

## Questionable Tastes: Women, Love Songs and Gender Subalternity<sup>1</sup>

...the issue wasn't really value but authority:the question was not whether [one musician or the other] are any good or not, but who has the authority to say so. (Frith 1998:9)

### Introduction

This work examines the way Argentine lower and middle class women connect with Latin romantic music in order to understand the place this music plays in their daily lives and in the configuration of femininities. Romantic music has been the music of choice of millions of women across the world for decades, making it a particularly apt focus for a critical cultural study. In spite of—or perhaps precisely because of—its mass appeal, this music is often criticized from two different angles: as a cultural product, it is considered poor quality, overtly commercial and terribly clichéd, with little to offer in terms of musical composition. On an entirely different front, it is viewed as “sexist garbage” by feminists convinced that the texts of soap operas, women’s magazines, romance films and popular music alike reproduce gender inequalities. In order to offer a more insightful view into the women who value these products and use them in wholly

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<sup>1</sup> This article is a corollary to the research I conducted for my doctoral thesis in social sciences at the Universidad de Buenos Aires “¿A dónde había estado yo?: configuración de feminidades en un club de fans de Ricardo Arjona” (“Where Had I Been? Configuring Femininities in a Ricardo Arjona Fan Club,” 2012), directed by Pablo Semán and Pablo Alabarces. This research was funded by fellowships from the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas de la Argentina (National Scientific and Technical Research Council, CONICET) and grants from UBACYT (Universidad de Buenos Aires) and the FONCYT (Universidad de San Martín).

innovative ways, we will focus on a group of women fans of Ricardo Arjona, a Guatemalan singer-songwriter whose popularity across Latin America dates back two decades.

Ricardo Arjona's music can be heard on any major radio station in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru, Paraguay or any other country in Latin America. His songs are played at music stores, bars and even supermarkets. A constant in mass culture, his music attracts countless fans across the region, especially women, who have helped his albums go platinum—with over 40 million albums sold, Arjona is one of the most successful Latin American artists of all time—and fill the stadiums every time he visits their city. Coupled with Arjona's success, however, is the same type of artistic and ideological criticism mentioned above. The singer's music is deemed poor quality in the ongoing debate over what constitutes “good” and “bad” music from both an aesthetic and ethical standpoint (Frith, 1998), while feminist critics allege that it reiterates gender inequalities. This article aims to show how this criticism shifts from Arjona's music to his audiences. If his music is such poor quality and so offensive in terms of how it depicts women, the question that arises is why is it so popular among listeners, especially women? There is certainly nothing novel about discrediting women for the cultural products they choose to consume: rather, there is a long tradition of labeling these products as “garbage” and treating the women who choose such products as short on taste and critical awareness.

The objective of this article is thus to call into questions such criticism by examining the specific uses of this music by women in Argentina through this case study. The article shows that both Arjona's music as well as the fan club dedicated to the singer allow these lower-middle class women to take a break from their family and household obligations, question certain gender mandates and construct a space for

socialization far from home and family. At the same time, the article analyzes a series of discourses that criticize Arjona's music and the women who listen to it in order to gain an understanding of how gender and cultural criticism both ultimately treat these women as what we will refer to as, in a variation on Stuart Hall's term, "cultural dopes".<sup>2</sup>

### **Tiny Housewife Rebellions**

Like other feminized cultural objects, romantic music is considered "women's music." Love songs, soap operas and celebrity magazines filled with the love stories of the rich and famous ostensibly target women,<sup>3</sup> although in practice, men can also consume them. This process of generalizing the audiences of mass culture also involves a moral and ideological association between cultural products that evoke love and discourses that impose on women's autonomy. Broadly viewed as useless and distracting chaff, these products denote women's passiveness and subordination (Radway 1984). Illouz (2009) remarks that for the past three centuries, romance culture has been accused of causing "emotional disorders" through a moral discourse and the arguments in favor of this have grown since the emergence of mass culture. Female consumers are thus chided for having an uncritical attitude towards the products they consume and for not questioning the discourse of utopian romantic love or the underlying

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<sup>2</sup>This phrase is inspired by Hall's notion of "cultural dopes" (1984), a term he uses to question critiques that presents subjects as passive in the face of all-powerful and manipulative cultural industries. Such critiques, Hall claims, may satisfy the critical consciousness but completely overlook the cultural relationship between subjects and the product the industries create. This topic will be explored in greater detail further on.

