taylor, 1979). Evita as depicted through Madonna in this film fits point by point the characteristics of the *femme fatale*, that dangerous side of femininity always threatening to take over women who step aside from the taming rules of patriarchy: she is determined and aggressive, she manipulates men masterfully, she is childless and narcissistic—self-centered and egoistic. The *femme fatale* is confirmed as a love object, an object offered for adoration. Narcissism, as an erotic self-investment that defies emotional attachments to men and to the male-centered social world, connects Evita's image to Madonna's contemporary version of *femme-fatality*, transcending cultural and historical differences.

Madonna and not Evita, however, seems to be the main beneficiary of this universalizing operation. She appropriates Evita's charisma and looks to give depth to her own image. Madonna's *Evitism* cultivates a conservative femininity of her times: romantic, fragile, caring, wrapped up in delicate fabrics, wearing toned-down makeup, and excelling in costly bourgeois good taste. Evita's own image as a strong, foul-mouthed, independent woman is subdued in Madonna's representation, offering spectators a softened Evita, looking for Perón's approval after every public performance, leaning on his shoulder for protection, smiling gently at the poor as she distributes kitchenware and money, moved by her own words as she addresses the crowds. In Madonna's characterization, Evita is romanticized and unthreatening. Her dangerousness as a *femme fatale* is contained, and not just by her death (the destiny reserved for fatal women who, in the end, always bring fatality to themselves).

Alan Parker's *Evita* is interesting to analyze from this point of view, because the film's narrative is saturated with death and destruction. Evita's death opens and closes the narrative, tightly containing her disruptive powers as a warning or moral lesson that serves as a backdrop to any potential seduction exerted by her transgressive doings, even when presented in a tamed version as in this case. Most remarkable is that while Evita actually dies (paying the price for her *femme-fatality*), Madonna acts out (that is, pretends) Evita's death only to resurrect herself as the star who played the coveted Evita role. Evita gives new thrust to Madonna's career. *Evita* inaugurates Madonna's metamorphosis from pop idol to mature actress.

Audiences, critics, and Madonna herself work hard at blurring the differences between Evita, the historical figure, and Madonna, the star. They compare their lives and their looks, stressing their parallels from the lurid stories of rags to riches to the bleaching of their hair (e.g., *Clarín*, 1996;

Ayerza, 1996; Martínez, 1996; Escribano, 1996; *Caras*, 1996). And yet, *Evita*, the film, constantly wrestles with the presence of two main female leads, namely, Madonna and Evita. The Evita/Madonna juxtaposition amounts to a tense competition between two spectacular identities in which Evita is awkwardly Madonnified and Madonna cultivates Evitism. One, Evita, plays the dramatic role engaged with historicity; the other, Madonna, becomes paramount in the scenes that provide the film its lyrical, transhistorical component (see Dyer, 1992a).

### TANGOIZING ARGENTINE IDENTITY

The dance sequences are precisely the sites where the globalization of Evita takes place and the Argentine national myth becomes transnationalized. Madonna portraying a dancing Evita is able to produce an intensely personal, intimate, and thus universal representation of Evita as a “woman.”<sup>3</sup> This is a place that the real Evita rarely inhabited in her life (see Mayer, 1996). Producing these tangoesque images of Evita, Madonna projects a universal image of a femme fatale, devoid of specificity except for that frivolous exotic touch (the tango) that makes femmes fatales fascinating in their difference and yet recognizable or easy to identify with as generic women with power. The spectacularization of a seemingly banal national cultural trait such as the tango both expands the stereotypical and erases all other specificities that would work against easy universalistic assimilations.

In *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995), I examined the complex relationship between the tango and Argentine national identity (Savigliano, 1995). There, I argued that the tango was not considered a national dance in Argentina until after the European elites had so identified it. Even then, the upper and middle classes in Argentina considered it a poor representation in both senses of the word: it was a lower-class dance, and it inaccurately represented the nation as a whole. Eventually, however, many Argentines accepted the European view of Argentina, the tango, and the connection between the two. The internalization or reproduction of the European point of view is what I have called “auto-exoticism”—seeing oneself as an exotic Other. These days, not very many Argentines actually dance the tango, but most would identify it as a key component of Argentine national identity.

