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Who is the Spider Woman?

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Much has been said about the various types of discourse in the Argentinian Manuel Puig's novel, *El beso de la mujer araña*. In particular, critics have commented on how Puig, influenced by his love of 1940s Hollywood movies, introduces them through one of his main characters, Molina, and how they become recreated as they are retold, first by him, then by his friend Valentín, who joins in with comments and interpretations.¹ When the book was made into a movie, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, by the Argentinian director Hector Babenco, and opened in the U.S. in the summer of 1985, the critical acclaim was almost universal. William Hurt eventually won the Academy Award for best actor, and the Academy was praised for recognizing a film on the subject of homosexuality. Manuel Puig himself was categorical: "I hated the film," he said in a *Boston Globe* interview. Ironically, and apparently in a manner not to his taste, the work had come full circle: 1940s film discourse (the movies Puig saw growing up in Argentina), written discourse (the novel Puig wrote), 1980s film discourse (the movie Babenco made). But something had happened on the way: just as Molina had changed and edited the 1940s movies he had seen, so did Babenco change and edit Puig's 1976 text. Vincent Canby and others have discussed the trend to internationalization in movies. Internationalization really means homogenization: that is, more and more, movie directors are bringing together a cast of different nationalities to make a film in English set nowhere in particular about a topic that is "universal," supposedly with which we can all easily identify. When the American audience first viewed *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, what they saw was a film in English with a North American, a Puerto Rican, and a Brazilian playing the main characters, and street signs in Portuguese (the movie was made in Brazil). What they could not see were the streets of Buenos Aires where the novel is set or, given the political situation in Argentina in the early 1980s, a simulation of such a scene. What the audience is encouraged to believe is that, first, all Latin Americans (all people?) are alike and, second, that all Latin American countries are the same, in fact interchangeable.

Puig has been concerned from the beginning with the colonization of Spanish culture by North American popular culture. In his earlier novel, *La traición de Rita Hayworth* (1968: in English, *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*), he shows how *Sangre y arena* (*Blood and Sand*), an American movie based on a Spanish novel, is a blatant example of such

colonization. It is appropriate and necessary to ask, then, what is the result this time when a work has been uprooted from its specific social and cultural context to be translated into film? What kind of “filmic discourse” do we end up with? It is my contention that the resulting product is what I’ll call “generic discourse”—that is, in the effort to be “universal,” the director has produced a soft, diluted, and distorted version of the original text.

Puig has important and provocative things to say in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* about Argentinian sexual politics, gender, and power. He wrote the novel after being exiled from his country because he had been critical of the existing regime in an earlier book, *The Buenos Aires Affair* (1973). From his perspective as a political and cultural exile he is very much concerned with the particular situation of Argentina in the late 1970s and early 1980s under a repressive military dictatorship. His view of Argentinian society is subtle, detailed, and paradoxical and he comes up with no easy answers.

Our natural, “liberal” tendencies are to reach out to others, to stress sameness rather than difference. But it is only by respecting and appreciating difference that we can come to a true understanding of other cultures and peoples. In this article, then, I will show how, in stressing the universal and neglecting the particular, the film oversimplifies and distorts its subject to such a degree that the true nature of the spider woman is inevitably lost. Further, the “generic discourse” of the movie removes us from reality—Argentinian reality—and from Puig’s notion of how one might deal with it: the film offers an easy escapist resolution, whereas the novel insists that the struggle is not over.

The image of the spider woman herself pervades the novel. She appears in different versions, as cat woman and zombie woman. She is an enigmatic, archetypal version of the female. Puig is highly concerned with her presence in popular culture and in the Argentinian psyche (the 1940s Hollywood movies that invaded the Argentinian screen in Buenos Aires in the period were accompanied by a slump in Argentinian movie making). He is also concerned with the impact this image of popular culture has had on *machismo* and its counterpart, *marianismo*, that is, on Argentinian stereotypes of male and female.