<sup>3</sup> The connection between love, emotions and femininity dates back to the division between the public and private spheres imposed during the modern age and women's relegation to the private sphere (Archenti 1994; Giddens 2008).

sexism in their favorite cultural products. Gender subalternity, then, is not only evident in the violence that many women experience in their day-to-day lives or in the glass ceiling that prevents them from accessing promotions: it can also be seen in the way in which women's cultural consumptions are judged.

In order to provide further insight on the complex bond between women and music, the ethnography that forms the basis for this paper focused on how women connect to the music they enjoy,<sup>4</sup> analyzing a Ricardo Arjona fan club in the city of Buenos Aires. The aptness of this particular fan club for the study is owed first and foremost to this artist's widespread and enduring popularity with female audiences in various countries in Latin America since the mid-1990s.<sup>5</sup> Arjona's multifaceted repertoire combines the bolero with ballads, protest music and pop with love songs.<sup>6</sup> In addition, this particular fan club had been meeting on a monthly basis for fifteen years—making it the oldest Arjona group of its kind in Argentina and allowing the research to continue over a lengthy period. Membership included women of different ages, allowing generational diversity to be contemplated along with the women's heterogeneous trajectories and music interests. For three years (2008-2011), we participated in the monthly meetings in Buenos Aires, where between 40 and 80<sup>7</sup> lower and middle class women gathered to talk about the singer. The group also worked to get Arjona played

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<sup>4</sup> For more on ethnography and its aptness for research into the social uses of music, see Silba and Spataro (2016).

<sup>5</sup> Arjona's 2014/2015 tour took him to most of Latin America (Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Honduras, Bolivia, Peru, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Venezuela and Puerto Rico) and a few major U.S. cities (Miami, New York, Los Angeles).

<sup>6</sup> Since his first album in 1985, Arjona has released fourteen studio albums, twenty compilations and three live albums. His records top the charts and his shows frequently sell out across the continent. Polygram, Sony Music and Warner Music have distributed his albums and in 2011, he started his own record label, "Metamorfosis", seeking to emphasize his image as a socially conscious troubadour, which is how he likes to define himself.

<sup>7</sup> The number of women in attendance at the meeting always spiked right before the artist arrived in Argentina as the fan club often provided chances to meet the artist, get more information about the tour, etc.

on radio and TV, organized special gatherings when the artist visited Argentina, held donation drives, talked about life and forged relationships with the other members based on solidarity and camaraderie.

As women whose adolescence had long since past, the fan club members we interviewed recounted that family members, coworkers and friends alike questioned their participation in this group. They themselves faced certain dilemmas in this regard, as the activity conflicted with domestic and/or family responsibilities that fell to them alone, like looking after children, grandchildren and elderly parents. The fan club operated as a complex space for socialization that they referred to as “their place” and where they claimed to feel “free”. This self-perceived freedom was evidenced not only in the women’s accounts but also whenever they mentioned places and bonds that did not elicit a similar feeling—generally situations in which their gender and age positioned them as household and family caregivers.

The overarching question that guided the research was what women do with their free time. During fieldwork, this question was split into further questions: how did the specific women in our study use their time? What role did music play in their day-to-day lives? When and where could they listen to music? Did they have specific places in their home where they could enjoy their music? What implications did leaving the house to attend a fan club meeting have for them? Many of the women concurred that it was difficult to listen to Arjona’s songs if a family member was in the same room. Laura, a 43-year-old literature professor who lived with her husband and three children in the city of Buenos Aires, listened to Arjona on her MP3 player when out walking or washing the dishes. This domestic image of individual listening appeared over and over again during the interviews: the women did housework to the beat of Arjona songs, often wearing headphones. This type of listening reveals, first, that these women

handled most household tasks themselves. Tidying up, cooking, grocery shopping, ironing, picking up the kids at school and keeping an eye on them at home, and looking after elderly parents/in-laws were tasks that they either handled themselves or shared with hired help.<sup>8</sup> The use of headphones was not necessarily to find a way to take music with them as they moved from room to room (or down the street): some said that putting on an Arjona album at home could be a source of conflict either because others in the household did not like the singer, criticized it as “bad music”—a topic we will return to later—or thought that she had an unhealthy interest and was spending too much time on the artist. Far from being dissuaded, the women opted to use headphones in order to avoid bothering or being bothered. This is what Laura had to say about this:

You don't have time for yourself... and when you do have so time and you put on a CD, you bother someone who's studying or watching TV or someone who doesn't like the music. You are never all by yourself! Or when you're alone, you're working. And later on, everyone is home, the kids, my husband a little later (...) so I don't have that time to say, “I'm going to sit down and listen to a CD.