Eva Perón was one of many Argentines who did not dance the tango. In fact, both she and her compatriot Che Guevara were renowned for their lack of skill at dancing. For example, Cabrera Alvarez includes the following passage in his biography of Che (1987: 77):

There is a dance that night, and the friends decide to go. It's a bustling crowd, and the couples seem to multiply on the dance floor. Ernesto ["Che" Guevara] approaches his friend and tells him in a low voice, "Runt, listen well. I'm going to dance, but you know . . ." Alberto [Granados] doesn't need any kind of explanation to know that his friend is incapable of distinguishing a military march from a *milonga*. "When they play a tango," Ernesto requests, "kick me, then I'll know what it is. Agreed?" More or less every other piece played by the improvised band is a tango, but for some reason they suddenly play a Brazilian *shoro* entitled "Delicado." Granados remembers the song was popular at the time his friend began to court Chichina, and wishing to remind him of that time, taps him with his foot. Ernesto takes a young woman out to dance. The tempo of the *shoro* is quick, but he doesn't hear it. He dances to the beat of a tango, marking off his steps with mathematical precision.

There are similar stories about Evita's incompetence as a dancer, including an account of why the famous actress and tango singer Libertad Lamarque slapped the lesser-known Evita during the filming of *La Cabalgata del Circo*.<sup>4</sup> Alicia Dujovne Ortiz writes (1995: 87):

According to the testimony of Sergia Machinandarena, the scene of the slap, or of the heated discussion between the real star and the starlet with "clout," took place during the rehearsal of a *pericón*, a folkloric dance that requires no special talent and that all Argentine schoolchildren can do. But despite her fine and delicate feet, Evita did not manage to adapt them to the demands of the rhythm. And Libertad, who danced very well, finally reacted. According to her own testimony, she did not slap Evita on the cheek, but she did tell her off completely—how she was fed up with Evita's absurd hours and had it up to here with the aforementioned *pericón*, for which they had had to hire a dance professor to try to untangle Evita's feet.

Evita and Che, however, dance in several scenes in *Evita*, following the conventions of Broadway and Hollywood musicals. In fact, Evita dances significantly more in Alan Parker's film than she did in the stage versions of the musical, where tangos performed by professional dancers appeared almost entirely as a backdrop providing the Argentine "cultural ambiance." The filmed *Evita's* extra dancing is a reflection of Madonna's presence as a music-video diva, taking over the centrality of the historical character. The Madonnification of Evita spectacularizes the female body and its desires, engaged in recognizably stylized movements that reveal its enigma in the form of a "natural" code. Madonna/Evita's tangoesque dances, as such, are a lyrical relief in which the corporeal and the emotional invite spectators to abandon the pursuit of intellectual appraisals of Evita's life. The dancing moments appeal to the logic of the senses, a logic that allows for gaps, contradictions, and fragmentations to run smoothly on a totalizing register in

which specificities become mere formal details. From a cinematic point of view, dancing familiarizes Evita as it focuses on her generic femininity while it diverts attention from her politics. The tango dances are coded in either tropical, Hispanic, or waltzed styles, providing a mere “cultural” reference to be interpreted according to stereotypes attributed to more familiar dance genres. Thus, Evita’s tango-rumba—performed on a crowded city bus in the midst of her first arrival in Buenos Aires—announces the contagious, irresistible excitement that promises to turn the metropolis into her territory/dance floor. Her first incursion into a rowdy bar is signaled by a couple performing a tango-flamenco, announcing the dark, alcohol- and smoke-ridden underworld into which she will immerse herself, paying the price for her ambition. The tango-waltzes she dances in the arms of Che and Perón show her classy, conflicted arrivals at the pinnacle of power. Madonna/Evita’s most tango-like tangos, of which glimpses are offered, stand for her most debased stages of prostitution, dancing in close embrace with rough-looking Latin men in dusty dance halls. The tango’s allusion to excessive eroticism has frequently been coupled in filmic uses with destructive, antisocial appetites for power—the tango as a fascist dance. Parker’s *Evita* makes use of these resonances, politicizing Evita’s personal desires and neutralizing the politics at play in the configuration of national, cultural stereotypes. Indeed, one of the most important ways in which the film marks Madonna’s Evita as Argentine is by showing her dancing the tango. *Evita* tangoizes Argentina as a nation and Evita as a national myth, drawing on a familiarly exotic cultural reference laden with political implications that packages Argentine “otherness” for global consumption.

