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Michael Boccia

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VERSIONS (CON-, IN-, AND PER-) IN MANUEL  
PUIG'S AND HECTOR BABENCO'S *KISS OF THE  
SPIDER WOMAN*, NOVEL AND FILM<sup>1</sup>



Michael Boccia

THE PATH FROM FILM TO NOVEL to film is seldom traveled, yet *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has completed this journey beautifully. Manuel Puig, himself a confessed film addict (Schwartz 153), constructed his novel around the retelling of several old movies; and, in turn, Hector Babenco turned the twice-told tales into a thrice-told film. This conversion from screen to page to screen focuses on the relation between a revolutionary and a homosexual, and the plots of both the novel and film climax with the inversions in their relationship. These two individuals, trapped in the necropolis of an Argentine prison, finally invert positions; the apathetic homosexual acts politically by contacting the revolutionaries, and the leftist revolutionary becomes homosexual when he shares the kiss of the spider woman. Throughout the narrative, and perhaps unknowingly at times, both men seek the same human values, freedom and dignity, and finally learn to view life from a broader perspective. The inversion of their roles reflects a central theme of the

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<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Kenneth Burke for this title, which I borrowed from his "Versions, Con-, Per-, and In-: Thoughts on Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood*."

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novel and film and raises the issue of the very nature of perversion. The dreams and actions of the protagonists, when compared to their manipulative and cruel captors, compel us to ask who are the real perverts: the homosexuals, Molina and Valentin, or their sadistic captors. Puig clearly sees the military as the perverters of human dignity and freedom, and Babenco translates this into a central theme of his film.

### Con-version

Rarely has a narrative been converted from film to novel to film and perhaps just as rarely translated so well. Of course the novel's narrative style, consisting in great part of dialogue, lends itself well to this transmutation. And if it seems that the novel lacks some of the narrative details normally found in novels, we should not be surprised, because Puig started his writing career as a script-writer and assistant director (Schwartz 157). Puig is more than a little like Molina in his retelling of old films. Sounding much like his own literary creation, Puig reports: "What excited me in film was to copy, not to create" ("Growing" 50). In addition to the similarities in form that translated well into film, numerous themes also made the transition smoothly. Although many themes of the novel survived in the film, the search for dignity and freedom dominates the transmutation from films to novel to film. In neither the conversion from films to novel nor from novel to film does the source translate literally; instead the narrative is recast to highlight significant themes.

Because Molina embroiders the films when he tells them, modifying them to suit his own fantasies, we are unable to know exactly which films he is retelling. There is disagreement among scholars as to the exact number and titles of the films retold in the novel. Schwartz identifies only four films: *The Curse of the Cat People*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, *Paris Underground*, and *Holiday in Mexico* (57). More recently Merrim claims that there are

six films narrated in *El beso*, three of which are based on real films, three of which are composites of several films: (in order of their appearance in the novel) "Cat People," dir. Jacques Tourneur (1942); the invented Nazi propaganda film called "Destino"; "The Enchanted Cottage," dir. John Cromwell (1946); what we call the "Adventure" film; "I Walked with a Zombie," dir. Jacques Tourneur (1943); what we call the "Mexican" film. ("Through the Film Darkly" 311)

Although I have recently seen *Holiday in Mexico* (and it generally follows Molina's version, thereby giving Schwartz more credence),

I do not know which of these lists is more accurate.<sup>2</sup> But that is a moot point. The narrated films are meant to take on their own lives, to become entities unto themselves. They are not literal retellings but recreations to suit Puig's and Molina's purposes.

The nature and meaning of the original films are irrelevant because the embellished retellings represent the world according to Molina and are more indicative of his world view than any cinematic tradition. Puig's use of dreams, films, and stories as symbols of deeper psychological aspects of a character is well documented throughout his novels, as in *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* and *The Buenos Aires Affair*.<sup>3</sup> Molina carries these films and the world they dimly reflect inside him. He is just like the Panther Woman, who is "all wrapped up in herself, lost in that world that she carries inside her" (Puig, *Kiss* 4). The dream world of the films is Molina's creation, but it reflects both the "real" world and his desires.