This type of listening shows that women often find it difficult to construct a space and time for leisure in their home, a problem that Radway made clear in her now classic work on readers of romance novels (1984). In her study, the author observed the eloquent way in which these women managed to postpone the constant demands of their

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<sup>8</sup>Colombians use the term “ironing music” to refer to the predominant type of circulation of romantic music in Latin America, that is, women listening to it in the privacy of their home while doing housework. In 2003, the Colombian affiliate of EMI records even released a compilation entitled “Lo mejor de música pa 'planchar (Grandes logros de planchado)” [The best ironing music (Greatest ironing hits)] that sold 35,000 copies (Party, 2009).

families and deliberately do something for their own pleasure by reading their favorite books. As Radway affirms, the readers describe these moments as a “declaration of independence” and a way to tell others “This is my time, my space. Now leave me alone”. In another classic study on television that dialogues with Radway, Morley reveals differences in the cultural consumption habits between men and women. Men, for example, are the ones who decide what program to watch on television and have more time for this activity, a finding that can be explained by the particular social tasks attributed to the different household roles of men and women (Morley 1992). Though conducted more than two decades ago, these studies are relevant because the household continues to be a place of leisure for men and a workplace for women. Moreover, the structuring of the domestic sphere through these gendered rights and obligations is precisely the stage where specific consumption patterns develop. Faced with this lack of space<sup>9</sup> or time within their households, Arjona’s followers discovered they could carve out their own place outside the home.

While listening to Arjona’s music on headphones as they did housework was a wholly private affair, the fan club members moved into the public sphere to talk about their favorite artist and get all the latest news. According to many women in the group, “the first Saturday of every month is sacred,” meaning that it took priority over almost any other social event. Some women referred to the meeting as a “party” and would fix themselves up for the big day, choosing a special outfit and putting on makeup. Sonia, a 60-year-old widow who lives alone in Greater Buenos Aires, took care of her grandchildren during the week while her daughter and son-in-law worked and on weekends if they went out. Yet Sonia made sure her daughter knew that she

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<sup>9</sup> The lack of “a room of one’s own,” to use Virginia Woolf’s term, is a subject that has been amply covered within feminism. See Amorós (1994).

couldn't take care of the children on the first Saturday of the month because, in her words, "I'm not available."<sup>10</sup> This comment brings up an interesting point that was repeated in other interviews. In order to do something they liked to do, many women had to forge an autonomous space and doing so meant putting limits on their family's demands.

As noted earlier, some of the women were criticized for participating in the fan club and accused of "acting like a teenager"<sup>11</sup> since fandom's activities are generally associated with adolescents. As Lewis notes, "Fandom is overwhelmingly associated with adolescence or childhood...Furthermore, the fan impulse is presented as feminine, not masculine" (1992:157). At the same time, this practice suggests mechanisms of juvenilization: "The link made between immaturity and femininity operates as a strategy simultaneously to deride women and fandom" (Ibid: 158), an argument that became explicit in the criticism to which many of these women were subjected: "My husband will kill me," "Everyone's going to think I'm crazy," "I must have a screw loose." Beyond the fact that fandom usually occurs at a different age and stage in life,<sup>12</sup> the question was what really bothered the women's loved ones about their membership in the club. According to the women's own accounts, there are at least two answers to this question. The fact that a male singer was the *raison d'être* for leaving the house was one of them, as fantasies associated with male artists-female fans unquestionably influenced the responses these women received. Beyond the rare

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<sup>10</sup> This is the catch phrase used by the local cable channel Cosmopolitan, whose contents and aesthetics are designed "for women," to promote a nightly film on at 10pm. The commercial says, "If you want to unwind without anyone bothering you, Cosmo is the place. Say no to obligations and interruptions and enjoy a moment planned especially for you." The use of the term "interruption" points to a type of consumption that occurs in contexts where women face a slew of demands.

