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Audience, Sentimental Postmodernism, and Kiss of the Spider Woman

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Kimberly Chabot Davis,
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Abstract: In her article "Audience, Sentimental Postmodernism, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*" Kimberly Chabot Davis analyzes the three media forms of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* -- novel, film, and musical -- and their reception by gay, bisexual, and heterosexual fans: Davis reads *Kiss* as a key example of a hybrid contemporary genre she designates as "sentimental postmodernism." Chabot Davis positions the text's dialogic negotiation between the popular and the postmodern in relation to the critical discourse of camp, as a form of sentimentality-*cum*-irony. Manuel Puig's novel offers a powerful rebuttal to the Frankfurt School's dismissal of sentimental mass culture as fascist and affirms the importance of emotion to political consciousness. Research with audiences revealed that the affective strategies of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* helped to galvanize the fans' commitment to left-leaning socio-political critique. Questioning Marxists' overemphasis on the macro-political, *Kiss* focuses instead on the politics of the personal sphere of identity formation. Although these audiences respect the pull of identity politics, many identified with characters across the boundaries of gender and sexual identity. Chabot Davis argues that the fusion of emotional identification and social critique encouraged by *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is a central strategy of sentimental postmodernism.

Kimberly CHABOT DAVIS

Audience, Sentimental Postmodernism, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*

With its thematic focus on identification and leftist politics, Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is a paradigmatic text within a contemporary cultural genre that I call "sentimental postmodernism." Since the text is centrally concerned with the politics of mass culture and of homosexuality, it also bears some relationship to the critical practice called "camp." Any scholarship camp bears the burden of definition, since the term has been variously defined as a "depoliticized" form of send-up that converts the "serious into the frivolous" (Sontag), an "aestheticized sensibility" (Babuscio; Sontag), an "operation of taste" (Ross), and a radical form of "queer parody" (Meyer). I rely on Richard Dyer's sense of camp as a gay sensibility that involves a dialectical movement between "theatricality and authenticity" (*Heavenly* 154), between an ironic critique of mass culture and a sentimental immersion in it. Defined in this way, camp is kin to my concept of sentimental postmodernism as a hybrid style invoking both irony and sentimentality, both critical distance and emotional engagement, and both essentialism and anti-essentialism. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* exudes a camp sensibility in its aesthetics and in its treatment of the politics of sexuality, gender, and mass culture.

Crucial to the camp positioning of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is its merging of the aesthetics and narrative strategies of high-cultural postmodernism and of popular culture. The popular sensibility of *Kiss* is evident in its treatment of melodramatic film as a positive vehicle for intimacy between two prison cellmates (Molina and Valentin) and as a means to revivify Valentin's battered spirit. The novel could be described as a tragic love story that tugs at the heart strings, not unlike the B-movies that Molina cherishes and retells to Valentin. Another sign of the text's affinity for the popular is that it was adapted into a successful film (1985) and Broadway musical (1993). Despite these attributes of a popular sensibility, *Kiss* has most often been received as a high-cultural postmodern text. In the tradition of literary postmodernism and high modernism, Puig's novel challenges the reader with its difficult mixture of narrative elements, including footnotes and stream of consciousness style. *Kiss* upsets narrative expectations, criticizes the banality of popular culture, and deconstructs such accepted cultural dichotomies as male/female, rational/emotional, and homosexual/heterosexual. Many critics regard *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a high cultural, critical meditation on popular culture, rather than as a participant in popular culture. I contend that the text establishes a symbiotic relationship between the popular and the postmodern that is crucial to its political impact upon audiences. Pamela Bacarisse argues that Puig's novels have drawn two distinct reading publics—serious critical readers with cultural capital, and a mass audience desiring sentimentality, illusion, and comfort (*Necessary Dream* 4). Rather than assuming that the text speaks only to discrete audiences with tastes for high or low, I propose that many audience members are attracted by precisely this "campy" conjunction of opposing aesthetics and worldviews, as the sentimental and the postmodern, the emotional and the critical, speak to one another dialogically in the text. In order to explore how viewers and readers negotiate this textual hybridity, I interviewed thirty fans of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (all residing in the Washington, D.C. area) about their responses to the novel, musical, and film versions.