It would be all too easy to assert that the movie *Kiss of the Spider Woman* introduces a universal myth, that of two very disparate men in isolation (a prison cell) who, by the end of their time together, rather like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, take on each other’s characteristics, even change places. In fact, one movie reviewer, Michael Boccia, interprets it that way and argues that it is a very successful adaptation of the novel. In a 1986 article he asserts that Molina, the homosexual window-dresser, turns revolutionary by the

end of the movie, and that Valentín, the Marxist, becomes a homosexual (417, 422). Thus, they invert positions. He further argues that when Babenco, the director, chose to leave five of the six story-movies out of his movie there was no great loss, since Molina's versions are his own recreations, not literal retellings. In fact, this oversimplified interpretation, the "inverted positions theory," is dependent on the notion that the omitted story-movies do not matter. Another reviewer, Mauricio Viano, frankly states that the film director chose to focus on the political content of the novel and to omit other more ambiguous, and perhaps unsettling, material on sex and gender (45).² However, the end result is that the audience learns far less about gender stereotyping in Argentina and less also about the two main characters. This distorts Puig's view of the spider woman and what she represents.

Molina, a native of Buenos Aires, grew up like Puig on a surfeit of foreign movies that invaded the Argentinian screen in the years after World War II, that is, during the most impressionable years of his childhood (this also happened to a previous character of Puig's, Toto, in *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*). Needless to say, these movies were mostly romantic Hollywood movies; four out of the six movies that Molina relates are North American. José Miguel Oviedo has meticulously tracked them down in his article "La doble exposición de Manuel Puig." One of them, *I Walked with a Zombie*, was made in 1935; the others, *Cat People* and *The Enchanted Cottage*, were made in the 1940s. A fourth movie is Puig's concoction, based on elements from different Hollywood movies of the period. Of the remaining two movie-stories that Molina tells, one is a made-up product of German expressionism and the other is a Mexican invention, based on Mexican movies of the same period.

The only movie that Babenco retains is the German one: in Spanish entitled *Destino*, in English *Her Real Glory*. In choosing to omit the others, he is first and foremost omitting the Hollywood invasion of Argentina and its significance. Thus, the theme of the colonization of Argentinian culture by Hollywood is lost. We are far removed from the Cine Belgrano, mentioned by Molina, in Buenos Aires, where the audience sat entranced by the glamor and pathos of those particular images.

Puig's novel opens with Molina relating the movie-story of *Cat People* to Valentín. As many critics have pointed out, it is not merely the movie itself that is important, but the way in which the characters interpret, embellish, and respond to it. Puig is seeking here to do two things: to establish the psychological terrain between the two men and to expose the cultural stereotypes that inform that terrain. This is done deftly through the tendency of the men to identify with particular

characters in the movie. In this way Puig sets up a male-female polarity which he sees, not only as prevalent in his own culture, but as reinforced by Hollywood stereotypes. This polarity is characterized by *machismo* on the one hand and *marianismo* on the other.

Briefly, the story is about cat woman who is under a curse which makes her prone to turning into a panther and savaging any man who tries to kiss her. She is beautiful and noble but a victim of the curse she is under. Her conventional fiancé persuades her to see a psychiatrist with the notion of “curing” her. This psychiatrist is a Don Juan with whom Valentín identifies: his “cure” will involve the seduction of cat woman in order to break the curse, it is implied. Valentín, the Marxist revolutionary, assumes control in this scenario: like the movie character, he will interpret and dominate. In fact he acts just like a traditional Freudian psychoanalyst when he “interprets” the movie with his “rational” system: the cat woman is actually frigid and everyone knows what the cure for that is; Don Juan will take care of her! This is a typical “macho” reaction. The chief characteristics of *machismo*, or the cult of virility, are exaggerated aggressiveness, arrogance, and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships.

Valentín, then, is a macho Marxist of the old school that has always put the class struggle before questions of sexual politics. He has never really seen women as an underclass, but rather is concerned with the proletariat or economically deprived as Marx defined them. Psychologically he has suppressed his female side because women are soft, sensitive, and self-indulgent (they eat avocados, for heaven’s sake!) and therefore weak. Love relationships with women must come second to the revolution because, as a dangerous distraction, they pose a threat to it. Here Puig is taking to task old-style Latin American Marxism, which he sees as being reinforced by macho popular culture stereotypes and bolstered by popularized Freudian analysis.

