Jonathan Tittler
Manuel Puig

Chapter Four: Odd Coupling
Kiss of the Spider Woman

As I was preparing a substantially different version of this chapter, Manuel Puig died, apparently of complications ensuing upon a gall bladder operation. 7he tenor of what follows is in good measure a reflection on the loss of the author as a living object of study.

On 14 May 1990, *Newsweek* ran an article on a renewed concept in American theater, a series of productions called "new musicals", the most recent avatar of "off-off-off-Broadway." This collaborative venture between a local college and recognized theater mavens was touted as a bold Initiative that would allow "a radical change, away from the high-stakes crapshoot of producing new musicals on Broadway."' The first of the maverick theater's productions was slated to be, uncannily enough, *Kiss of the Spider Woman,* "based on the Argentine novel by Manuel Puig that inspired the 1985 film" (Kroll, 73). My letters of inquiry to both the show's producer-director Harold Prince and SUNY Purchase's impresario, Martin Bell, as to the feasibility of acquiring copies of the libretto of their adaptation, went unanswered. Involved for the moment in other projects, I let the matter rest.

Puig's name next appeared in *Newsweek* some three months later. A jarringly brief entry in the "Milestones" section read "DIED: Argentine novelist Manuel Puig, 57; of a heart attack, in Cuernavaca, Mexico, July 22. Puig's work *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* was made into an Academy Award-winning movie in 1985.,,2 Having maintained a periodic correspondence with Puig since 1981, when he participated in a festival of Ibero-American culture at Cornell University, I was shaken to learn via the mass media that an important aspect of my textual relationship with the author was over. It was not till later, however, that another realization dawned on me: if these two journalistic entries were any indication, Puig would be known to future generations not so much for the diverse textures of his unorthodox novels as for a film in whose production he figured secondarily, a by-product of one of his narratives, *El beso de la mujer arafia.*

All the ink spilled in representing stock characters, everyday situations, vernacular dialogue, commodified cultural references, parodies of stereotypes, and the like, and what earned the artist a piece of immortality was the chance conversion of some of his words into images on celluloid. As Puig was, practically from birth, fascinated with the world of film (and this novel is clearly his most '.flimsy"), there is some justice or at least a twisted symmetry to this eventuality. But to appreciate the consonance of the author's fate is not to understand why this novel - rather than the seven others he published - has transcended its generic borders, spilling over into the realms of film, drama, and, now, musical comedy. What is there about *Spider Woman* that sets it apart, marking it as especially meaningful?

The most accurate and honest answer to this sort of question '- one critics nowadays are reticent to ask - is that I don't know for certain. Neither does anyone else, although, as usual, there may be no shortage of opinions on the subject. Success, both commercial and critical, is no less difficult to explain than it is to achieve. It inevitably depends on such intangibles as balance (between tension and release, emotion and reason, action and dialogue) and timing (both within the text and within history), elements that, even if mastered once, do not transfer

easily from one work to the next. Of course, the mechanical repetition of one's past accomplishments Is probably the surest way to *avoid* producing a valid artistic representation, let alone a masterpiece. On the contrary, the freshness that comes with venturing into uncharted terrain, occasioning the felicitous juxtaposition of disparate elements - what I call here "odd coupling" - seems like a more reliable guideline for authentic artistic creativity. Even then, however, there are incomparably more ways to get lost than to hit the mark, whatever "hitting the mark" may be taken by publishers, consumers, and critics to mean. These considerations notwithstanding, *Kiss of the Spider Woman,* since long before the author's premature death, has stood out (for me, for many of my colleagues, for the public at large) as Puig's most complete work, the one that addresses the issues that haunted him in the most satisfying, integrated fashion. Let us, in an appropriately eulogistic vein, probe the wherefores of its perceived greatness.

I start with the conviction that *Kiss of the Spider Woman is* Puig's most generally successful novel because it is, far and away, his most powerful. My contention is that, whereas his other novels allude to, but eventually skirt, several suppressed and even taboo themes (homosexuality as social practice, revolution as political activity, film as culture), this work confronts these issues in a candid and sustained manner that is likely to have an impact on contemporary Western readers. The topics, "hot" in themselves, interact, moreover, by means of a minimalist technique such that time, space, the number of characters, and other plot elements are judiciously reduced to their bare essentials, thereby enhancing the novel's dramatic compression and intensity. These unique ingredients - the particular signs and the numerous pregnant silences that constitute the text - combine to empower the reader to respond creatively on a number of fictional and psychological levels. The response is particularly acute and significant because, again, Puig manipulates images that touch our collective contemporary nerve. In short, the highly pertinent problematics dovetails precisely with the audacious technique (although the technique is part of the problematics and vice-versa) such that they give rise to a sense of aesthetic and intellectual fullness. All of which, despite or perhaps because of the effort entailed, amounts to an uncommonly good read.