Kiss's dialogic strategy moves audiences to weigh the merits and limitations of various dichotomous poles, such as emotion vs. reason, fantasy vs. realism, and escapist kitsch vs. Marxist critical thought. The majority of the audience group interpreted the text as enacting a fusion or compromise between such extremes, and herein lies the heart of sentimental postmodernism's politics. The plot of *Kiss* concerns the developing relationship of two prisoners in an Argentine jail cell, two men who appear to represent opposite principles—the rational, macho, Marxist, heterosexual political prisoner (Valentin), and the emotional, effeminate, apolitical, homosexual B-movie *aficionado* (Molina). Through Molina's eyes we are led to criticize the rigidity of Valentin's Marxist worldview and his attempt to banish emotion, beauty, fantasy, and personal relationships in his pursuit of revolutionary change in the public sphere. On the other hand, Valentin allows us to see that Molina does nothing to

resist his own oppression (or that of gays as a group) and uses kitschy film as a crutch to escape societal problems. To underscore the theme of dialogism, Puig constructed much of the novel as a dialogue between the two central characters, as in a play. As their dialogue progresses, the two men begin to see through each other's perspective, and their eventual union, both sexual and emotional, represents this larger merging of viewpoints. Although some of my interview group read the text as un-ambivalently Marxist, most felt that the novel and its adaptations criticize the tendency of Marxist thinkers to deny the human need for fantasy, aesthetic beauty, and emotional connection. I read *Kiss of the Spider Woman,* and sentimental postmodernism in general, as a counterpoint to Frankfurt School theorists such as Theodore Adorno, who disdained sentimental popular culture as a tool of fascism. Instead, *Kiss* suggests that a desire for love and aesthetic beauty should not be immediately dismissed as retrograde, because affect is crucial to sustaining political conviction on the Left as well as the Right. With its focus on film melodrama, the text implies that the micropolitics of human relationships is just as important as the macropolitics of Marxist revolution, and suggests that personal desires and dissatisfactions fostered by popular culture could lead to positive change in both the private and public spheres. Reappraising the role of popular culture in the political sphere, *Kiss* suggests that mass culture, and not merely the avant-garde, can provoke critical thought. The fact that this novel, film, and musical stir up intense emotions among its audiences works against fascism rather than for it, by fostering respect and sympathy for both leftist revolutionaries and sexual minorities.

As part of its project to underscore the micropolitics of the personal sphere, *Kiss* provokes readers to re-evaluate various categories of identity that have served both to enable and limit freedom. I argue that *Kiss*, in all three of its media forms, offers its audiences a means of reflecting upon their own ambivalent or shifting feelings about gender and sexual identities. When the voices of anti-essentialist feminists and queer theorists spread from academia to the mass media in the 1990s, some people were moved to question their once secure belief in stable identities. By offering us two main characters who appear to be opposites, *Kiss* invokes a dichotomizing view of identity familiar to fans of melodramatic popular culture. However, while the text seems to condone polarized and essentialist constructions of sexuality and gender in its initial characterization of Molina and Valentin, these binary rubrics blur, shift, and are subverted as the relationship between the two men progresses and eventually becomes sexual. Molina himself is an odd mixture of essentialist conceptions of subjectivity (transsexual, gay, feminine) and anti-essentialist ones (transgender, drag, queer). *Kiss* thus offers its readers the comfort of traditional unitary identities but also urges us to reconsider them without totally undermining their usefulness and emotional pull. This tension between authenticity and anti-essentialist performativity also characterizes the practice of camp. Since both the popular melodramatic and the postmodern senses of subjectivity are given full play in *Kiss*, the reader is encouraged to consider their competing merits and to think about the political implications of his or her own self-construction. This sentimental postmodernist text thus finds a receptive audience among ambivalent people who appreciate queer theory's attempt to allow broader coalitions but who still feel innately "gay" or "straight," and among people who accept the anti-essentialist position on gender but still feel most comfortable practicing acceptable forms of gendered behavior. Despite the fact that most of the interviewees appreciated the text's attempt to represent sexuality and gender as fluid, many of the gay and bisexual people in particular also expressed intense feelings of biological and essential otherness and an affinity with identity politics. *Kiss* and the viewers' responses to it suggest both the political promise and the limitations of queer politics, with its affinity for performativity and surfaces over depth and rootedness.

