

Bewitching Kisses (*Besos brujos*, 1937)

Laura Podalsky

dir. José A. Ferreyra; prod. Alfredo P. Murúa; screenplay Enrique García Velloso; photography Gumer Barreiros; music José Vázquez Vigo. 35 mm, black/white, 73 mins. Sociedad Impresora de Discos Electrofónicos, distrib. Sociedad Impresora de Discos Electrofónicos.

Marga Lucena (played by Libertad Lamarque), a successful nightclub singer, is tricked by the family of her upper class fiancé, Alberto (played by Florén Delbene), into believing that he has betrayed her. Throwing away her dreams of marrying him and settling down, Marga leaves her comfortable life in Buenos Aires for a job at the Guaraní Café Concert, a rough-and-tumble bar in the interior province Misiones. During her first performance, she enchants Don Sebastián (played by Carlos Perelli), a wealthy rancher who, with the bar owner's help, abducts Marga and takes her into the deep woods, hoping to win her over. Trapped in a feral landscape, Marga resists Sebastián—never realizing that Alberto is in pursuit.

A tale of virtue, vice, and emotional extremes, *Besos brujos* is a notable film for a variety of reasons, starting with its production history. Along with *Ayúdame a vivir* (1936) and *La ley que olvidaron* (1938), *Besos brujos* was one of the first Argentine films to achieve commercial success in both foreign and domestic markets. All three films were directed by Afro-Argentine director José A. Ferreyra for Sociedad Impresora de Discos Electrofónicos (SIDE), a new production company built on the commercial success of entrepreneur Alfredo P. Murúa's »Sidetón,« an optical sound system known for its »low costs, high quality, and ease-of-use« (Peña 58; Kohen). In these early productions, SIDE tested out a viable commercial formula with the help of a seasoned director who had made thirty-two films between 1915 and 1935 (Couselo 131-46). Frequently set in Buenos Aires' *arrabales*, or slums, Ferreyra's films blend »melodrama with a humanist commitment to represent a marginalized social class« (Peña 24).

Another recurrent aspect of Ferreyra's oeuvre was the tango. Film scholar Fernando M. Peña argues that Ferreyra's early-period films gave »cinematic expression to the poetry of tango which is, by definition, working-class and melancholic« (24; see also Couselo). Less melodramatic than mournful, the song form represented a »state of the soul,« or *un sentir porteño* (»a Buenos Aires way of feeling«), for Ferreyra (Peña 25). This



attention to sentiment coexisted with his concern for urban environments and visual details, with several of his silent films shot on-location in the city's interior, which has led critics to see his early films as a form of proto-neorealism (Couselo 63).

Ferreya's more stylized sound films like *Besos brujos*, filmed mostly in studios, offered »a more cosmopolitan« type of melodrama that was »original, exportable«—capitalizing on the tango's international success and showcasing a modern Argentina (Aimaretti 10). The abovementioned trilogy served as the perfect vehicle to turn Libertad Lamarque, an internationally known tango performer, into a full-fledged trans-media star—following in the footsteps of Carlos Gardel and his mid-1930s films with Paramount, themselves perhaps influenced by Ferreyra (Peña 45-47, 58).

Unlike Ferreyra's other two films with Lamarque, as analyzed by Matthew Karush, *Besos brujos* is not focused on class conflict per se but rather on a (moral) conflict between old and new ways of life. Alberto's mother and Don Sebastián symbolize antiquated forms of socioeconomic power in urban and rural environments, respectively. A rigid matriarch in a stylish Buenos Aires apartment, Alberto's mother despises Marga and insists that he marry someone of his »rank,« preferably his cousin Laurita. A man from the countryside, Don Sebastián exemplifies an older form of virile masculinity, using his economic position and his physical dominance to impose his will on Marga. The film contrasts the selfish motivations of these two characters with the virtuous love of Marga and Alberto, who symbolize new and emergent ways of life. Marga is a wildly successful nightclub singer who has overcome her seemingly modest origins. While she epitomizes a new socioeconomic mobility, Alberto represents a new form of masculinity. While tied to the countryside as an *estanciero*, an owner of a large property, he is as comfortable in a tuxedo in Buenos Aires as he is riding horseback through the jungle pursuing Marga. Produced by an up-and-coming entrepreneur who found success in new culture industries, *Besos brujos* utilized its protagonists to promote the new urban bourgeoisie's embrace of changing socioeconomic opportunities while upholding an existing moral code and gendered norms (Kohen 268; Aimaretti 4).