Madonna/Evita dances both the most gruesome and sublime landmarks of her biography, and her dances always indicate some kind of social mobility. She dances her arrival in Buenos Aires, fleeing from the prospects of a dull future in Junín, a small town where her fate as a bastard is insurmountable. She dances, night after night, in sleazy bars and dance halls, in the arms of older working-class or ruffianesque Latin men. (These professional Argentine tango dancers are not mentioned by name either in the film credits or in the captions of Parker’s book *The Making of Evita* [1996b]. They are Pedro Monteleone, Guillermo Cunha Ferré, and Luis Salinas.) These shady tangos, recognizable by the inclusion of *ganchos* and other paradigmatic *figuras* such as *ochos* and *cepilladas*, mark Evita/Madonna’s shameful but obstinate path to the top by manipulating machismo (associated with the tango). These tangos stand for sexual favors, and the tango dance halls become fancier and her dancing partners whiter and better-dressed as she endures this tangoesque rite of passage from destitute prostitution to a more rewarding and even legitimate prostitution in the arms of Perón.

Madonna/Evita's dance scenes with Perón signal their first encounter: a brief, slow dance in which the shots focus on their faces, studying each other, culminating in a striptease with her gloves (reminiscent of Rita Hayworth's *Gilda*,<sup>5</sup> another woman in Buenos Aires trying to escape her past). A dance also marks Evita's triumphal entrance, after her wedding to Perón, into the circles of political power. Like a queen, all in white, Evita/Madonna climbs the stairs of a monumental palace-like building, waltzes with old generals, diplomats, and public figures, and leaves the scene in Perón's arms, always dancing, in graceful transition to her prominent (yet inexplicable) place in history.

The dances of sorrow, the slow-paced tango laments performed by somber Argentines in dimly lit indoor and outdoor settings, zooming in on grave Latin faces of all ages, indicate Evita's passage from life to death to immortality. The death-dance scenes, prominently featuring María and Roberto (a well-known professional tango couple also ignored in the film credits), open and close the film narrative, making the tango an exotic, ritualistic dance of mourning associated with a strange religiosity. Thus, the Argentine tango, a national symbol of Argentineness, confers an aura of primitiveness and alterity on Evita's mythification and on the mores and customs of Argentines. Evita and her people are carefully exoticized to establish the distance necessary to generate fascination in the global spectator. At the same time, and in tense contradiction with this exoticizing thrust, Evita's doings and, especially, her personal motives and psychological traits are presented in terms that are familiar enough to elicit a transnational audience's identification.

#### THE BANALIZATION OF THE POLITICAL

Popular psychoanalytic interpretations (what Freud might have called "wild psychoanalysis") slip into this *Evita*. Beyond historical-political-social circumstances, what seems to be important for the audience to know is that this very special woman's life story can only be understood from the point of view of the psychic consequences of a sad and wounded child's development. The lack of a legitimate father and the presence of a morally corrupt mother combined to produce a female subject obsessed with compensating for the degrading status of being a bastard. Her beauty, determination, and aggressive personality allowed her to manipulate her way to the top, but she could not come to terms with her success; she felt either undeserving or unsatisfied or both, and therefore she worked too hard and wanted too much until she reached her own bodily limits. She had to pay the price; she died.