Molina, the homosexual queen, identifies with cat woman. He identifies with her beauty, purity, and altruism and with her ultimate strangely powerful martyrdom. Of course Molina is emotional, intuitive, and “female” in orientation in contrast to Valentín, who is rational, logical, and “male.” Puig is interested in cat woman as a female archetype. As such she reinforces the Latin American stereotype of *marianismo*. *Marianismo*, according to the sociologist Evelyn Stevens in a seminal essay, “Marianismo, the Other Face of Machismo,” is the cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semidivine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men (91). Molina clearly thinks his movie goddesses are literally “divine.” *Marianismo*, says Stevens (who has lived half of her life in Latin America), is very prevalent and symbiotic with *machismo*. North American feminists tend to dismiss this image of woman as passive

and therefore inferior: their Latin American counterparts, on the contrary, see it as a source of power and strength (an example would be Allende's recent portrait of the matriarch, Clara, in *La casa de los espíritus*).³ The spiritual strength of this stereotypical image of woman often involves self-abnegation or a great capacity for humility and sacrifice, that is, a martyr syndrome. The two men view this "martyr syndrome" quite differently. Molina exhibits female chauvinism when he asserts that women are morally superior: if men were like women, he insists, there would be no torturers ("si todos fueran como mujeres no habría torturadores" [35]). Valentín, on the other hand, sees martyrdom as related directly to the exploitation of the weak by the strong: he describes a cycle of exploitation and guilt when he imagines the movie hero's mother's situation:

Tiene sirvientes, explota a gente que no tiene más remedio que servirla, por unas monedas. Y claro fue muy feliz con su marido, que la explotó a su vez a ella, le hizo hacer todo lo que él quiso, que estuviera encerrada en su casa como una esclava, para esperarlo. (22)

To return to cat woman: she exhibits the purity and strength of *marianismo* while, at the same time, being a victim and, as a victim, she is violent and dangerous: at the end of the movie she tears the psychiatrist apart before dying herself, a martyr's death. In Molina too we see a combination of altruistic and potentially violent elements (we are to learn that he has the power to destroy Valentín).

Valentín sees Molina as "female" and therefore brainwashed by a patriarchal system. This is only true *to some extent*, for the truth is actually much more complicated. Molina does say he is a woman who needs a real man and that there is no kick to a relationship unless the woman is a little bit afraid of her man. Valentín tells Molina that he should never let himself be abused by anyone and that a "real man" would never let the person next to him feel exploited. However, ironically, it is Molina who actually demonstrates this lesson to Valentín when he takes care of him after he has eaten contaminated food and cleans him up after diarrhea. This nurturing, loving man does not wish his friend to feel reduced and degraded, and does what is in his power to prevent it.

It is not enough simply to assert that Molina is a victim of the patriarchy and all he gets from his precious movies is reinforcement of this tendency. North American critics who have viewed the movie have interpreted it in this one-dimensional way because, presumably, they have not been a party to all the movie-stories or to the Argentinian