<sup>11</sup> It is necessary to clarify that not all the women in the group experienced situations of this kind. Age and marital status were both critical, since middle-age married women were generally the ones who faced such conflict, though not in all cases.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the connection between music and age, see Semán (2015).



possibility they would actually meet Arjona—and what could happen at such a meeting—it was inappropriate for a middle-age woman to spend her time talking about a man who she found attractive artistically but also physically. In some cases, partners wondered or directly confronted them to ask whether they were actually going to the meetings. Eleonora, a 40-year-old who lives with her husband and three teenage children in Greater Buenos Aires, opted to avoid a scene by taking her youngest daughter to the club meetings. Previously, her husband had thrown a little fit every month, ranting on about what she was really doing so many hours on a weekend. In his opinion, like that of many of the husbands and boyfriends described, weekends were family time. While Eleonora's story divulges the limited autonomous spaces of certain women burdened by family demands, it also reveals the strategies women develop to overcome such obstacles.

Another source of contention was that these women were seen as “wasting” their time at a fan club meeting, since fandom is an expression of preference and pleasure in a given person. Such hedonistic demonstrations are viewed unfavorably in certain moments of life, especially the moment in which women have been historically expected to care for other family members. Bataille explains how the principle of utility is associated with people's use of time, noting that individual efforts should be geared to productive social activity, while pleasure, whatever form it takes, is reduced to a concession, to a “diversion whose role is subsidiary” (1985:168). Pleasure here is viewed as a nonproductive expenditure akin to other practices where the emphasis is on loss, such as “mourning, wars, cults, monumental and sumptuary construction, games, spectacles, the arts and perverse sexual activity” (Ibid: 169). Fandom could be viewed in a similar manner, as it is an expenditure that has nothing to do with the material preservation of life. In the case we are analyzing here, the time the women “spent” at the

fan club could not be understood as “productive” expenditures—such as working for an income or keeping a household running, a historically feminized task. On the contrary, the hours spent at the monthly meetings—moments of sheer pleasure and tied to the stigmatized practice of fandom—were seen by some family members and friends as time wasted. The people close to them asked why they were going, told them not to waste their time and even questioned their sanity, revealing disdain for how they chose to spend their time.<sup>13</sup>

Hedonism had its limit for these women, however, as could be seen in the altruistic activities the group organized. In this fan club, like in many others (Borda 1996; Martín 2006; Skartveit 2009), women brought in donations for different institutions such as schools, nursery schools, hospitals, etc. What characterized this particular group of women was that they donated items they made themselves, principally clothing and toys they had knitted or sewed. These charity activities perhaps helped the women justify being out of the house and attending a fan club, giving them an explanation for others and even for themselves as to why being part of a fan club wasn't sheer “madness.” Susan's account is particularly telling in this regard. At the age of 40, Susan was a divorced administrative employee living in the city of Buenos Aires with her son and a new boyfriend. At the beginning, family and friends scoffed at her new activity. “But when they listen to you and hear about what you do [in the fan club], and they find out it's not all just ‘Arjona, Arjona,’ then they realize that it's positive.” Susan's account reveals the complexity of gender subalternity: women were expected to justify the way they spent their time, investing it in an activity useful

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<sup>13</sup> Although such comments are repeated by many of the women interviewed, a few described family settings in which no one questioned the way they were using their time. One stark contrast was a fan club member who attended meetings with her husband and two children in what they all considered a “family outing”. In other cases, women reported that their husbands helped out with a certain activity or transported the donations the women had gathered.

toothers. If the meetings had in fact been only about “Arjona, Arjona,” then they would have been classified as a non-productive expenditure, a concession from productive social activity. In that case, some of the women may not have set aside two or three hours a month to merely talk about a man they liked, a man who moved them. Even in the case of fan club members attending for that reason alone, many would bring up the altruistic activities to justify their membership when questioned by friends or family.