This transmutation is further complicated when the movie reduces the borrowed films to one (*Destino*) placed between an Introduction and Conclusion that combine elements from *Catpeople* with elements from the spider woman dream/fantasy/film. Many readers of the novel were initially disappointed with the reduction of the films retold in the movie, hoping to see original black and white films intercut amid the contemporary story. This would have made the cinematic sources clear but would have defeated Puig's and Babenco's purposes. Because Molina recreates new films in his mind's eye, there could be no way to show his sources, the old films. His versions do not match the old films but are conglomerates of various films meant to establish certain themes and are not literally faithful to the originals. Molina embellishes each film to reveal its thematic and psychological significance. As Merrim points out, "the movies-stories touch off discussions of concerns to the characters, for the emotions and circumstances from their present . . . provide the scaffolding of the films" ("Through the Film Darkly" 302). The films Molina relates are his own inventions.

The three films within the film reveal the sociopolitical situation of the protagonists as well as the growth of their relationship. In his retelling of *Catpeople* Molina reveals his feelings about his roles of spy and homosexual. His modifications in the story focus on the destruction of the individual, who is the object of desire. Furthermore, Molina's story centers on the devouring of the Pan-

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<sup>2</sup>For the sake of expediency I will refer to the "Nazi propaganda film" as *Destino* and to the "Mexican film" as *Holiday*.

<sup>3</sup>See particularly Merrim, "For a New (Psychological) Novel in the Works of Manuel Puig."

ther Woman's beloved when she is in her transformed and uncontrollable state. Molina's action in prison parallels his narrative, where he is the Panther Woman waiting to destroy and devour his/her lover. While he is a spy for the warden, Molina is betraying and destroying Valentin, whom he is beginning to love. Trust and love are two elements from *Catpeople* that survive the move from novel to film. Ultimately, trust and love are closely connected to the freedom and dignity of the individual. Molina and Valentin both learn about freedom and dignity because they are able to trust and love one another.

A much more obvious parallel appears in the retelling of *Destino*, in which many elements of the cellmates' lives are reflected. The compulsion under which the woman in the film operates is obviously the rationale Molina uses to justify his own actions. She acts for the good of the starving victims of the blackmarket racketeers, and Molina acts (or so he thinks) for the good of his mother. Molina casts himself in the female role, and, as Leni does, he ultimately turns into a double spy with a double betrayal involving self-sacrifice. Just as Leni finally sees that her allegiance belongs with the people of her homeland and not with the fascists, so also does Molina realize that his allegiance should be to Valentin (and to the left, which he represents) and not with the right-wing military forces. Even before Molina aligns himself with Valentin's political position, the homosexual realizes that his acceptance of the Nazis in the film is unsavory. That is why he tells Valentin, "But just try and remember that when it came to the love scenes the film was divine, an absolute dream. The political stuff, well it was probably foisted onto the director by the government, or maybe you don't know how these things work?" (89). In his defense of *Destino* Molina describes his own situation. The retelling and modifications of the film make him the creator of the film in the same manner as the director was the creator of the original film. He also has politics foisted onto him by the authorities, and he also would rather focus on love than politics. He does not want to spy on Valentin but is compelled to by the repressive political and social system.

The last element that translated so well from novel to film was the fantasy/dream sequence (presented in the same cinematic format as Molina's inventions) in the last section of both works. Instead of Molina, this dream-film has Valentin conjuring a fantasy, and his *Kiss of the Spider Woman* serves the same purpose as did Molina's recreations, providing an escape from the hell of the prison. And more important, it gives Valentin the only kind of freedom and dignity he can achieve while being tortured in that bleak nightmarish underworld. Both the novel and the film center on the

themes expressed in Molina's recreations, which draw our attention to two main concerns: freedom and dignity.

Throughout the retelling of the four to six films, we are made aware of certain themes and of the growing relation between the two men. Thus the retold films reflect and emphasize the concerns of the two men. It is generally agreed that Molina's variations "contain extratextual explanations that make us aware of two simultaneous series, the story and the story teller" (Wyers-Weber 168) and that Molina "so significantly rewrites the movies he tells as to become their author" (Merrim, "Through the Film Darkly" 303). In effect, when Molina and Valentin embellish the films, apparently merely entertaining each other, they are revealing their human desires and needs. More important, they are able to free themselves from the confines of their hellish prison life. Although they may not have physical freedom, they do have the freedom to think and to dream. In the same manner that film is an escape from the humdrum existence of daily life, the retelling of the films is an escape for the two prisoners. The films are an escape; the retellings are an escape; and, ultimately, death is an escape. Freedom with dignity is only available to the protagonists in the world of dream-films or death.