The novel's thematic power base can be thought of initially as a three-legged stool. But in addition to the three strongest explicit motifs - homosexuality, revolutionary politics, the world of film - there is a fourth thematic strand - writing itself - that not only conveys the other themes but interacts with them as well. Through the adjacency of disparate kinds of discourse (Molina's nostalgic cinematic evocations, Valentin's dialectical syllogisms, the impersonal voice of psychoanalytic theory, that of the cellmates' unconscious, a police report), writing acquires opacity and calls attention to itself - a major instance of the "odd coupling" noted above. Each of the main themes is by itself potentially subversive vis-a-vis the dominant ideology - heterosexual, bourgeois, logocentric - of contemporary Western culture. Together they have the potential to function explosively, unsettling mainstream values and practices and, if reading is not yet totally irrelevant to other realms of our cultural life, threatening to destabilize the balance of power in society.

To be sure, this novel is not the first in which Puig has broached these controversial topics. With regard to homosexuality, the quasiprotagonist Toto in *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* Is portrayed as effeminate or sexually ambivalent and barely escapes being the victim of a homosexual attack. And Leo Druscovich's sodomitic violation and bludgeoning of a male homosexual in *The Buenos Aires Affair* brings him so much guilt that it nearly drives him crazy and does eventually lead to his own violent self-destruction. But neither of these episodes is central to the fictions in which they figure, nor is the question of homosexuality developed systematically. *Kiss of the Spider Woman,* however, through two main vehicles - the character

of Molina and a series of apparently scientific footnotes that intermittently break the illusion of the primary fictional discourse - removes the issue of sexual preference from its discreet Victorian closet and subjects it to thorough scrutiny.

That scrutiny, to be sure, is far from disinterested. Rather, it takes the form of an apologia and acquires the quality of a defense of homosexuality. Crucial to Puig's strategy for counteracting Western culture's intolerance toward deviance from the "straight" norm is to portray the gay character Molina as sympathetically complex. The windowdresser's eye for the fine details of design, his sensitive identification with the heroines of the films he narrates, his genuine fondness for his mother and his cellmate, and his attempts (largely hapless) at defending himself intellectually against Valentin's cutting ratiocinations all help dispose the reader positively toward this middle-aged queen (loca in the original Spanish) convicted of impairing the morals of a minor.

It should be noted that Molina is not just a typical sexual dissident but rather an individualized subject who identifies not so much with women as with the pervasive stereotype of the subjugated woman. Referring to himself as a female ("I can't believe what a stupid girl I am [1341), he refuses to play a penetrative role in his sexual relations and cannot imagine enjoying sex with a man unless the pleasure is mixed with pain and fear (243-44). Men are, according to Molina, serious, responsible, consequential, whereas the other queens Molina associates with tend toward the fickle and feckless, as indicated by their trivial game of exchanging names with those of starlets of the silver screen. Politically inert, socially outcast, lacking in self-respect, untrained in the rigorous methods of Marxian analysis, Molina must somehow marshal his scanty resources to confront the challenges thrust upon him by the State and by his assertive interlocutor Valentin.

To meet those challenges and gain his release from prison, Molina does the only thing he can do. He converts himself into the Spider Woman, the seductive spinner of webs who devours her mate after coupling with him (260). Each film segment Molina narrates constitutes a strand designed to weaken Valentin's resistance and eventually to trap him into revealing the identity of his comrades in arms, data the informant hopes to pass on to the warden. If successful, this treacherous plan - another manifestation of the betrayal motif that courses through Puig's fiction - is likely to alienate Molina from our affection. But it does not succeed, at least not in the form in which it was conceived, for as Molina seduces Valentin he also seduces himself When, like a Hollywood ingenue, he falls in love with his cellmate and sacrifices his life in order to pass information on to Valentin's revolutionary cohorts, he demonstrates to what extent he has been caught in the very web of allure he fashioned.

A hero(ine) despite himself, Molina ultimately embodies the ragtag vestiges of virtues - valor, fidelity, magnanimity - commonly associated with an earlier age and possible today only in an impure, parodic, mass-mediated form. It is not an abuse of figural language to aver that his characterization amounts to the author's planting a mischievous kiss on the lips of the (male, Western) reader. By addressing the question of homosexuality directly (the love scenes, although carefully constructed so as not to offend, cannot be taken for anything other than love scenes between men), Puig shows his willingness to play with fire. And by according Molina such sympathetic treatment, Puig enacts a revindication of sexual practices whose marginality has only increased with recent historical events (witness the persistent homophobic hysteria pursuant to the AIDS epidemic).