In a complex structuring of the way they spent their time—a time involving a man whose songs moved them, a chance to meet people, make friends and also do altruistic “work”—the fan club members carved out an important space for socialization. Their stories reveal the moral mandates that shape the lives of women and the explicit and implicit rules circulating in their surroundings and in their own visions of what they should be. Some of the accounts also highlighted what Kandiyoti has referred to as “bargaining with patriarchy.” In her study on India and Africa, two cultures often defined as gender oppressive, the author affirms that women do not simply comply with the patriarchal rules of the family structures they are born into but instead bargain with patriarchy. These women actively come up with strategies within a framework of restrictions and negotiate the implicit scripts that “define, limit, and inflect their market and domestic options” (1988:285). This practice, argues Kandiyoti, “exert(s) a powerful influence on the shaping of women’s gendered subjectivity and determine(s) the nature of gender ideology in different contexts” (ibid: 275). “Patriarchal bargains,” she says, “do not merely inform women’s rational choices but also shape the more unconscious aspects of their gendered subjectivity, since they permeate the context of their early socialization, as well as their adult cultural milieu” (ibid: 285). In the context of the ethnography of the Arjona fan club—a very different context from the one studied by Kandiyoti—the gender norms configured among

middle-age women in Argentina from the middle-lower class, the main caregivers of their home and family, became evident. For these Argentine women, a particular use of music and the forms of socialization they construct in their surroundings come into play as they bargain with patriarchy.<sup>14</sup>

Although their actions counter certain patriarchal claims on their time and bodies, however, the fan club members expressed no claims related to women's sexual and reproductive rights, feminist demands or the discourses of a broader women's movement. In fact, the music product these women chose is criticized from both ideological and aesthetic standpoints. From a feminist perspective, Arjona's music is viewed as sexist and conservative, and in the eyes of music critics, it is substandard in terms of its musical composition and lyrics. This is the topic of the next section.

### **3) Accomplices in their own domination**

Over the course of our fieldwork, criticism of the type of music these women chose to listen to was a constant among the women's family, the media and even the academic sphere where this study circulated. Two kinds of arguments against Arjona's music appeared. The first, which claims that Arjona's songs promote sexist behaviors, could be called feminist criticism, though it is not necessarily voiced by feminists. In such critiques, there is a division between women who are aware of the sexism in Arjona's work and those unable to discern it. The second type of argument is based on a

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<sup>14</sup> A range of recent studies in Latin America also emphasize the modes of socialization and empowerment that are configured around specific music: on tango, see Archetti 2003; Saikin 2004; Carozzi 2009, 2011; Liska, 2009; on cumbia, Martín 2006; Semán 2006; Alabarces et al., 2008;; Semán and Vila 2011; Silba, 2012; on cuarteto, Blázquez 2008; on the *canción melódica*, Party 2008, 2009; on bolero De la Peza 2001, 2009; on opera, Benzecry 2012; on electronic music, Gallo and Semán 2009; Lenarduzzi 2012; on rock Citro 2008; GarrigaZucal and Salerno 2008, to name just a few.

criterion of legitimacy reserved for certain cultural objects. The musical products Arjona creates, the argument goes, are substandard and his lyrics are “cheesy” or “crass”, repetitive and prosy. These comments indicated, though not always explicitly, that Arjona’s audiences did not have the competences required for a type of musical consumption reserved for more erudite, professional and sensitive audiences. They also suggested that the success of such mediocre music indicates a certain level of cultural deterioration in society.

We will now briefly analyze this criticism in order to present the arguments that imply that certain women lack the critical capacity to detect sexism or poor-quality music, at least according to certain feminist and hegemonic cultural criticism.



“How is it possible that a singer [Arjona] who cannot avoid the same old prejudice, the most sexist and backwards clichés, attracts overwhelmingly female admirers?” asked *Las 12* (4 June 2010),<sup>15</sup> a feminist publication with important debates about gender and sexuality that targets Argentine women. It runs interviews with well-known feminists from the sphere of politics, culture,

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-5617-2010-04-03.html>

*Las 12* is a weekly supplement to the national newspaper *Página/12* that comes out on Fridays and has been included in the newspaper for the past 16 years. The newspaper is identified as progressive and frequent topics include human rights as well as gender and sexuality, not only in specific supplements like *Las 12* and *Soy* (the supplement on sexual diversity) but also in its daily coverage.

education and others; coverstrending topics; and advocates expanded rights for women in its features.