Marga and Alberto's modeling of new ways of life comes at a cost, of course, and, in true melodramatic fashion, they must prove their virtue. Following melodramatic conventions (Williams 65-67; 69-72), the film foregrounds scenes of sacrifice, and the two protagonists repeatedly seem to arrive too late for reconciliation. After hearing Laurita's lies (about being pregnant with Alberto's child), Marga immediately runs away, leaving her dreams of wedded bliss behind (literalized in a cutaway to her crushed bridal crown on the ground). When he finds out, Alberto rushes to find her, enduring the harsh conditions of the jungle, and ultimately the life-threatening bite of a venomous snake before being found, serendipitously, by Don Sebastián. Just as he brings Alberto back to their hut in an effort to save him, an oblivious Marga almost escapes by stealing Alberto's horse. The couple's ongoing suffering functions as proof of their virtue. This is particularly evident in the final scenes, where Marga, having returned to the hut, discovers a wounded Alberto. In order to convince Sebastián to cure him, Marga lies, rejecting Alberto and feigning love for Sebastián. Once healed, Alberto decides to leave, willing to give up the woman he loves as long as she is happy. But, just in the »nick of time« (Williams 69-77), Marga sings her final tango—»Tu vida es mi vida« (»Your life is my life«)—revealing her undying devotion to him, at which point the newly selfless Don Sebastián lets her go.

These dizzying plot turns and rapid character reversals point to the contradictions that the film tries to contain. As noted by film scholar María Aimaretti, even while upholding patriarchal norms, the film gives voice to female subjectivity—and a desire made perceptible in the *mise-en-scène* in the lush and verdant interior—through Marga's impassioned musical performances, including the title song that she sings to Sebastián (17, 20-25). Even while affirming male dominance, *Besos brujos* repeatedly showcases Alberto's pain and the ecstatic suffering of Sebastián. As Marga sings out her love for Alberto in the final sequence, numerous close-ups display Sebastián's agonized expression as he discovers her true feelings. The film ends abruptly, as Sebastián cedes the woman he loves to his more urbane, but equally courageous, rival.

Besos brujos' efforts to materialize the characters' seemingly transcendent emotional depth coexist in tension with the film's fascination with surfaces—most particularly with production designer Juan Manuel Concado's art deco interiors and the accoutrements of urban modernity featured in the initial scenes in Buenos Aires (Gómez Rial 273). Film historian Héctor Kohen argues that SIDE's films generally drew on the visual style of U.S. comedies that would have been »recognized by and acceptable to Latin American audiences« as a commercial tactic (275). While that may be true, *Besos brujos*' use of multiple planes of action and complex staging—abundant flowers in the foreground of Marga's apartment, open latticework in the middle ground separating Alberto's living room and dining room, boughs hanging overhead as Marga baths in a river—exceed that norm and lend the film a Sternbergian feel.

Historian Matthew Karush offers one explanation for this melding of melodrama, tango, and art deco interiors. For him, such efforts to »harmoniz[e] cinematic modernism with local authenticity« allowed Argentine audiences to »enjoy music and cinema that was rooted in the local context but was just as modern [...] as those imported from the North«—and, at the same time, to fantasize about upward mobility (116, 132). Although this may be true in ideological terms, *Besos brujos* does not exemplify Miriam Hansen's notion of early cinema as a form of vernacular modernism on a sensorial level. Rather than capture the emergent sensorium of modern life, the film encourages audiences to feel good about the triumph of new ways of being in the world that are, nonetheless, anchored to older moral codes and gendered norms.

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