stereotypes they influence. For example, Linda Dittmar sees Molina as entirely “narrated by patriarchal discourse” and therefore entrapped in a patriarchal web (84). But Molina, like many other female chauvinists, is a subversive. Roberto Echevarren is much closer to the truth when he notes in his article on Puig’s novel that Molina perverts the patriarchal propaganda of the movies he relates (68). First of all, he uses the movie-stories as a way of survival: he creates that crucial alternative world that allows the prisoners to dissociate from their horrible conditions.⁴ Secondly, and even more importantly, he changes the movie-stories in the retelling and draws upon them for his own ends. Ultimately he derives strength from a series of powerful archetypal women who, although victimized, rise above the victimization, are even capable of destroying the existing oppressive structure. This can be seen in a second movie-story that is omitted from Babenco’s film: the story of zombie woman (based on *I Walked with a Zombie*, 1935). Oviedo comments that Puig’s text does not talk about the movie, but about itself and calls this process “connotative semiotics” (615).⁵ In other words, through this discourse we learn more about Molina and how he views his situation in the prison of Villa Devoto. Zombie woman, along with all the black plantation workers on the island, is a victim of her situation. They have all been deprived of their free will and are forced to fulfill the wishes of the evil mayordomo. They are brainwashed into passivity like the citizens of a totalitarian state. This is Molina’s problem too; he is the victim of a structure that seeks to break his will and use him for its own ends, even to betray and kill the person he loves, Valentín. However, at the end of the movie-story, zombie woman, who has been forced to commit acts of evil, becomes the instrument of justice and reparation when she immolates herself in the old house. The old structure collapses and the islanders are freed, and the young woman/heroine who came to the island as zombie woman’s husband’s second wife escapes into a new future. With this story Molina anticipates the part he is to play in resisting the pressures of the warden to betray Valentín and in taking a stand against the oppressive state. In this scenario Valentín may become free, in part because of his friend’s sacrifice.

Cat woman and zombie woman both wreak revenge on their oppressors. Enslaved victims are not necessarily forever passive. On the psychological level, these creatures also suggest the conflict within the male psyche between the male and female elements. Molina identifies each time with the mysterious, dangerous, cursed woman, the mythic female who is oppressed but also potentially powerful. Valentín, particularly at first, finds these females outlandish and distasteful: they are deviants from the mother/wife figure he has been socialized to believe in. He likes the unthreatening Jane Randolph

character, the conventional girl-next-door type. When a woman begins to threaten him, he drops her (see his relationship with Marta). He has suppressed the female in his soul and she is screaming to get out. Of course the female in the male soul, thus frustrated, may break out in other destructive ways, to the detriment of the whole person. In popular culture, the dark muse lurks in many forms and has the power to be creative or destructive, but she cannot be ignored. Cat woman and zombie woman may appear passive, as society decrees, yet it is clear that they are also powerful and dangerous or threatening.

Valentín's anguish over gender and identity is central to Puig's novel. His illness is not only physical, but spiritual. This fact comes out when Molina relates to him a movie-story that he, Molina, does not really like but which he thinks will please Valentín, a story about a young racing driver from the affluent middle class who abandons his love affair with a beautiful older woman to join his country's political movement working for social justice. This story triggers many things in Valentín's imagination. He is sick and weak and drifts in and out of sleep, plagued by dreams and fantasies in which his own personal experience and the movie-story become mixed up. In the subsequent stream-of-consciousness sequence the reader learns about the almost unbearable tension within Valentín over gender and politics. In the dream, he comes from a small colonized Latin American country, which, he feels, can only be liberated by a Marxist revolution. But personally he is in anguish over his own middle-class background, over his father, who may or may not be a criminal, and over his mother, who after his parents' divorce, depends on him more and more and who has probably betrayed his father by conspiring with her lover against him. He is also in conflict over the fact that he prefers a sophisticated, educated woman from his own background to the peasant woman in the movement who has become his lover. With her he satisfies his sexual desire but he does not want her child because it would have mixed (Indian) blood. His relations with her are a violation of her and he knows it. His guilt about gender, race, and class and his own hypocrisy permeate his dream/fantasies. The second sequence ends with him ordering the execution of his own mother and then getting shot by the guerrillas, his own people. We learn, then, that Valentín, the "straight" man, is actually in far greater conflict over his identity and what it means to be "male" or "female" than his friend, Molina, whom society has judged as abnormal and perverted because of his sexual and gender preferences. In the two sequences the image of rape becomes the central metaphor for relations between male and female, thus reinforcing the conflict. In the movie we lose all this information because Babenco omits it.