"Don't cry for me, Argentina." Don't cry for me, because I got what I deserved, because my death makes perfect sense—and also because I lived

my life this way so that I would be remembered, don't you see? I plotted my own mythologization! This is where the audience is led by this highly personalized and psychological version of Evita's life. Politics and historico-social background are there (not very carefully researched or concerned with accuracy, but that is another story), spectacularized in dazzling shots that convey this movement of starting from the surface, the appearances, the muddled noise of contextual information, in order to reach the depth, the kernel, the dark continent of Evita's unconscious. The result is both convincing and undisturbing. A grand story, but a sad one—an exhausting career and a spectacular end. Adored and hated, forever, she got away with it, and we are left wondering if this is the fate of women who engage fully in the world of politics.

Attending primarily to the personal, as this *Evita* encourages audiences to do, we are immersed in a moral riddle, trying to figure out how to deal with justified or unjustified causes, means and ends. Did the causes justify her means? (That is, did her illegitimacy justify her defiant and aggressive behavior toward the dominant classes?) Or did her ends justify her means? (That is, did her pursuit of social justice justify her authoritarianism and her fanaticism?) Or did her causes justify her ends, whatever her means? (That is, did her early experiences of deprivation justify her hunger for power, regardless of the personal and social costs?) Or were her means unjustified no matter what causes and no matter what ends? (That is, no matter what traumatic experiences struck her in the beginning, no matter what egotistical or noble social concerns moved her to act, her demagogic and calculating manipulations in the political arena wronged others and Argentina's history.) This *Evita* does not produce the elements necessary for an informed assessment because of its uneven treatment of the personal/psychological story vis-à-vis the political and sociohistorical context. Not only is there not enough context but the context provided is not complex enough, not blurred enough, creating the impression that it is simply a frame for the personal picture of a historical and mythical political figure.

Like a modern fable, a soap-operatic moral tale, this *Evita* offers a universally applicable lesson beyond place and time. Looked at from the point of view of the projection of a femme fatale image onto Evita, it seems as if Parker's *Evita* would code all political and historical information as a series of catastrophes (earthquakes, social upheavals, political repression) unknowingly brought about by the mere presence of Evita.

This *Evita* fails to construct a public persona, either mythical or historical. The aesthetic treatment of the political scenario, carried out mainly through images of great visual impact but of little explanatory power, and the treatment of Evita's personal motives and desires, addressed insistently

through the lyrics, generate the effect of two parallel, contrasting scores that never amount to a syncopated rendering. In this *Evita*, the political happens and the personal speaks or, rather, sings, even when it talks politics. In addition, the musicality of the words, regardless of their content, creates a climax of intimacy and a transcendental, intersubjective bridge, prompting a rush across cultures, nations, and history (see Dolar, 1996).

The singing voice is dangerously powerful in that it appeals to emotions that provide synthetic judgments not readily accessible to criticism. The voice beyond the words, like the stylized movement of the dancing body (beyond necessary pragmatic activity), is taken for a senseless play of sensuality. These are fascinating forces, pregnant with excessively moving and intricate meanings, and yet in themselves are considered empty and frivolous. I tentatively suggest that, at least in contemporary Western and Westernized cultures, the singing voice and the dancing body exhibit a dimension that runs counter to self-transparency and to sensibility, as if their pleasurable corporeality operated against the logos and the physicality associated with labor and the production of meaning—singing and dancing being the “other” of production, its radical alterity. And yet, music, song, and dance constitute powerful discursive registers that operate, in conjunction with the image, in the production of signification. They allocate points of view, points of hearing, and points of kinesthetic identification that alternately reproduce and challenge hegemonic perspectives (see Shohat and Stam, 1994). Alan Parker, in *The Making of Evita*, recognizes the challenges posed by the filming of a historical account in which all the words are sung. He declares his intention of producing an “objective,” “balanced” account of Evita’s controversial life at the same time that he acknowledges that the screenplay is based on the libretto of the 1970s British musical “Evita” (which was probably inspired by Perón’s return to Argentina after 18 years of exile). The lyrics belong to Tim Rice, as in the stage version. They are based on a book by María Flores (1952), *The Woman with the Whip*. María Flores was the nom de plume of Mary Main, an Anglo-Argentine historical novelist who returned to Argentina in the early 1950s, at the height of Evita’s interventions into politics. The book was published in New York in 1952 and was translated into Spanish and published in Buenos Aires only in 1955, after Perón’s ouster. It provided a magnificent collection of elaborate anti-Peronist gossip (Fraser and Navarro, 1996: 199 n. 11). Parker’s *Evita* tries to compensate with images for some of the historical background missing from the stage version, but the lyrics (being roughly the same) bend all the complex information toward a seamless narrative of oppositional politics coded as an analysis of a personality type: Evita as the woman with the whip, resentful, power-hungry, and so on. As Evita’s “problematic” personality becomes more and more para-