Because *Kiss* invokes both traditionalist identities and postmodern anti-identitarianism, the viewer or reader is left with a great deal of interpretive freedom. A few of the interpretive choices audiences face are: Is Molina gay, transgender, or transsexual? Is Valentin straight, bisexual, or gay? Do the two men become less polarized in their gender roles, or remain static? Is this a story about the fluidity of gender and sexuality, or about the essential fixity of those characteristics? In the interviews, I set out

to examine how people's own identities and ideas about gender and sexuality might affect their interpretations of the text's characters and its narratives concerning identity. These 30 individuals -- 13 gay men, 2 lesbians, 4 bisexual women, 1 bisexual man, 6 heterosexual women, and 4 heterosexual men -- did not usually respond in neat patterns according to their sexual and gender self-identifications; I found that particular interpretations cut across many of the groups. This group thwarted the naive expectation, based on a vulgar understanding of identity politics, that all gay men or straight women would read the text in a similar way. I do not mean to imply that the self-professed identities of the interviewees had no influence upon their interpretations, but rather to show that such identities are fractured, multiply determined, and layered. Interpretations were clearly affected by how each person conceives of identity in the abstract, and those understandings turned out to be highly individual, politicized, and sometimes contradictory. What sexual identity means to these thirty individuals was hugely variable, influenced by their response to a plethora of concurrent debates. Sparked by the AIDS crisis, queer activism (Queer Nation, ACT-UP), and scientific attempts to discover a "gay gene," public debates in the early 1990s addressed whether sexual identity is politically chosen or preordained; socially constructed or biologically influenced; fluid or static; essential or performative; based on a continuum or an either/or binary; and based on sexual desires, sexual behavior, or affiliation with a group culture or politics. For many interview subjects, their sexual identity was also complicated by their race, gender, class, and age. Despite these numerous complicating factors that serve to individuate identity, I did find that a few types of textual interpretations usually accompanied particular ways of thinking about identity. There was a strong correlation, for example, between a pre-existing belief in biological essentialism or polarized schemas and a reading of the text as a representation of the fixed and biologically determined nature of identity. Those who embraced fluidity and rejected either/or polarities of sexuality and gender tended to read the text as an exemplar of ambiguity and felt that Valentin and Molina transcended categories. Yet a significant number of people echoed the mixture of discourses already present in the text by using language that indicated both a popular, melodramatic view of identity as fixed and a postmodern sense of identity as fluid. These diverse audience responses to *Kiss of the Spider Woman* suggest that identity is no longer, or perhaps never was, a static given that overdetermines audience interpretations and response.

The interviews revealed an astonishing diversity of identity within supposedly homogeneous groups and they also revealed a complex pattern of cross-group identification that has important political implications. In *Identification Papers*, Diana Fuss acknowledges that if identification allows crossing of gender/race/sexual boundaries, it could potentially encourage coalitions and foster empathy for oppressed groups (8). The text of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* enacts such a crossing, as Valentin and Molina slowly retreat from their polar positions and mutual distrust to the point of identification and intimacy with the other. This textual model encouraged my audience group to loosen their own self-conceptions and to discover affinities for the other within the self. The individuals I interviewed revealed a strong capacity for identifying with characters who did not share their own identity affiliations; women and gay men identified with Valentin while heterosexuals and people with masculine personalities identified with Molina. This finding challenges identification theories which reduce identification to a simple process of self-recognition, of finding resemblance and solidifying one's identity. It was also striking that many people identified with both men at once, or they identified as well as disidentified with the same character. These ambivalent forms of identification, which have often been underemphasized in theoretical work on identification, further attest to the complexity of identity. In short, my ethnographic study of responses to *Kiss of the Spider Woman* underscores that identification is a politically charged, emotionally powerful process that can promote self-criticism, a loosening of identity, and counter-hegemonic coalitions.