But the novel's vehicle for dealing with homosexuality is not limited to this one character or, for that matter, to the level of fiction where characters normally dwell. In a series of eight

footnotes, spanning chapters 3 through 11, the text also explores the same question, but from a radically different perspective. Here we have not a case study In quasidramatic form (as we find with Molina) but a disembodied, erudite voice that offers an overview of some extant scholarship on the subject of homosexuality as it has been studied by the social sciences in this century. Theories by such prominent figures as Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Norman 0. Brown, Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, and Kate Met on the socio-psychological origins and ramifications of homosexuality are proposed, debated, and, in most cases, rejected, relativized, or countered.

Rather than revisiting clich6s about the role of repression, narcissism, paternal domination, maternal castration, and the like in contributing to the incidence of homos exuality, I propose to take a global stance before this aspect of the novel. Most noteworthy from such a perspective is that no single theory or group of theories glossed can explain satisfactorily either the phenomenon of homosexuality in general or the situation of Molina in particular. I do not conclude out of hand from this limitation, however, as some critics have done, that the footnotes function to burlesque psychoanalytical or sociological theory.6 instead, I take at face value Puig's comments as to his felt need to disseminate information on the matter, even if the scholarship represented, especially in the area of non-Freudian and particularly feminist psychoanalysis, is far from the last word on the subject.7 The sort of play going on here, rath er than mere spoof, is the endless freeplay of signifiers, as Derrida would put it, or the polyphonic interplay of indeterminately authoritative voices, in Bakhtinian terms. Puig's mistrust of power, and the lengths he will go to in order to diffuse it in his texts, is by now amply documented. But instead of simply playing out that obsession through the risky technique of the footnotes (numerous students have complained to me about how this feature momentarily interrupts their reading enjoyment), the author outdoes himself by introducing in the last entry the figure of the Danish scholar Dr. Anneli Taub.

What makes Taub so important in the context of the quasiscientific discourse of the annotations is that, whereas the Freuds, Brown, Reich, Marcuse, Millet, et al. are thinkers and writers whose titles can be found in the card catalog of any research library, Taub is something of a nonentity. Like Molina and Valentin, she is an invented figures whose "Presence" in the footnotes effaces the neat distinction between reality and fiction maintained until that point. Perhaps this roguish tweak of our nose derives from Puig's familiarity with the works of his senior compatriot Jorge Luis Borges, whose spurious footnotes are legion and who even went so far as to invent an author, H. Bustos Domecq, for three books he coproduced with Adolfo Bloy Casares.

Possible influences aside, however, Anneli Taub's fabricated contributions to the scholarship on the issue of homosexuality do attain a privileged status for the license Puig takes in her name. The conclusions attributed to her read at first like a behavioral explanation for Toto's development in *Betrayed by Rita Hayworth.* And her closing remarks, tantamount to an exhortation for homosexuals to organize themselves and participate in the political process, tend to support the course of action Molina finally chooses for himself. Ms female authority figure, whose name consists of the same number of vowels and consonants as those of Manuel Puig, whose theories encompass the alpha and omega of Puig's novels to that date, and whose very appearance in the text implies the sort of self-erasure at the heart of Puig's ideal vision of power (see chapter 5 of this volume), demonstrates the enormous personal investment the author has in giving priority to a balanced understanding of homosexuality - a priority long overdue on the agenda of Western culture.

Despite Molina's initially apolitical stance, the novel shows that to speak candidly of homosexuality, let alone of gay liberation, is to engage in meaningful political praxis. The text's

second high-risk thematic venture is to try to envisage a way for homosexuality to insert itself creatively into revolutionary politics. Now, lest the novel look unduly fanciful and extremis t, we must distinguish between North American and Latin American politics. Whereas the 1980s saw a flowering of democracy in such Latin American countries as Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Argentina, the decade before (that of the novel's writing) was mark ed by a preponderance of brutal military governments whose repressive regimes tended to curtail or abolish entirely freedom of speech and of the press, not to mention their engagement in acts of torture, rape, pillage, and the like. With legitimate movements of opposition banished and forced to move under. ground, it was not uncommon for educated, sensible young people to associate with guerrilla bands and, indeed, to carry out acts of sabotage or subversion against the government. When caught, these political enemies of the State were of course frequently treated with little regard for civil rights or due process.