mount, the ideological and political motives that guided her behavior (such as the redistribution of wealth) become less and less relevant. We are being taught a lesson about a woman who misbehaved—a universally applicable lesson. The fact that she misbehaved with Peronist goals in mind and that her misbehavior contributed to Peronist political ends becomes superficial.

### THE POLITICS OF APOLITICAL MYTH-MAKING

Parker's *Evita*'s final scenes clearly direct attention away from historical specificities and beyond ideological considerations. At the majestic site of Evita's wake, countless sorrowful Argentines, one by one, slowly approach the glass-topped coffin. Perón watches gloomily, standing by the corpse that seems to symbolize the death of his source of power. The presence of Che by the coffin suddenly catches Perón's and our attention. Che defiantly places a last kiss on Evita as he directs an intense look in Perón's direction. Perón returns the look, puzzled at first and then with growing suspicion. Above the woman's dead body, two powerful men exchange menacing looks. Blackout, the end. It all comes down to another exemplary story of machismo. The audience is prompted to wonder: What would have happened if Evita had ever met and fallen in love with Che? The suggested response in the film is romantically apolitical: Perón would have been jealous. Either in Che's or in Perón's arms, Evita would have been no more (or less) than a woman whose passionate doings unfailingly nurtured rivalry among men—a drive stronger than history, stronger than politics. *Evita*'s ending seems to imply that, as a matter of fact, sexual politics would supply us a universally applicable answer to the question of what politics is—a masterfully depoliticizing take on politics.

This is in fact a remarkably effective political move, given that it projects all the stereotypical knowledge about the political atmosphere that surrounded Evita's Argentina onto the Argentina of today. Evita and especially Perón and Peronism were matters of great international attention and political concern toward the end of World War II. The international press reported on Perón's and other military officers' sympathies if not connections with Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini; Peronism's alleged resemblances to Nazism and fascism; and stories about corrupt dealings with officers from these totalitarian and genocidal regimes who sought asylum in the vast pampas. The truth of these reports is still being debated in international scholarly circles. The association between Peronism and fascism or, for the more prudent, between Peronism and totalitarian-nationalist-populist-demagogic-personalistic regimes that respond to antidemocratic ideological inclinations is accepted, in general, as a given. When one adds to this a superficial

knowledge of the successive military dictatorships of the 1960s and the 1970s, equally subsumed under the rubric of fascism, one has a picture of sorrowful victims and victimizers who could never learn the lessons of democracy. The intervention of the United States in Latin American affairs during these decades, seeking either to overthrow or to consolidate these regimes, is frequently left out or underestimated. The impressions left by this fragmentary information do their work as they remain unaddressed on the screen.

It could be argued that this *Evita* is a spectacle. I agree, so long as by "spectacle" we mean an artistic, creative rendering of a story that in providing a synthetic, condensed view of a complex and often puzzling historical phenomenon fully engages the political and ideological terrains (see Dyer, 1992a, 1992b; Nichols, 1981). Spectacles that address the interstices between a nation's history and its myths, produced for a transnational audience, effectively do political work. As the artist (in this case the director) chooses what to keep and what to discard, what to stress in the plot, what connections to establish and what to leave out, an aesthetic rendering comes to life that is not very different from myth in its symbolic power.