In this special issue, the focus on Arjona's music was because his audiences are overwhelmingly female and the question was how a repertoire filled with "sexist clichés" could win over such a great number of women.<sup>16</sup> An initial response in one of the articles ventures, "Maybe it's because the guy's hot." Arguments based on women's sexual attraction to the artist and the ease with which women are manipulated are frequently used to explain their relationship to mass culture. The tone of the five other articles in the supplement about Arjona can be summarized in the following thoughts about the singer-songwriter's biggest hit, "Señora de las cuatro décadas" ("Forty-year old lady"): "The fact that it's nearly impossible to turn forty without someone singing the song to you, either at a karaoke bar or by heart, is reason enough to skip the entire decade and just turn fifty." With a chorus that includes an elaborate saxophone melody—Arjona adds the sax on songs about seduction—the song says:

Forty-year-old lady/Fiery footprints with every step you take

You don't have the same figure you did at fifteen/But time can't undo

That sensual touch/And that burning flame in your eyes.

Forty-year-old lady/Let me discover

What's behind those gray strands/And that abdominal fat

That aerobics won't get rid of

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that the material selected here is not an isolated phenomenon but instead part of the common ground that scholarly and militant feminists in Argentina share with media outlets specializing in gender and diversity. Social meanings are at work here, not only with regards to the value judgments on certain popular music but also in terms of the dual subalternity facing the women we worked with on this study, that is, both gender and class discrimination.

Lady, don't strip down the years of your life/Filling the years up with life is so much better (...)

Her figure beneath a revealing neckline/Her talent lies in knowing

So much more about the art of love.

Forty-year-old lady/Don't try to go back to thirty

At forty-something/You leave footprints wherever you go

And walk into any place like you own it (...)

Album: *Historias* (1994)

Referring to this particular song, the article in *Las 12* says: “This lady needs to know that starting today, if there’s something that’s going to define her in life, it’s all age-related”; “And the obvious: ‘You don’t have the same figure you did at fifteen’ (...) But Ricardo just has to remind her.”<sup>17</sup> However, besides being one of his biggest hits, this is one of the most important songs for Arjona’s followers—and has been for over two decades. Its popularity is owed to the way it defends the seductiveness and pleasure of a woman who’s not in the most sought-after age category for eroticism—youth—and whose body doesn’t fit the guidelines for hegemonic beauty. At his concerts, Arjona often chooses a “lady” from the audience, invites her on stage<sup>18</sup> and sings her the song in front of a packed stadium. Many of the women who attend the shows carry signs to get his attention, from the simplest “I’m forty!” to “The only good thing about turning forty is hearing you sing just for me” or “I’d sign on for forty or more just to have you look me in the eye.” Most of the women value Arjona’s emphasis on the

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<sup>17</sup> The article was penned by Liliana Viola, an Argentine writer and journalist who deals with gender-related themes and writes documentary scripts for television.

<sup>18</sup> Sandro, an Argentine singer very popular in 1970s Argentina, would also bring a woman on stage during his performances as part of the show. For more on this, see Alabarces (2011).

seductive power of a woman whose youth has passed; it does not always elicit discomfort, as the article suggests, by leaving “the lady at her weakest.” Quite the contrary, many of his fans interpret the song as a reworking of a moment in life that is publicly acknowledged as anything but sexy. The problem with all of these critiques of Arjona’s songs is that they establish a single parameter for what women should and should not like, homogenizing this collective along with the social meanings of his music.

At the same time, the immanent analysis of song lyrics is always risky, not just because it involves separating the words from the music, rhythm and the context of utterance, but also because it supposes the existence of a sort of literal sense and seems to establish causality within a phenomenon that is much more complex. In this regard, Frith says:

It is this argument that supports contemporary moralists’ claims that heavy metal lyrics make white adolescents suicidal and that rap lyrics make black adolescents violent. All these things may be true, but they are certainly not demonstrated by content analysis alone. There is, in fact, no empirical evidence that song lyrics determine or form listeners’ beliefs and values. (1998:164)

Similarly, there are no empirical studies that could establish a cause and effect between certain music and the reproduction of gender inequality and violence. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to attribute the replication of social inequalities to a single variable or even deduce that people will react in a certain way to a specific stimulus from the cultural industry. There are pioneering and highly valuable works that, besides



contributing to this study, have thoroughly explored the guiding principles, connecting them in different ways with women in order to explore their cultural experiences (see among others McRobbie 1984, 1991, 1998, 1999; Ang 1989; Radway 1991; Ehrenreich, Hess, Jacobs 1992; Hinerman 1992; Abu-Lughod 2005; Mizrahi 2014). However, there are countless studies on cultural industries and few analyses of audiences, partially because cultural industries are a more feasible subject<sup>19</sup>.