The Argentine military dictatorship of the 1970s was particularly savage in this respect, mounting a "dirty war" *(guerra sucia)* that involved torturing, killing, or "disappearing" thousands of citizens suspected of political dissidence. North Americans have come to take for granted the right to criticize their government, and they even (somewhat naively) expect the government to defend that right for them. What they are not often aware of, however, is the exceedingly narrow options offered to them by the two-party political system, a system in which Republicans and Democrats are frequently indistinguishable as to the conservatism or liberality of their views. There are even instances of complete inversions from the norm: North Carolina's Democratic senator Jesse Helms, for example, stands clearly to the right of New York's Republican senator Alphonse D'Amato on the question of artistic freedom. Neither of these politicians, of course, espouses guaranteed free postsecondary education or medical treatment, as Cuba's Fidel Castro or Peru's Alan Garcia have done with enormous popular support. Which is to say that the urban revolutionary Valentin Arregui Paz is neither a lunatic nor a legendary figure, as he might be if the novel were set in the United States. He is, rather, a plausible example of the measures many people of conscience were driven to take under the extremely repressive conditions reigning in Puig's homeland at the time.

These distinctions, often necessary when dealing with cross-cultural phenomena, are especially pertinent in the light of Puig's residence in New York while writing this novel. In addition to wanting to discredit the Argentine military in the eyes of the rest of Latin America (the novel was censored in Argentina until the democratically elected Alfonsin government came to power in 1983), it is quite likely that the author also had a North American reader in mind. Th e film version, in fact, unequivocally speaks to the North American viewer: despite the Brazilian location (Sao Paulo), an Argentine director (116ctor Babenco), a Brazilian leading lady (Sonia Braga), and a Puerto Rican supporting actor (Ra6i Julia), the language of the original soundtrack is English. Notwithstanding the text's lush aesthetic dimension, this is not a work for complacent speculative consumption. It is an instructive exercise in Latin American realpolitik.

As with the motif of homosexuality, that of radical sociopolitical change is one Puig has flirted with in at least two of his previous novels, *Betrayed by Rita Haywortb and The Buenos Aires Affair.* Again, on those occasions the author deals with the question only tangentially or allusively. While most of the characters in *Rita Hayworth* are too young, too old, or too preoccupied with the details of everyday domestic life to actively pursue politics in the conventional sense, the promising premedical student Esther does channel her idealis m into the Peronist (military populist) slogans she inscribes in her diary. But these sporadic outbursts of youthful zeal lead nowhere and are In a sense neutralized by the protofascist remarks found in H6ctor's monologue ("long live the united jerks of my beloved country" 11311). Leo Druscovich's brush with unionism in *The Buenos Aires Affair* is likewise short lived and

furthermore at odds with his lust for personal power. Until the advent of *Spider Woman,* in fact, Puig's fiction focuses almost exclusively on the micropolitical, that level where power is wielded over one subject by another, where events are so meaningful to the individual and so trivial to society at large. The sustained treatment accorded to the possibility of a macropolitical solution to human problems marks not so much a turning point (as he never returns to address the question with equal seriousness) as an apex in the trajectory of large-scale political investment in his narrative.

The representative of a certain kind of class struggle in the novel is Molina's cellmate, Valentin Arregui Paz. It would be comforting to brand Valentin as simply a Marxist, but, like Molina, he is too individualized and complex for us to dismiss him so summarily. And like Molina, he undergoes a fundamental metamorphosis. From an initial position of narrowly doctrinaire militancy, he evolves into an ostensibly sensitive, caring person capable of sharing his feelings and thoughts on a nonjudgmental, egalitarian basis. Despite his near reversal of roles with Molina, and contrary to the dominant interpretations of the novel to date, though, I do not see Valentin as a figure of equal sublimity or significance, however formidable a challenge he mounts to Molina's discourse of seduction.

Valentin's secondary status within the fiction derives, characteristically for Puig, from the position of superior power he initially enjoys relative to Molina. Trained at the university level in political science, practiced in the art of Mar)dan dialectic, and tempered in the forge of physical torture, Valentin thinks and acts with a rigor and discipline that critically undermine ("deconstruct") Molina's sentimentally escapist film narrations. These are qualities certainly worthy of respect, but they do not overcome an inevitable antipathy that stems from, among other sources, the revolutionary's haughty disdain toward his apolitical interlocutor ("What an ignoramus! When you know nothing, then say nothing" [104]), Before long, Valentin's insistence on consistent reasoning cannot help but underscore certain inconsistencies in his own modus operandi, inconsistencies that lead him to reduplicate, within the isolated space of their cell, the very relations of power he has dedicated his life to overthrowing. His inability to apply the high-sounding values of his abstract theories to the simple and concrete situation in which he finds himself erodes his credibility almost from the outset.