Myths are beliefs, not specifically true or untrue, certainly invested with the power of representing something worth knowing. They are particularly interesting in that they effect representations between the real thing and its interpretations, between the historical and the historiographic. An artistic production of this kind, a cinematographic spectacle, is also in-between, neither documentary nor fictional narrative. Spectators, especially when not well-informed, are left either skeptical or enraptured or both. This one masterfully crafted impressionistic interpretation is the only information that most viewers will ever have the time or interest to get about *Evita*. *Evita* thus enters the transnational scene through a powerful medium that generates a new myth capable of reproducing old myths about Latin American history, reinforcing universalistic connections via subjective identifications, reinstating the morality of fear and fascination surrounding the explosive woman-power equation, and generating a whole new global package of "Evitist" commodities including *Evita* fashion, jewelry, cosmetics, coffee-table and academic books, and even US\$1,500 7-day *Evita* tours (e.g., Chacón, 1996; *Vogue*, 1996; *Honolulu Advertiser*, 1997).

#### THE MENEMIZATION OF EVITA

"Have you seen *Evita*?" I am repeatedly asked, and then "What do you think?" And it takes me some time to sort out and choose a referent (what I think about *Evita*, the historical figure, pleading with or agitating the masses

on the balcony, or the peripatetic embalmed corpse now locked up in a mausoleum in La Recoleta; about Evita as portrayed in other recent films; about Madonna's performance of Evita; or about the film, *Evita*, directed by Alan Parker, as a whole, (a work of cinematic art or a piece of entertainment?) And how should I respond? As a cinema buff, a cultural translator, a responsible scholar, or a representative of the Argentines (and, if the latter, of which ones? the Peronists or the anti-Peronists? the right- or the left-wing Peronists? the nationalist or liberal [Menemist] Peronists? or the ones above and beyond these disputes, who welcome any representation of Argentines in a Hollywood production, calculating that it is better to be there, identified even if misrepresented in global culture, than totally erased and ignored?)? Who or what is Evita, and who/what do I represent when I talk/write about Evita?<sup>6</sup>

None of my colleagues or friends have the time, interest, or patience to let me go carefully through this entangled checklist before I respond. Therefore I have come up with an answer that gives me some room to complicate things: "Yes, I've seen both of them." The initial surprise at this doubling of Evita allows me some time to assemble a combination of responses, trying to address all these issues, synthetically, at once. This is my opportunity to protest the Evita question and to attempt to unravel and reweave what seems to be a simple, straightforward question. In order to focus my thoughts somewhat, I have addressed the present remythologizing of Evita, the historical figure and the myth, through the intervention of the Hollywood filmmaking apparatus. My intention has been to relate this cinematic production to the transnational spectacularization of Third World historical figures and to the global circulation of Latin American national myths. I would like to conclude with some reflections on Argentine responses to the decision to produce a Hollywood version of *Evita* (not to the film itself, because it had not yet been shown in Argentina when I was last there). These early responses are, in one way or another, concerned with issues of cultural imperialism.

It has been widely argued that "culture," especially "popular culture"—including not only music or dance but also myths—now circulates globally, despite its obviously local/national original production. But discussions have engaged more fully with the mechanisms of transnationalization than with the politics of cultural piracy or appropriation. The local Argentine reactions to the Hollywood production of *Evita*—culminating in an Argentine filmic counterversion (*Eva Perón*, directed by Juan Carlos Desanzo, screenplay by José Pablo Feinman, starring Esther Goris as Eva Perón and Victor Laplace as Perón, Aleph Producciones, 1996) with at least two more films planned (*La Maga*, 1996a)—fully engage the political dimension of these transnational undertakings and demonstrate resistance not only to what is perceived

as the unethical or irresponsible use of national symbols or icons but also to the persistence of unequal relations of power between nations and constituencies in the course of so-called globalization and transnationalism.