A meme of Gene Wilder in the original version of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (which reads “So you like Ricardo Arjona/Tell me what not having a brain feels like”) that has circulated widely on social media emphasizes a point of particular interest here: the intellectual capacity—or lack thereof—of those who listen to this music.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the seemingly innocuous humor, what is of interest here is the widespread belief that enables the joke: Arjona’s followers are less intelligent and have a lower capacity for critical thinking, as evidenced in their lack of good taste in music. The disdain for the artist’s music is thus transferred onto his followers. According to Frith (2001), this movement is possible because the intensity of the connection between personal tastes and self-definition is stronger in popular music than in any other cultural form (except, perhaps, in the case of sports, according to the author).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Radway explains that “We simply do not know what practical effects the repetitive reading of romances has on the way women behave after they have closed their books and returned to their normal, ordinary round of daily activities” (1991:217). One of the reasons for the lack of studies on the meanings that subjects given the objects they choose has to do, as Jensen notes, with the fact that “analyzing texts and offering hypotheses about power are easier than spending time interviewing popular culture fans” (2010: 99) thus achieving a more profound knowledge of the texts than of the experiences associated with them. These authors would like to encourage scholars to relinquish the comfort that such desktop studies provide.

<sup>20</sup>Something similar occurs with cumbia. For a more extensive look at the “erudite” appropriations of cumbia, see Alabarces and Silba (2014).

<sup>21</sup> Frith makes this reflection upon receiving a wave of letters in response to a feature story criticizing Phil Collins. In these letters, his fans, “not from teenyboppers or gauche adolescents, but from young



In this regard, it is important to note that the criteria on what constitutes “good music” and “bad music” depend not only on the context of utterance of such value judgments but also, more broadly, on the way value is constructed in music, that is, the assumption that only some music is legitimate. Merely clarifying that a certain music is good or bad for a certain social group and then explaining how that bias seeps into the group’s own evaluation parameters does not suffice. Beyond such parameters, there are social consensuses according to which certain music is not questioned while other music is regularly criticized. According to Fischerman (2004), there is an honor code for contemporary music where the top spot is reserved for classical music. This paradigm of what is understood as “good music” is the product, as Trotta (2011) has noted, of a social construction that goes far beyond the intrinsic aspects of this music. “Good music” has historically been a symbol of distinction among the nobility and the leaders of the colonized countries of Latin America, one reserved for elites, that is, “something made and appreciated by few” (ibid: 102). Interpreting classical music as “good” thus means an education that:

...is control-oriented [...] towards a type of quiet musical listening, conscious and stripped of corporeality, to compose the necessary framework of civility that stands in opposition to the profane and barbarian cultural practices of the “savages” [...] the notion of rationalizing musical practice is a correlate to the

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professionals (...) all based on the assumption that in describing Collins as ugly, Genesis as dull, I was deriding their way of life, undermining their identity” (2007:267-68).

civilizing process of controlling customs and publicizing what constitutes embarrassing or shameful acts in order to draw up a behavioral profile on what is both correct and socially undesirable. (Trotta 2011:103)

Although Ricardo Arjona's music is not compared with classical music when it is defined as bad, the classical music parameters—exclusiveness, quiet, control, civility, exclusion of the body—penetrates the conceptions of the popular singer's music. The musical production of the Guatemalan crooner embodies a model different from the one Trotta notes as legitimate. Against the idea of a musical product for the elite, "appreciated by few," an important feature of Arjona's music is its mass appeal. His chart-topping albums, the crowds at his concerts, the corporal performances of his followers and the replaying of his songs on social networks are all indicative of a mass phenomenon that challenges the idea of consolidated prestige surrounding the idea of exclusiveness. Arjona's mass appeal is one reason for criticizing his music because, as Frith notes (2001), a music's quality is often associated with its possibility to subvert commercial logic. This does not apply to music stars, as no one would dare argue that the music of the Beatles or the Rolling Stones is bad simply because of their mass appeal, but for other types of musical products that have not been acclaimed by music critics, journalists or scholars, mass appeal is an undesirable aggregate.