To his credit, Valentin becomes increasingly aware of these contradictions and makes a Herculean effort to resolve them. He manages to unblock a good part of his emotions and to admit not only that he cares more deeply for a woman in his revolutionary movement than for the movement itself but also that the woman he really loves belongs not to the movement at all but to the hated ruling class. His acquiescence to coupling sexually with Molina, surely the most sensational manifestation of significant change in Valentin, reflects not desire for his partner but a desire to please Molina and to exchange affection with him on Molina's own terms. Even his readings of the films Molina narrates to him, at first severe allegorical reductions, eventually become more highly nuanced appreciations of the diverse textures of human experience. Valentin's evolution, grossly summarized, runs from an inconsistent dogmatism to a tolerant pluralism, the latter terms bearing a markedly positive charge in Puig's narrative system. But Valentin's sentimental education, financed through a debt not collected in full by his mentor Molina, never becomes the text's primary object of focus.

The contention of Valentin's secondary role vis-a-vis Molina, itself hierarchical in nature, rests on two key aspects of the novel: the dominant subject matter of the footnotes and certain revelations included In Valentin's concluding dream sequence. As we have already seen, the footnotes deal chiefly with homosexuality, the motif embodied in Molina, not with the topic of guerrilla movements of liberation. There is, to be sure, an exception to that rule: one long

annotation, located in chapter 4, that represents officially sanctioned (by the Third Reich) publicity material concerning the second, pro-Nazi film Molina narrates, "the superproduction entitled *Her Real Glory"* (82). This note does bear an explicit political message, but not of the sort that would resound sympathetically in Valentin. In fact, it quite severely contextualizes the version of the film the reader receives from Molina.

Instead of speaking directly to any particular ideology, however, the note's primary function is to emphasize the relativity of all ideologies and discourses. Since the character with the ideological hang-up is Valentin (Molina, who can barely muster a consistent attitude, has no pretensions of maintaining anything so authoritative as an ideology), the note serves as a necessary corrective to his obses. sive and imperious Mar)dst cant. In sum, then, by airing the questions most important to Molina personally (albeit in an erudite manner quite foreign to him) or by justifying his nonauthoritarian position in the ongoing debate in which he is embroiled, the marginal notes work to bolster Molina's protagonistic, and even heroic, status.

'That still leaves open the matter of the novel's conclusion, taken by some to embody a sort of apotheosis for Valentin, who in a literal sense has the novel's last words. That is, once Molina is eliminated by the urban guerrillas, only Valentin remains as a focus of readerly interest and, especially, empathy. Having been subjected to further torture, which according to the attending physician has produced third-degree bums in the groin area (275), Valentin is mercifully given a drug to alleviate the pain. His morphine-induced delirium shows the extent to which he has assimilated some of the key concepts implicit in the interlude with his deceased cellmate. In touch with his emotions and forthright in his relations with others (he carries on an imaginary dialogue with Ws beloved Marta), Valentin closes the novel by demonstrating how he has become humanized, spiritually enriched by the process. Let us see where such an Ostensibly sound interpretation fails to do justice to the text.

Beginning with the drug-induced state of the monologue, which marks Valentin as Other with respect to himself, we should consider some of the ways in which the novel critiques the idea of a stable, discrete identity underlying such an account. Those bums in the groin area, for instance; are they not the mark of a *castrate,* of a man who is not (in the conventional sense) a man, of a man who is perhaps Molina, or more precisely both Molina and not Molina? This contradictory statement, rather than embodying a logical absurdity, carries the full force of Puig's vision of both the ideal subject and the sort of intersubjective relations that would constitute the ideal society. When, after making love with Valentin, Molina says "It seemed as if I wasn't here at all ... like it was you all alone. Or like I wasn't me anymore. As if now, somehow ... I ... were you" (219), he posits the principle of a porous, fluid personal identity, one where the subject is not viewed as an elemental, unassailable fortress. It takes the form, rather, of an open-ended construct consisting of myriad influences, prominent among which, in addition to one's genetic constitution, are the events, persons, images, and words that comprise one's environment.

In Valentin's monologue, the instability of such a contextualized subject is reflected in the protean figure of his interlocutor. At first taken to be the physician ("if it weren't for your knowing the way out of here, doctor, and leading me, I couldn't go on" [2761), that figure quickly transforms into Marta, Valentin's long-standing object of desire ("Marta ... where are you? when did you get here?" [2761). Marta, however, soon blends with an island girl (" 'Can I ask you to pretend that she's me?' yes, 'But don't tell her anything, don't be critical of her, let her think she is me' " 12781), who later changes into an island ("she's lying in the sea and she lifts her hand and from up here I can see that the island is a woman" [279]) and finally into the spider woman ("the spiderweb is growing out of her own body, the threads are coming out of her waist and her

hips, they're part of her body" [2801). This fantastic figure, who appears in a scene thoroughly stylized in the manner of a Hollywood production and who provides him with sustenance, is of course a hallucinatory version of the deceased Molina, both quasisubject and quasiobject of the dream. Through all these metamorphoses, to be sure, Valentin is talking to no one but himself, but that self is not the same self who began the dynamic interaction. It is a self that has incorporated Molina's notion of a commutable, constructed subject. It is a selfless self, not just in the sense of altruism (though there is plenty of that) but also that of alterity, of otherness, such that the only trace that remains of the initial entity "Valentin" arc the linguistic signs of his ventriloquy. 'Within such a framework, the character is reduced to little more than a simulacrum, a name over a void, and the possibilities of his playing a conventionally protagonistic role are accordingly negligible.