Given that the three media versions of *Kiss* target slightly different populations, I am particularly interested in how my U.S. audience sample imposed their own cultural values upon a novel that was not written primarily for them. The national context of this group clearly had an effect on their recep-

tion of *Kiss*. For example, the understanding of sexual identity among urban Washingtonians, particularly those who define themselves as gay, varies greatly from a Latin American cultural construction of homosexuality. Most of my audience sample either disregarded the text's original context or were ignorant of the differences. In an interview, Manuel Puig noted that his novel was directed at Spanish-speaking readers, most of whom have been denied information about the origins of homosexuality. In order to educate people, he included footnotes summarizing the history of theoretical discourse about homosexuality and intended them to be taken seriously (Christ 28). The fact that many of my interviewees read the footnotes as ironic send-ups of "outdated" Freudian theories indicates their distance from the intended audience of Latin Americans in the 1970s. Most importantly, social constructions of homosexuality in the U.S. are quite different than in some parts of Latin America, where only the receptor, the one who is sexually penetrated, is considered to be *maricón* (fag, queer); such penetration implies a loss of masculinity which Latin Americans associate with homosexuality (Foster 2). The active penetrator who adopts the macho role is often considered to be straight and may even be married. As David Foster contends in *Sexual Textualities*, many Latin Americans do not equate gay sexual acts with a gay identity, and they frown upon homosexual identity politics as a foreign concept (4-5). Argentinean readers might view Valentin and Molina's relationship through this lens (although Puig attempts to challenge such gender-stereotyped notions), and they might be less likely than my U.S. audience group to consider Valentin to be gay or bisexual. To understand or criticize the novel's take on sexual identity, the American readers invoked contexts that would have been foreign to a Latin American audience -- gay liberation and gay pride, a belief that gay sex acts imply a gay or bisexual identity, the disassociation of homosexuality and gender inversion, and the Kinsey scale.

The novel was also written while Puig was living in Greenwich Village right after the Stonewall riots and his text seems to offer an implicit commentary on gay liberationism and identity politics in the 1970s. In a 1979 interview, Puig applauded the self-respect fostered by gay liberation in the U.S., but he also saw "danger in the American attitude" of viewing homosexuals and heterosexuals as different and segregated species (qtd. in Christ 28). In *Kiss*, Puig criticizes gender stereotyping inherent in the Latin American construction of sexual roles, but he also appreciates the ability of that construction to break down the rigid barrier between heterosexuals and homosexuals, thereby enabling people like Valentin to explore their potential for bisexuality (Christ 30). *Kiss of the Spider Woman* mediates between Latin American and United States' constructions of sexuality in the 1970s, a dialogic which my U.S. audience group translated into their own cultural terms and debates of the 1990s -- gay liberationism vs. queerness, essentialism vs. anti-essentialism, pre-Stonewall inversion vs. transgenderism, sexual acts vs. identities, and gender polarities vs. androgyny. The fact that the later film and musical were produced in English also gave audiences justification for reading the texts in a U.S. cultural context. Not only did this audience group read Puig's novel out of its original cultural context, but they also read it out of historical context. In a sense, they and I are interpreting the 1976 novel (translated into English in 1978) in an anachronistic fashion by connecting it to recent debates about identity politics vs. queer anti-essentialism. It is important to remember, however, that ideas we now identify as "queer" were in circulation in the U.S. and other cultures long before the late 1980s and 1990s, when they became codified as queer theory. Puig might be called proto-queer in his desire to move beyond the limits of either/or identity choices to embrace a "natural" bisexuality. In a 1987 interview concerning the writing of *Kiss*, Puig made the anti-identitarian comment that "a sense of identity should never be based on sexual orientation" (qtd. in Bacarisse, *Impossible Choices* 101). His sensibilities may have been influenced both by a Latin American suspicion of gay identity and by anti-essentialist ideals in circulation in 1970s U.S. culture. In an article on the history of gay identity, Steven Seidman argues that a strain of mid-1970s American gay culture was incipiently queer in its pursuit of the ideals of androgyny and bisexuality, despite the hegemony of essentialist discourses of gay liberationism at the time (108-10).