Throughout the novel and the film both men struggle to achieve freedom with dignity. Until he takes political action, Molina is caught in the apathetic quagmire of inaction, totally surrendering himself to his situation. Not only does the homosexual have no freedom, other than his imagination's ability to transform the prison cell into the dream world of film, but he has little human dignity as well. In describing Leni, one of his many alter egos, Molina reveals how he feels trapped in a world where surrender is the only possible action. He tells Valentin that he is frightened by the reflected fear in her face: "You can't believe it, how frightened she looks, but at the same time like she's not doing a thing to defend herself, but just surrendering to whatever has to happen" (51). To some extent this is a rationalization for Molina's betrayal of his cellmate, but his words reveal how he genuinely feels. He has surrendered to the forces in society that have oppressed him his entire life. And it is Valentin's response to this feeling that forms the crux of the relationship between the two men. Valentin realizes that survival with no dignity or freedom is an empty existence. To be human, to be a "man" to use Molina's terms, requires the individual to stand up for human rights. As Valentin says, "Not taking crap is one thing, but not the most important. What really makes a man is a lot more, it has to do with not humiliating someone else with an order, or a tip. Even more, it's . . . not letting the person next

to you feel 'degraded, feel bad'' (63). Valentin teaches Molina to care for all human rights. Dignity includes not humiliating others as well as defending yourself. Molina's surrender permits the fascists to control him. In the end he is able to regain his freedom and dignity by acting out of moral responsibility rather than out of fear of the police, although his actions inadvertently lead to the only escape available in his world: death.

### In-version

Two central inversions dominate the film, novel, and even the films within the novel, all of which stress the theme of freedom with dignity. The first inversion is the plot twist in which Molina appears to be Valentin's friend, and then a spy and Valentin's enemy, and then a double spy and Valentin's friend once again. The secondary inversion, which is dependent upon yet the cause of the first, is the political and sexual role transformations in which the apathetic homosexual becomes radicalized and the heterosexual radical becomes homosexual. Both inversions occur because the individuals quest for freedom with dignity, which they achieve after they overcome their own prejudices. They learn from each other; the radical becomes homosexual and the homosexual becomes radical because both share the desire for everyone to have human dignity and freedom.

The plot inversion is perhaps the most obvious, and little needs to be said about it. Suffice it to say that the spy and double spy plots parallel the actions and emotions of Molina and are evident in his retelling of the films in general and of *Destino* in particular. *Destino* has a female double spy, and Molina (in his female persona) turns out to be a double spy. First he appears to be the lackey of the warden, the prison, and the social system and is thereby stripped of freedom and dignity. He seeks freedom but at the expense of betraying a fellow human being, and in the process he loses all self-respect and human dignity. As the story progresses, it becomes apparent that he is a double agent, seeking food and comfort for Valentin, whom he is supposed to betray. To achieve freedom with dignity he must combat the repressive authorities and deliver Valentin's message to the revolutionaries.

This plot inversion depends upon the political and sexual inversions of the protagonists. Each learns to accept the other and in so doing grows. Poor Molina makes the first consciously political act in his life; and Valentin, whose torture in prison is perhaps even worse than Molina's death, accepts his own homosexual aspect.

One of Molina's chief motivations for political action was his desire to control his own life. Without the social and cultural freedom to choose his own lifestyle, Molina saw himself as worthless. His homosexuality was the cause of his social oppression and his imprisonment. Trapped in the necropolis of prison, Molina chooses a path to freedom, but his betrayal of Valentin strips him of what little dignity he retained. Feeling remorse for spying on his cellmate, Molina rationalizes his espionage by drawing parallels between himself and zombies in *I Walked with a Zombie*. Like himself under the cruel thumb of the prison officials, the zombies "can't do anything but obey the order" (211) because they "no longer possess any will of their own" (167). His references to subjection of the will and spirit demonstrate his discomfort concerning his Faustian compact with the oppressive social and political system. He even casts himself in the role of prostitute in *Holiday in Mexico* and sadly justifies the act because he has "become a prostitute only to feed" his now-beloved friend (256). Valentin's acceptance of Molina as a man, a fellow human being, and a homosexual permits Molina to awaken politically. Valentin tells Molina, "—And promise me something else . . . that you're going to make them respect you, that you're not going to allow anyone to treat you badly or exploit you. Because no one has the right to exploit anyone" (261). This response helps Molina realize that all forms of oppression are related. From that point Molina becomes politically active because he knows that political oppression does not permit freedom with dignity. The only way for his repressive sadistic society to recognize basic human rights, sexual and political, is through political action.