Dissident sexual preference and radical political practice are, In the context of Western culture, topics almost certain to outrage or at least titillate. But to what extent can the same be said for film, a medium that is by now not only commonplace but also in some sense superseded by that of video, which in turn Is rendered obsolete by the graphic capacities of the personal computer? Are we not in the Age of the Image, where reading is largely replaced by viewing and where life is reduced to electronic impulses that register within the confines of a small, two-dimensional monitor?" Surely the representation of the world of film, even in the mid-1970s, could not be expected to imprint sensationally on the reading public.

To appreciate the force of the film motif in *Spider Woman,* we must first specify precisely what kind of films are involved and how they function within the text. The films Molina narrates do not belong to the world of "serious" cinema, to that of a Bergman, an Antonioni, or a Godard, They are, with one exception, grade B American commercial flicks, unashamedly riven with the facile gimmicks of melodrama, suspense, nostalgia, chintzy glitter, and the like. Such films normally have but one appeal: entertainment. They hold the power of spectacle and are designed to distract us from the tedium or problems of everyday existence, but nothing more transcendent than that. Escape from his mediocre-cum-sordid existence is presumably Molina's primary motive for viewing the films in the first place, and it is certainly one of his principal reasons for retelling the films as stories to Valentin during their incarceration (more about his other possible motives shortly). Valentm, for his part, with unlimited time on his hands, listens attentively not because he expects to be edified, but because he seeks relief from the boredom of his sentence.

Failing to qualify as Art, these commercial artifacts lack legitimacy in the world of high culture - that of museums, symphonic concert halls, or traditional universities. And here is precisely where Puig works a neat inversion of the established cultural -axes. Whereas the term cell in the novel connotes imprisonment and repetition ad nauseam of the same, a configuration with a markedly downward vector, *celluloid* brings with it associations of liberation, of passage into a realm of inexhaustible novelty and difference. Escapism is not disparaged out of hand. On the contrary, it is studied detainedly, in depth, with an eye to its less-than-obvious complexity, its motivations, its unforeseeable effects. In short, then, what is remarkable about the treatment of film in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is not so much its presence in the text (a mere reflection of the superabundance of passe technology in postindustrial society) as the unpretentious nature of the examples provided and the unflagging respect that attends their narrative representation.

If escapism serves to motivate the cellmates to start narrating the films, it is certainly not their only reason, nor does it continue for long as their chief purpose. Although the reader is not aware of this level of meaning until chapter 8, Molina has another sort of escape in mind, for he has made a deal with the warden to wear down Valentin's resistance and extract information

about his comrades' whereabouts and planned activities. Poisoning the revolutionary's food is one means toward this end, but Molina's preferred tactic is to gain Valentin's confidence. The film narratives are thus designed to promote a sinister, one-sided intimacy (the spider woman scenario): the gay yam spinner would appear to reveal his feelings, values, and memories, and the pliant guerrilla would be conned into revealing political secrets of utility to the authoritarian State.

Molina's downfall occurs because the above plan works too well. Not only is Valentin's physical resistance eroded, he responds to Molina's invitations to intimacy by uncovering elements of his own psyche that Molina finds irresistible. Here at last is a "real man," the kind Molina has been searching for all his adult life! Once Molina realizes he is in love with Valentin he must revise his objective: rather than relay information to the warden in order to gain his own release, he must play a stalling game in order to stay in Valentin's company as long as possible. He must not elicit information from Valentin, lest he betray both his love and himself. The film narrations continue through the second half of the novel almost as intensely as In the first (approximately 84 pages in part 1 as opposed to 57 pages in part 2), but their function and meaning undergo a drastic transformation

For Valentin, the change - lacking an analogous ethical reversal - Is less radical but still significant. I-rom an inconsequential pastime, the films evolve into the matrix for an almost primal experience. Through their narration and discussion Vatentm reawakens to aspects of life - the joy of eating, of erotic imagining, of intimate sharing, of crying - he had allowed to wither and almost die. After Molina dies in attempting to make contact with Valentin's band of subversives, Valentin wonders whether his cellmate acted out of political conviction or just in emulation of Leni, the heroine of one of his narrations. He never learns of Molina's duplicitous collusion with the State and so never fully understands the irony of his miraculous rebirth. The new meaning he finds in life comes about through his exposure to an illusion, or a series of illusions on a variety of planes. These include the patently idealized films, which are filtered through Molina's memory, then translated into language, and finally are received under a set of assumptions not shared by both parties. Rather than undermine the value of the narrated movies, however, such dynamic equivocality attests to the importance of such masscultural objects as a force in contemporary life. By incorporating the rudimentary structures of the films into the nuanced and shifting structure of the text, Puig both legitimates the marginalized artifacts and implicitly questions the boundaries of serious literature.