In the novel, as a counterpart to Valentín's dream/fantasies (or

nightmares), Molina tells himself a movie-story for comfort; it is the story of *The Enchanted Cottage* (1956, American). This story is a departure from the other movie-stories he tells with no screen goddess, no martyrdom, and no self-sacrifice. It offers the possibility of love between two people whom society has dismissed as marginal because they are physically scarred and ugly (the woman is also from an “inferior” class). They, however, see each other as beautiful, and their love is only vulnerable if they allow the outside world to encroach on it. Clearly this story fuels a wish-fantasy of Molina’s: he longs for the magic formula that will make Valentín appreciate and love him. Further, this is a relationship built on equality where there is a mutual exchange. Valentín’s horrific nightmare is in stark contrast to Molina’s wistful, idealistic fantasy.

The movie-story that Babenco did decide to include in his version of *Kiss* is *Destino* (*Her Real Glory* in the English version). This is a movie-story that Puig invented, but it is influenced by the German expressionist propaganda movies of the thirties. It is the story of a French singer, Leni, who has a love affair with a German officer during World War II. Leni is convinced by her lover that France is in error and that the Nazis are the potential saviors of the human race. Eventually Leni dies for her lover and his cause and is venerated by Germany as a heroine of the Fatherland. Naturally, Valentín condemns this as fascist propaganda tripe. But Molina thinks it is a beautiful love story—and of course, later he too will die for love and, perhaps incidentally, for a political cause, Valentín’s.

Babenco singled out this one movie-story for inclusion in his film of *Kiss*, undoubtedly because of its straightforward political content, easily identified with by an English-speaking audience that might not know much about Argentina. It raises the question of art and politics and also foreshadows Molina’s own death. Babenco presents it in black and white in a stylized fashion that parodies the genre Puig wished to evoke. The audience around me laughed at Leni and her little melodrama, thus effectively distancing themselves from the piece. But Molina loves the story and Valentín, despite himself, is drawn to it: they are very much involved in it. What is lost is the fact that in the novel they are two Argentinians who have seen the impact of Peronism and other military dictatorships on their country and who are fascinated with a movie about fascism. The story of a glamorous actress/singer who rises to dizzying heights and captures the heart of a powerful military man who convinces her of his nobility and enlists her to save the people is a resonant one for Argentinians and belongs to Argentina’s recent past. It is surely no coincidence that Puig evokes the period in Argentina during and after the war when Juan Perón was a friend of the Axis. Nor could it be by chance that he resurrects

the potent myth and image of Eva Perón, who as actress (wicked woman of the world) turned saint was hailed as the mother of her people and died a premature and very public death already canonized as their patron saint (a theme Puig takes up again in the Mexican movie-story). Argentina has harbored Nazi criminals since the war, and Perón's progressive conservative rhetoric often appeared in sympathy with Hitler's. Eva and Leni both fulfill the requirements of *marianismo*—spiritual altruism, martyrdom—which reinforce *machismo* in their mates.

Puig, then, by implication, is exploring a piece of popular culture or propaganda and its impact on a country and a psyche that were mesmerized by the spectacle of a beautiful, powerful, dedicated woman, a woman who apparently held more popular and political (albeit through her husband) power than any other in her time. What happens, he asks, when such a woman sleeps with a fascist? Can she retain her integrity in any way, despite being co-opted by the military patriarch? The parallel with art is obvious. Many directors in Germany during the Third Reich sold out their talents to the regime, whereas others, such as Fritz Lang, fled with their integrity intact. Is it also a coincidence that Puig's heroine, Leni, shares her first name with the film director Leni Reifenstahl, whose film *The Triumph of the Will* has been hailed by critics as an aesthetic achievement despite being Nazi propaganda, a woman who is supposed to have been very close to Hitler? Puig, as a writer in exile from his country where an increasingly brutal dictatorship would not tolerate him, cannot help but create a scenario that involves himself and his country in questions of gender, sexuality, art, and politics. These are universal questions, but here they are particularly salient because they are rooted in his own circumstances and those of his country.