Not only do I read *Kiss* as queer before the term came into vogue, but I also argue that the text is infused with an uncanny prescience, as if it is criticizing queer politics's anti-identitarianism, *Kiss* shows respect for Molina's deeply felt otherness and refuses to treat sexuality as merely a performative surface phenomenon, and this point of view resonated strongly with my audience group. I contend that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* can be read as pre-queer, proto-queer, and post-queer all at the same time. The temporal conflation is further fueled by the fact that the film and musical adaptations were created in the 1980s and 1990s, when discourses concerning sexuality were rapidly being transfigured; thus the storyline took on new valences and political meanings for audiences, some of whom read it as radically queer while others saw it as a throwback to a pre-Stonewall era. A fascinating article by David Román and Alberto Sandoval considers the symbolism of the musical version -- blood imagery and kisses of death -- as a treatment of the AIDS crisis. At the root of this diversity of response is the text's hybridity. It elicits sympathy for both identity politics and queer politics, but ultimately endorses neither and rests in the space between. This temporal and cultural liminality -- this mediation between different national cultures and moments in the history of discourses of sexuality -- makes *Kiss of the Spider Woman* an ideal text to shed light on the complex process of audience reception.

Audiences use the extra-textual discourses of a particular historical moment to make sense of *Kiss*, but their readings are also shaped by the text's own strategic mediation between melodramatic popular culture and formally experimental high culture. Although each media version of *Kiss* is positioned differently on the continuum from low to high culture, they all participate in a fusion of the popular and the postmodern. However, it is easy to see why critics have tended to stress the elements of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* that might be considered high modernist or postmodern. From page one, the novel immediately announces itself as highbrow by challenging the reader to distinguish the characters from each other. Instead of a traditional introduction to the characters and situation, *Kiss* begins *in medias res* with a dialogue already in progress and omits the speakers' names, which are not revealed until the end of the chapter. The film begins with a similarly disorienting technique, eschewing the standard establishing shot and instead offering the viewer a disembodied voice and a slowly roving camera that reveals glimpses of a bare room and a man's body dressed in drag. Both novel and film deliberately frustrate the passive reader/spectator in order to encourage a more active and critical interpretation process.

In the novel, Puig employs many experimental narrative techniques that force the reader to work hard to make meaning, thus increasing the potential for alienation or confusion but also for intellectual pleasure. The variety of narrative techniques -- such as dialogue, stream of consciousness monologues, academic footnotes, play scripts, and impersonal official reports -- works to shatter a perspective of omniscience and to draw attention to form, two aesthetic projects that are often associated with high modernismand literary postmodernism. Puig's "remarkable interior monologues" even prompted a reviewer to compare him to James Joyce (Wood 19). By refusing closure, the novel invites comparison to postmodern fiction by Don DeLillo or Thomas Pynchon. Puig's text closes with Valentin's surreal dream narrative, which leaves many questions unanswered: Does Valentin love Molina? What motivated Molina to pass on the message to Valentin's comrades -- love, a movie-inspired desire for a tragic fate, or an awakened political conscience? *Kiss*'s experiments in form and its attempt to engage audiences in active, critical interpretation might satisfy even Adorno's criteria for modernist art. The most characteristically postmodern feature of the text is its academic-style footnotes (mostly concerning theories about homosexuality), which interrupt immersion in the narrative and push the reader to make intellectual connections between the footnotes and the storyline above. The absurd and often random placement of the footnotes, however, frustrates a reader's desire for legibility even further. The connections that can be gleaned between the footnotes and the narrative are often ironic ones. For example, the scene in which Valentin succumbs to diarrhea is accompanied by a footnote concerning Freud's beliefs that the anal retentive drive is at the root of repression and that anal fixation leads

to homosexuality (141). Linda Hutcheon argues that Puig's footnotes exemplify postmodern parody and irony because the authority of these "experts" on sexuality and politics is undermined by their failure to explain the behavior of the characters (*Politics* 85). While Puig thwarts a desire for simple keys to unlock the characters' psyches, he also rewards the careful reader by offering more subtle connections, such as clever intertextual and allegorical doubling between the inset narrated films and the lives of Molina and Valentin. For example, "The Enchanted Cottage," the film that Molina revisits in his mind but refuses to share with Valentin, rests on the theme of looking beyond surfaces to see "not the body but only the soul" (111). This metaphor applies to Molina's struggle with the disparity between his interior female self and his masculine exterior, while the love story between an unlikely couple mirrors Molina and Valentin's relationship.