Some of the ways in which the dominant motifs of homosexuality, revolution, and film interact should by now be obvious. Homosexuality is treated with a candor that, within mainstream society, is outrageous. The seductive power of Molina's discourse is such, moreover, that it invades the space of Valentin's discourse (even as the other discourse impinges on it as well). Revolutionary politics becomes sexualized, sexual dissidence becomes politicized. And the narration of @ proves to be a crucial vehicle for sexual-political change in both directions. The cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility within a doctrinaire Mar7dst, of course, may not satisfy many militants on the left, but the idea that an effeminate gay male could achieve such humanizing results through the use of pass6 commercial films qualifies as nothing short of startling. And Molina's ultimate determination to act in a politically subversive (though still romantic) manner is no less noteworthy. Puig has always held out more hope for gains in the micropolitical, intersubjective arena than in the national or global theater of macropolitics. But for Puig, unlike Jean Baudrillard, the social is not dead; social progress is still conceivable. Freedom and justice come about, however, not through mass mobilization (which leads to dangerously high concentrations of power) but with and in one interlocutor at a time, one viewer at a time, one reader at a time. Perhaps it was Puig's appreciation of the pivotal role of even

the humblest individuals in society that moved the author to adopt the minimalist technique he so successfully wields in *Spider Woman.*

At a time when it looked like the Latin American novel was in peril of painting itself into the exuberant but ultimately confining corners of the neobaroque or of encyclopedic metafiction, Puig championed the refreshing current move away from "literary language." His styles, or lack of them, at times reminiscent of Barthes's degree zero of writing, work at reco nnecting fiction with the worldly context in which it is produced. in *Kiss of the Spider Woman,* however, while maintaining his allegiance to plain parlance and popular myths, he achieves a maximum of economy and efficiency in the structure of the fictional universe itself. As we shall see shortly, temporal and spatial coordinates, as well as other plot elements, are reduced to the barest of essentials. But these economies are insignificant in comparison to the constraints introduced with regard to narrative technique: there is none. 'Mat is, the figure of the narrator itself, long considered an indispensable component of narrative fiction, is eliminated altogether. Puig's regard for the unempowered manifests itself in an aesthetic of spareness wherein les s is more and thinking small is its own reward.

Spider Woman is, after all, an exceedingly simple tale. With counted exceptions (the warden, a guard, a shopping list, a police report, the footnotes), the novel depends on only two characters talking to move from start to finish. And even though the themes of their conversations range widely in time and space, the coordinates of the action are limited almost absolutely to the restricted space of their prison cell and the weeks or months when they occupy it .15 Props consist of little more than the characters' clothing, some sheets and towels, the food Molina manages to bring in, their beds, the bars that enclose them. With no narrator to provide background information or even stage directions, reading diffi culties can arise. When, for instance, Valentin in a fit of pique throws their prized marble cake on the floor (193), it is only through the reader's inference that the action can be said to take place.

The scene in which such significant silences play t heir most capital role is, of course, the first of the estimates' love scenes (218-19), but the use of the almost-blank space (graphically rendered as "- …") is certainly not limited to moments when words might be offensive or too graphic for the lyrical nature of the scene. They appear throughout the text (see 9, 96, 180, 276, and passim) and, as in much contemporary fiction, invite the reader to participate actively in the completion of the fiction, to "write" it into coherent signification. In addition , the particular junctures where the fissures appear seem to indicate an awareness that language, so Important in life and definitely no less crucial in literature, is really not adequate at the peak moments of either. Language is troping, figuration, app roximation, not the "thing itself' it tries to represent. At any rate, the presence of so much silence in this colloquial text further supports the hypothesis that Puig's writing, despite the lush embroidery of some of Molina's descriptions, inscribes a logic of austerity.

To say that the reader must function as a coauthor is to evoke Cortizar's figure of the "lector c6mplice" (accomplice reader), by now a critical commonplace in contemporary fictional in view of the critique of power Puig articulates in *Spider Woman,* however, the reader must be seen as more than routinely engaged in a collaborative interpretive act. The reader here constitutes an utterly crucial fink in a social transaction begun with the author and transmitted through the text. Nonfeasance on the reader's part aborts the process entirely, not only producing nonsense but also reinstalling the despotic power structure in its place of comfortable dominance. Let us look at this transaction in some detail.