The specific question raised is this: is Molina caught in a psychological and cultural web that may co-opt him and/or require his martyrdom? We are at a point in the story where we do not know whether he will be prevailed upon to betray Valentín. Leni, for all her goodness, is devoured by the machine of the Third Reich at the end of this movie-story. Yet, as we have seen, zombie woman, who comes later, is instrumental in overthrowing the structure that has victimized her. What is more, the woman in the final movie-story told by Molina (a story invented by Puig in the style of Mexican movies of the 1940s) is a successful singer-star who turns prostitute in order to save her destitute lover-journalist. The movie goddesses in Molina's world increasingly show signs that they have the power to fight evil and bring it down. Zombie woman dies, but the singer in the last movie-story survives, although her lover does not, foreshadowing what is to come for Valentín and Molina. By omitting the other movie-stories, the

director deprives the audience of participation in the growth and changes that occur in both men. Neither can we appreciate fully the ambiguity of Molina's position as someone who is constantly treated by society as marginal and deviant and yet still has the imagination to use popular culture for his own ends.

Puig introduces the theme of a desert island in Molina's zombie woman movie-story, which ends with release and escape. Shortly after this Molina and Valentín make love. In a sense, the movie-story has released them to be themselves, free from oppression on the desert island of their incarceration. Valentín comments: "Es como se estuviéramos en una isla desierta. Una isla en la que tal vez estemos solos años. Porque, sí, fuera de la celda están nuestros opresores, pero adentro no. Aquí nadie oprime a nadie" (206). Here he can accept Molina and his own female self. He can also accept that human sexuality and the human psyche are more complex and ambiguous than many allow. (The theme of bisexuality is absent from the movie.)

Puig also prepares the reader for the lovemaking through his extensive footnotes, which are another form of discourse altogether and, of course, omitted from Babenco's movie. In them the "objective" documentary voice gives us a run-down on various theories of homosexuality. But the theories squabble with each other: they do not agree. We immediately see the relative nature of the so-called scientific theories of homosexuality and the fact that any documentary involves selection and bias, despite the authoritative tones of the (usually) male voice-over. In general, Puig exposes the categorical and reductive aspects of Freudian analysis. He quotes heavily from Marcuse, Roszak, and Taube toward the end of the discourse. Totalitarian governments have always tried to control sexual activity for their own ends and the result has been repression. But societies need to find a happy medium between extreme repression and extreme license, a medium that would not only accept homosexuals but would ultimately liberate all humans from damaging male/female stereotypes that result in males having to be the dominant class and females the dominated. Stereotypical gender dualism (strong/weak, superior/inferior, rational/intuitive, et cetera) must be broken down if humans are to become healthy.

The lovemaking between the two men helps each on the journey back to the self as a whole person: Valentín toward the *anima* (as Jung termed it), or toward acknowledging the female within himself and integrating it with the male, and Molina toward the *animus*, acknowledging the male self and reintegrating it with the female. The ultimate goal is that there should be no artificial male/female divisions in the psyche. Thus, on their desert island, the men appear to attain reconciliation and integration. More than one critic has suggested that symbolically a new whole person is created, that of "Valentín/Molina"

(Valentín is always called by his first name and Molina by his second).⁶ This is borne out when Molina comments that he feels as if he has become Valentín; yet he is still Molina. But Dapaz-Strout asserts that neither man can attain any integration of personality (93). This is the question that Puig addresses in the rest of the novel: what happens when the men are parted, leave the “desert island,” and each must face reality alone? Puig knows very well that, whereas theory is one thing, reality is quite another and often messy and ambiguous. The image of the spider woman, masked, haunts the two men: who is she really? As Arachne, she is the weaver of stories (i.e., Molina). As Ariadne, she gives the thread to Theseus so he can kill the minotaur (does Molina enable Valentín to kill his demons and thereby release him to himself?). On the other hand, if Valentín is the spider woman, does he couple with his mate (Molina) and send him/her to death as the black widow does? Spider woman is masked. So in a sense are both men, unsure of their reflection in the mirror, unsure of their inner selves and their outer surface, unsure of who has entrapped whom in a web of dreams and nightmares.