Ironically, the politically aware radical is prejudiced by the cultural taboo against homosexuality, a view held strongly by their right-wing oppressors. Valentin learns that the traditional oppressive male role is part of his psychosexual attitudes, and he overcomes this bias through an act of love. Puig also opposes this cultural, autocratic masculine image and has stated, "I myself have always rejected the role of the authoritarian male" (Christ 62). The acceptance of homosexuality is also driven home by the psychological and sociological arguments provided in the extensive footnotes. Freud, Adler, and a host of others argue that homosexuals and women are oppressed by authoritarian males and that social and sexual liberation are joined to combat the sexist oppression. Molina consistently has adopted the female role in the cell as well as in the films, as when he plays nurse to Valentin much like the wife in *I Walked with a Zombie*. Through this "Molina subtly inserts himself into the love triangle with the role of both caretaker and victor, auguring the sexual 'liberation' of Valentin, which will allow him



to become Molina's lover" (Merrim, "Through the Film Darkly" 307). Through his unselfish acts, acts of giving and nurturing traditionally associated with women, Molina liberates Valentin from prejudice against homosexuality.

There is another equally intriguing aspect of Molina that Valentin learns: the ability to dream. Valentin's movement into the *dream/fantasy world in the final segment of the novel* is his escape from the hellish realities of his prison life and torture. Unable to act, he now inverts his role and becomes the movie watcher/dreamer that Molina had been. The only freedom he retains is the freedom to dream.

The kiss of the spider woman is the kiss of freedom because it frees Valentin from his prejudice and Molina from his apathy, but the kiss of the spider woman is also the kiss of death. For Molina, the kiss he receives from Valentin leads to political activity and eventually to his ironic murder at the hands of the revolutionaries he is trying to aid. Both men are the spider woman. Initially one may be tempted to think of Molina as the spider woman, trapping Valentin in a web of politics and kindness so that Molina may regain freedom. But by the end of the work Valentin has ensnared Molina in a political web, which radicalizes the homosexual and causes him to act politically to achieve the freedom he desires and the dignity that is equally important.

### Per-version

Perversion is perhaps the subtlest theme in the novel and the film. Who are the real perverts in the world of decay and death? No doubt, Argentine culture would view homosexuality as a perversion, but we can see from Puig's statements and the implications of the footnotes that political and social oppression is the real perversion of humanity. Sadism, as shown by the torture, murder, and betrayal by the fascists, is far more horrendous than the lovemaking of Valentin and Molina.

The revolutionary and the homosexual have in common the role of oppressed outcasts because the politics of oppression crush both the leftist and the homosexual. The politics in the cell is a microcosm of the politics in Argentina and perhaps of the rest of the world. In this nightmare world the sadistic right-wing military are perverts who live in a world where oppression is systematized<sup>4</sup> and humanistic ideals a death certificate. But, ironically, humanistic

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<sup>4</sup>For an excellent discussion of this, see Borinsky, Chapter Two.

ideals are Valentin's salvation because they free his mind and his spirit. His willingness to die under torture rather than reveal his companions gives him a dignity and courage that his sadistic captors could never attain. Ironically foreshadowing his own torture, Valentin explained to Molina that freedom is independent of physical pleasure or pain. He tells Molina that sensual gratification is not as important as his intellectual freedom and human responsibility:

The great pleasure's something else, it's knowing I've put myself in the service of what's truly noble, I mean . . . well . . . a certain ideology . . .

. . . Marxism, if you want me to spell it out in only one word. And I can get pleasure anywhere, right here in this cell, and even in torture. And that's my real strength. (28)

The truth of his statement is attested to by his dream/fantasy at the end of the film and novel, in which he escapes to a world of color and beauty beyond the black world of death where he is imprisoned.

By contrast to the image of the right-wing tormentors, the homosexual Molina appears in a favorable light. Even before Valentin submitted to his advances, Molina felt compassion for his cellmate and was feasting and nursing Valentin, when supposedly betraying him. After all, *Kiss* is a love story. Molina's death and his refusal to reveal the cadre are both political acts and acts of love. We are invited to judge morally between a loving homosexual and sadistic tormentors. I think Puig's and Babenco's choice is clear.

Molina's realization that self-love and love of humanity are closely linked comes from his interactions with Valentin. It was Valentin who told him, "this business of being a man, it doesn't give any special rights to anyone" (244). This attitude, combined with Molina's compassion, permits him to have both the freedom and dignity that he deserves even if they result in his death.

In the final analysis the cruel military regime is the real source of perversion in society, and the likes of poor Molina are unlikely to restrict freedom or to destroy human dignity and the value of life. Is Puig asserting that love cannot survive in the world he has depicted? No. He is telling us rather that love is the only way to conquer the oppression of that society and for people to achieve freedom and dignity.

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