'Within the text, two sets of transactions are set in motion, one between the two main characters and another, on a discursive level, between the discourse of oral fictiveness (the "main plot") and the discourse of written scientificity (the scholarly footnotes). Despite their considerable differences, what these textual debates have in common is their tendency to blur the distinctions between what are normatively taken to be binary opposites. We have already established the ways in which Molina and Valentin come to partake of each other's personal identities, such that they merge, acquire some of each other's traits, share dreams, and the like. In similar fashion we might demonstrate the "truth" conveyed through fiction (not a terribly controversial notion) and the fictionality of writing within the domain of the humanities (perhaps less immediately apparent but, as the work of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra indicates, still easily demonstrable).17 In both cases we observe an interpene. tration of formerly distinct conceptual fields, with a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of the overall configuration. Higher on Puig's agenda than this appreciation, however, is the removal of power from one pole (the "scientific" one, in both Valentin's Marxian sense and the scholar's psychoanalytic sense) and an equitable redistribution of forces over the entire field (now properly called "fictive/scientific" or simply "narrative"). The newly transformed structure of power now grants as much validity to fiction (Molina's film narratives, the novel's entire imaginary dimension) as to what is conventionally thought of as nonfiction.

Something analogous occurs between the reader and the text. Conventionally conceived of as separate from the text and relegated to a subaltern, passive role, the reader of *Spider Woman* Is invited to reflect upon several heady matters. First are the ways in which the reader is in the text (as Valentin, the listener, and as Molina, the unauthorized speaker, for instance) and the text is within the reader (the stock gambits of Hollywood films, along with Molina's familiar emotional responses; the identifiable fragments of Marxian orthodoxy as well as Valentin's predictable turns of logic). In addition, there is the question of how this mutual interpenetration of text and reader empowers the reader to respond creatively to the text (to imagine love scenes, to fathom Molina's motives for sacrificing himself, to write an ending to Valentin's concluding dream sequence, or to choose not to do any or all of these things). By responding creatively, rather than merely determining the meaning of the text for him. or herself (thereby "consuming" the text as the commodifiers of art would prefer), the reader/text realizes the networking potential of the liberated (autonomous but interconnected) subject represented and sanctioned within the text/reader. In short, to read Kiss *of the Spider Ivontan,* internalizing its structure, is to subscribe to a utopian program, a self-effacing, quasimystical process where one is prodded to imagine a secular, nonalienated state in which world and word recouple oddly and flow through each other like (troping unabashedly) warm salted butter and sugar syrup.

That recipe may be too high in cholesterol and calories for some, but there is no question that the images and ideas represented in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* have made a deep impression on our collective psyche. Again the question arises: why? Have we gotten to the crux of the matter? Convinced we have not (nor will we ever), I suggest (vainly) one more possible explanation for this work's singular importance: death. Not the mere incorporation of this universal motif in the text but, again, the procedure by which the theme is transmitted. Death In the novel, to be sure, is always "out there," lurking beyond the prison bars as a threat against those who challenge the given social order. It Is the ultimate coercive force, one that Molina and Valentin are dedicated to resisting by forming an oasis of solidarity within their cell.

As you read this novel, in which unarmed individuals are pitted against the mammoth powers of the State, you have to suspect that one or both characters is eventually going to meet with death and that their storytelling, much like that of Scheherazade in the 1001 *Arabian Nights,* is designed mainly to defer that inevitable encounter. But when the expected happens, and

Molina finally perishes, you are not accorded the finality you have come to associate with death. Rather, you are given a set of equally plausible choices as to Molina's motives, choices that span the heroic and the bathetic, and you are then assured that his reasons are "something only he can know, and it's possible that even he never knew" (279). Likewise, you are kept in the dark about Valentin's death. Are the (remarkably upbeat) words with which the novel ends the words with which he terminates his earthly existence? Does he live on in order to be tortured again, in a repeated enactment of death-within life? Or does his newfound sensitivity move him to confess to his torturers? In any case, death is a latent presence that never quite crystalizes, a specter, an enigma or question rather than an entity or answer.

These reflections on death as an ongoing process and an insoluble human mystery arise within the context of another "death," that of the narrator. Far from tragic, the death of the narrator is a ritual sacrifice necessary to the destabilization and reallotment of power within the text, so that other, less authoritative voices (narrators in their own right) may be heard. It is therefore a silence and an absence that engender a deferred meaning, however decentered and disunified the textual surface may appear. That death, of course, dwells in the shadow (now, for us) of the death of the author, the biological, historical subject who will write no more. Perhaps the oddest coupling of all is the marshalling of so many images of death to constitute a work that amounts to a celebration of vitality ("this dream is short but this dream is happy"), a work whose signifying life has only just begun.