In the novel, the spider woman is introduced through Valentín’s fantasy that she is Molina: he tells him he is not cat woman, but spider woman who entraps men in her web (265). In the film, Babenco has spider woman appear in a final movie recounted by Molina to Valentín, a totally artificial device. In the dream a spider woman with a giant web growing out of her body rescues a shipwrecked man, Valentín, and brings him back to life. A tear runs down from under her mask, but Molina says he cannot tell Valentín why. In the movie it is after this dream that the two men make love. But in this concocted movie sequence the actress who plays the spider woman is Sonia Braga, the same actress who plays Leni and Valentín’s girlfriend, Marta. Babenco makes the associations with spider woman safely heterosexual and acceptable for a straight audience. The implication is that Valentín may be making love to Molina as a sort of stopgap arrangement, since obviously Marta is unavailable. Babenco seeks to soften the impact of this scene by surrounding it with heterosexual images.

Traditionally the black widow spider is known to kill the male she mates with. But in Puig’s story the reverse is true if we take Molina to be the female and Valentín the male. It is Molina who is killed when, at Valentín’s request, he places himself at risk in the streets of Buenos Aires. Once Molina has left the notorious prison of Villa Devoto, he is swallowed up in the maze or web of the city. Puig meticulously names these streets, just as Borges would have done, and the atmosphere of Borges’ stories is recreated in this story of a man who is gradually and fatally reeled in to his death. This is the Buenos Aires of the 1970s when people disappear every day. Molina is just one of the many. The

fact that Puig names this reality is important. This story is not just a “choose your own adventure story.” Time and place are of the essence. In this sequence not only are the streets named, but the “queens” are too. They call each other by the names of the Argentinian movie heroines of the 1940s; Molina’s whole subculture is a parody of Argentinian popular culture, and it is also subversive. Molina’s pursuers and persecutors suspect these names of being a code, and in a way they are; they are a secret language of complicity.

All this local color is entirely lost in the closing sequences of Babenco’s film. The reality that attacks and kills Molina could be anywhere. Further, the film does not leave us to speculate on Molina’s motivation but decides it for us. Babenco creates a scene, extraneous to the novel, where Molina goes to his sleeping mother and tells her he has to leave her in order to take charge of his own life. We are given to understand that Molina has assumed his “manhood” and chosen, if necessary, to sacrifice himself for Valentín’s cause.

Puig, on the other hand, leaves the question of Molina’s motivation open. Whereas the movie has Marta appear to Valentín in a final, curtailed dream sequence and whisk him off to a desert island where they can forget about Molina and escape to paradise/death, Puig has spider woman reappear in a final extended dream sequence, which Valentín experiences after torture and under morphine. Valentín dreams that he has made love to a beautiful island woman who may be Marta. Then spider woman appears, masked and dressed like a movie goddess, with a web growing out of her body. Valentín is repelled by the web and, at the same time, attracted (285). The spider woman weeps and Marta says that he, Valentín, is responsible and that he may never see her again. Valentín does not know if Molina died sad or happy or even if he knew why he died. Puig explores here Valentín’s ambivalence about his feminine self (the spider woman) and his guilt and uncertainty over Molina’s death. The last thing that Valentín ever wanted to be was a martyr; yet he has sent his friend to a martyr’s death. It is Molina who, like cat woman and zombie woman, has to die in order for the spell to be broken and for Valentín to be released to his old love, Marta. He must die and follow the fate of many homosexuals in literature and film and pay for being “deviant” just as cat woman, zombie woman, and Leni pay. However, the spider woman’s love remains unconditional and redemptive; she has nurtured Valentín all along and will continue to nurture him.