Whose perspective on Evita is more likely to achieve the status of a globally circulated myth? Argentines have a clear, consistent opinion on this despite the differences among them that have produced competing histories of Evita and contrasting Evita myths (see the contributions of Marcos Mayer, Pablo Chacón, Gabriela Bolognese, Horacio González, and Antonio Cafiero in *El Nuevo Porteño*, 1996). No one seems to doubt that the Evita that Argentine children will know will be the one represented by Madonna in Alan Parker's Hollywood film, and they resent it. "Evita hay una sola, y es nuestra" (There is only one Evita, and she is ours) proclaimed the posters plastered across Buenos Aires on the international film crew's arrival. This is, of course, wishful thinking (see the contributions of Juan Pablo Feinmann, María Saenz Quesada, Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, Abel Posse, and Marysa Navarro in *La Maga*, 1996b).

There have been many myths of Evita in and outside of Argentina, but this time something different seems to be at stake. The Hollywood remythification of Evita fits almost too well the trend of spectacular politics introduced by the current Peronist government under Menem. Menemism, as critics of the social costs embedded in this government's free market policies brand this refashioning of Peronism, has retained nothing but the memory of what once moved hopeful masses of Argentines—the ideals of social justice, economic independence, and political self-determination. Hollywood's *Evita*—spectacular, frivolous, depoliticized—evokes precisely Menem's understanding of a Peronism suited to our times. The film recalls the past glories of Peronism and reveals its unviable utopianism. The memory of Evita's willingness to give up her life for the cause of her *descamisados* still helps win elections in the midst of a generalized confusion brought about by Menem's use of Peronist slogans and symbols to implement neoliberal policies.

Argentines have no doubt that this Hollywood remake of Evita's myth will have a global impact on the representation and interpretation of Argentine history, an impact that some welcome and others resist. Globalization is well under way, and the new empire is one in which very few Argentines will have a say about the history or the myths that will explain our past and guide our future. Antonio Negri (1996), an Italian marxist political philosopher, suggests that at this point we would do better to move beyond the problem of how to resist global imperialism and focus instead on what kind of empire we want.

## NOTES

1. Evita's origins, marked by her birth out of wedlock as well as by the class ascription of her maternal family, have been a matter of much debate. Her own attempts at manipulating information on her birth and her family's status have been extensively discussed by Fraser and Navarro (1996) and Dujovne Ortiz (1995). In a recent presentation at the UCLA Center for Latin American Studies (April 1997), Tulio Halperin Donghi observed that it is false to consider Evita's maternal family as lower-class, given that both her sisters married Argentine professionals (a lawyer and a military officer). Thus, Evita's alignment with the *descamisados* seems to have been more of an ideological choice on her part. This observation opens up space for a political rather than a psychological analysis of her historical figure.

2. On the desexualized image of Evita and its resexualizing moments, when Madonna, the star, takes the leading role in the film, particularly in the dance scenes, I have been following Richard Dyer's (1992a) analysis of the ideological/cultural functions of star images and their relations to the construction of film narratives, characters, and so on.

3. Linda Williams (1989) argues that pornographic films as well as musicals strive to represent that which cannot be directly seen or that which has been previously invisible. Women's desires, motives, and impulses thus figure prominently in these genres. I suggest that dancing provides the opportunity within the film narrative for historicity and cultural specificity to be subsumed under a generalizable imaging of "expressions" and "true feelings." Dancing as a shorthand for accessing the essence of the plot acquires an explanatory power that usurps the relevance of other complex information.

4. Directed by Mario Sofficci, screenplay by Francisco Madrid and Mario Sofficci, starring Hugo del Carril, Libertad Lamarque, and Eva Duarte (Argentina, 1945).

5. Directed by Charles Vidor, screenplay by Marion Parsonnet, starring Rita Hayworth as Gilda, Glenn Ford as Johnny Farrell, and George MacReady as Ballin Mundson (Columbia Pictures, United States, 1946).

6. Similar questions have been confronted, directly or indirectly, by Argentine fiction writers and playwrights such as Tomás Eloy Martínez (1995), Rodolfo Walsh (1986), Luisa Valenzuela (1983), Néstor Perlongher (1986), Copi (1970), and Leónidas Lamborghini (1972). Issues of power and sexuality surrounding the erotics of nationalism are at the center of these works. The analysis of their strategies of representation and self-representation is beyond the scope of this article.

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