Women here are depicted as accomplices to their own domination in what is constructed as a double victimization: they aren't aware of the mistreatment because the cultural industries present them with a false consciousness (Hall 1984) based on their own tastes and on products they find pleasurable, much to the chagrin of researchers. In this way, the dual subalternity that Arjona's fans are subjected to—gender-wise, as

woman, and class-wise, as they don't belong to a powerful socioeconomic group, the intellectual world or feminist militants—is exacerbated by the underestimation of their capacity for critical thinking. According to this mindset, these women are blind to the sexist and bogus discourses of the cultural industries. As noted at the beginning of the article, there is a long tradition of underestimating women's capacities as audiences and stigmatizing the products they consume. As Hall (1984) has noted, a great number of workers were among the people who began to consume products of the cultural industry en masse during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Arguing that these people are manipulated or under the effects of a “false consciousness” is akin to treating them as “cultural dopes”, according to the author:

That judgment may make us feel right, decent and self-satisfied about our denunciations of the agents of mass manipulation and deception - the capitalist cultural industries: but I don't know that it is a view which can survive for long as an adequate account of cultural relationships; and even less as a socialist perspective on the culture and nature of the working class. Ultimately, the notion of the people as a purely *passive*, outline force is a deeply unsocialist perspective. (Hall 1984:446, italics in the original)

The same could be said of a decidedly post-feminist political and epistemological position that underestimates women's capacity for action. Such reflections ignore and/or underestimate experiences constructed around texts of the cultural industries mainly because they refuse to acknowledge them as valid objects of study (Radway 1991; McRobbie, 1998, 1999; Wise, 2006). Cultural analysis should not limit its findings to the dichotomy submission/resistance to the power of industries; audiences as Jensen

notes, “are not lost souls who need to be redeemed...nor are they children who need to be protected” (2010:101).

When analyzing the meanings that subjects attribute to mass culture products, it is critical to include those products that draw in millions of people around the world, even when these differ from our personal tastes or political agenda. As social scientists, it is equally fundamental for us to move beyond what we assume we are going to find in our research or fieldwork.

### **3) Conclusion**

In scholarly circles of Argentina, the study of women’s connections to Arjona’s songs was viewed as a “curious” choice of an “exotic” subject. Papers, conference and round table discussions on such music (romantic music/ballads sung by popular singers like Sandro in Argentina and Julio Iglesias in Spain, along with Latin artists like Luis Miguel, Chayanne, Cristian Castro and even Shakira) are extremely rare in Argentina and indeed, across Latin America. Moving out of the region, there appears to be widespread disdain for many of the music artists and genres people across the world adore, although these products are perfectly valid for scholars examining the connection between music and society. Although interest among Argentine scholars in such music is still limited, some intellectuals have worked to consolidate broad musical genres as valid objects of study.<sup>22</sup> Trotta (2011) remarks that intellectuals are able to turn a deaf ear to music that does not meet their assessment criteria. As a result, many popular artists are left out of encyclopedias, anthologies and textbooks, erasing them from

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<sup>22</sup>This can be attributed to growing interest in these themes, combined with increased funding from different institutions of science and technology for this type of unconventional research over the past decade in Argentina.

history and stripping them of their legitimacy. As López Cano argues, part of this can be explained by the way that a research object in academia grants legitimacy: “We deal almost exclusively with the study of music that is considered of the best aesthetic quality or evident historical importance, in order to legitimize ourselves and our work”(2011:227).<sup>23</sup>This is blaringly evident on the map of music studies. Frith claims that when he started his career in teaching, the problem was not only that students from the music departments at British universities studied music that the masses didn’t listen to but that no one found this surprising: “For them, it was obvious that Bartok’s music was worthy of academic interest and the Beastie Boys were not” (2014:20).

However, these objects have a lot to say about the ways in which music mediates the configuration of contemporary subjectivities. In the study of the experiences of women who listen to Arjona, we were able to see how they forge a place for themselves in a society that continues to insist on their role as caregiver and housewife, underestimating their opinions and limiting their scope of action. Similarly, we saw how women’s encounter with mass culture forged unexpected path for feminine autonomy. These are women who do not take to the streets to demand recognition of their rights, join political parties or identify as feminists and studying them represents, to some extent, an examination of every woman whose daily life also reveals the profound effects of gender inequality. Similarly, it shows how such women expand their scope of action with what they have on hand, like the songs they choose as the background music for their day-to-day lives.

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<sup>23</sup> For more on the scientific method and the social hierarchy of research objects, see Bourdieu (2015).

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