One of the last images of the novel is that of the spider woman. She is a hero/heroine who has died for a friend, she continues to grieve and is masked. Puig paints her as an enigma. In the dream, when Valentín asks the spider woman why she is crying, she answers with an echo of Molina’s earlier words:

ella me contesta que es eso lo que no se sabe, porque es un final enigmático, y yo le contesto que está bien así, que es lo mejor de la película porque significa que . . . y ahí ella no me dejó seguir, me dijo que yo quería encontrarle explicación a todo, y que en realidad hablaba yo de hambre . . . (285-86)

Valentín has always wanted a logical explanation for everything, something that the intuitive Molina rejects. In the same way, we cannot measure exactly the influence of the movies on Molina and on Argentinians, or of art on life. Nor can we know exactly why Molina died. We may ask, though, why Puig has Valentín's people kill him. Of course they do not trust him not to break down once in the hands of the enemy. Does love of the spider woman after all mean the kiss of death? Similarly, in Valentín's dream Marta tells him not to give her the names of his comrades. Is this an admission of her weakness and inability to stay strong under torture? Valentín loves Molina and Marta, but it seems that they are not quite to be trusted because they are "female," perhaps because Valentín is unable to emerge entirely from the influence of gender stereotypes. Insofar as they mirror his fear in the dream, it is clear that he still distrusts what he labels as "female" weakness within himself. In the novel fear and mistrust are present in the short and happy dream.

At the end of the novel Puig does not allow the reader to believe that Valentín is dying. The doctor tells him he will feel better the next day and that his wounds will take a few weeks to heal, and Valentín himself refers to the fact that he will awaken from the dream to resume the struggle. At the end of the film we are left with the strong impression that Valentín is dying and that his death is a romantic release from the horrors of reality. The film shows the tensions to be resolved at the end in a dream of escape;⁷ the novel explores those tensions right up until the very end and the dream is shown clearly to be an interlude where reality is already encroaching and from which Valentín must necessarily awaken.

Puig, then, poses the questions of gender stereotyping and sexual politics to the end of his work. Babenco is far more concerned with "happy resolution," even if this means an escape fantasy of the most banal sort. At the end of the novel, the reader knows that Valentín must wake up to resume the struggle in the streets of Argentina. We can only hope that he has learned enough from Molina, from his "female" side, to be able to do this constructively.

Clearly, the film, because it has been uprooted from its context and forced into a "universal mode," has lost the bite and color of the novel. Spider woman, the heroine who has grown from cat woman, Leni,

zombie woman, and the Mexican singer/actress, is characterized by both the negative and positive traits of Argentinian *marianismo*, but finally she offers possibilities of love, nurture, and redemption. Still, the shadow of Eva Perón haunts the novel as a possible tragic Argentinian scenario: spider woman is embedded in Valentín's psyche where she may live or die. Whereas in the novel these images of woman are lingering and powerful, in the film they are blurred, softened, or even absent. And because the film refuses to name the notorious prison of Villa Devoto and the streets of Buenos Aires, we are left with a relatively vapid "generic discourse" that, in the end, is the product of the overwhelming influence of North American popular culture on that of Latin America, which must abandon its roots if it is to receive accolades in Hollywood. Ironically, then, the film's shortcomings confirm Puig's own early criticism of the colonization of Latin American culture by Hollywood as well as his rejection of it. In this sense we have come full circle.

Notes

¹Frances Weyers Weber, in her perceptive article, "Manuel Puig at the Movies," explores this aspect of *El beso de la mujer araña*.

²Mauricio Viano's review of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* in *Film Quarterly* is one of the more intelligent and balanced appreciations of the movie.

³Clara manifests an interesting brand of female chauvinism, characterized by her withdrawal from the male realm into a female bastion where she practices magic and draws on her not inconsiderable resources of strength and creativity.

⁴Bruno Bettelheim and others have vividly documented this phenomenon in the concentration camps of World War II, where some prisoners survived because of their ability to create an alternative reality.

⁵Oviedo's article on Puig's narrative technique is often enlightening, especially his comments on the significance of *I Walked with a Zombie*.

⁶I am indebted to my students in a seminar conducted in the winter of 1989 for their contribution to this idea.

⁷Pauline Kael, in a disparaging review of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, in fact, calls it a "homage to escapism" (61), and it is easy to see how she arrived at this interpretation.

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