Kiss of the Spider Woman marks its distance from typical melodramatic film and formula fiction not only by fostering active reading and viewing, but also by deconstructing the dichotomies commonly employed by popular texts. Melodramas often rely heavily on a victim vs. villain structure in which innocence triumphs over evil, and *Kiss* invokes such a structure by immediately drawing our sympathies toward men unjustly imprisoned and tortured by a fascist government. But midway through the text, we discover that Molina is no longer simply a victim, because he has consented to the warden's bargain to wheedle information out of Valentin in exchange for an early parole. Neither is Valentin an uncomplicated victim, for despite his own egalitarian principles, he oppresses Molina by harshly belittling his values and feelings. By urging Molina to pass a message to his revolutionary comrades and by minimizing the danger of that venture, Valentin is also inadvertently responsible for Molina's death. Both characters are multi-faceted, capable of both kindness and treachery, unlike the pure types of melodrama. Bacarisse sees in the novel a Foucauldian message that power and oppression are ubiquitous (*Necessary Dream* 100), an idea that challenges the melodramatic faith that evil can be eradicated. The grim ending of the text, in which evil remains unchecked, thus diverges from typical melodramatic closure; Molina is killed while trying to deliver the message, and Valentin is once again tortured in prison. In addition to questioning melodrama's polarization of good and evil, the novel and film versions of *Kiss* also deconstruct the cultural dichotomies of masculine/feminine and gay/straight, identity binaries that are often reinforced by popular texts. Believing that all humans exhibit both masculine and feminine traits, Puig argued that "the woman most desperately in need of liberation is the woman every man has locked up in the dungeons of his own psyche" (qtd. in Christ 26). Puig's deconstruction of gender binaries is evident in the characterizations and plot structure of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. For example, although Valentin at first embodies the stereotype of the macho male, his emotional longing for his girlfriend Marta and his desire for fantastic escape through film are more powerful than his attempts to repress them. In the novel's final dream narrative and in the last shots of the film, Valentin embraces the "feminine" world of comfort, love, and peace, imagining himself in a romantic beach landscape resembling one of Molina's movies. On the other hand, while Molina seems stereotypically feminine and extremely emotional, he also displays purportedly "masculine" behavior by bravely double-crossing the warden. By the end of the text, this once effeminate man becomes masculinized as he agrees to act politically by contacting Valentin's comrades, stands up to his godfather for the first time, and rationally settles his bank accounts before carrying out his final life-threatening mission. Just as the two men move away from their initially gender-stereotyped behavior, even to the point of merging or switching places, the text also blurs their place in a binary rubric of sexual identity. The once securely macho heterosexual Valentin willingly engages in gay sex, and in the novel he appears to feel love and desire for Molina. While Molina seems uncomplicatedly homosexual at first, we learn that he feels like a heterosexual woman at heart. Their sexual union allows both men to redefine themselves in a more fluid and liberating way, as they are transformed into "someone else, who's neither a man nor a woman," neither gay nor straight, "but someone who feels … out of danger" (235). By disrupting binary understandings of gender and sexuality, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* denaturalizes these qualities and underscores their constructedness and fluidity. This post-

structuralist, anti-essentialist sensibility once again situates *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a postmodern text, pushing audiences to reject dualistic models that exaggerate and oversimplify human difference.

One could also discern in the text a high modernist critique of popular culture's potential to alienate people from reality and to limit their perspectives and desires. Valentin voices the perspective of Marxist critics of popular culture by lambasting Molina for loving the beauty of a nazi propaganda film and for ignoring its distortion of history and truth: "it can become a vice, always trying to escape from reality like that, it's like taking drugs or something" (78). Valentin also rightly points out that Molina has internalized harmful gender stereotypes from melodramatic film, such as the idea that submission to violent men is pleasurable for women: "you've been fed an old wives' tale. … To be a woman you don't have to be … a martyr" (244). The end of the text also suggests that Molina's "political" heroism might have been merely an attempt to enact the romantic death of a film heroine, and thus Puig underscores the problematic glorification of feminine self-sacrifice in popular cinema. In addition to this feminist critique of kitsch's stereotypes, Puig's novel offers an allegory about the stupefying effects of mass culture via Molina's retelling of the film "I Walked with a Zombie." The living dead of the film who "don't have any will at all beyond the witch doctor's" (167) could be read as figures for the passive mass audience, controlled by the witch doctors of Hollywood. Stephanie Merrim sees Puig's text as a tragic exposé of the way that "the characters have been rendered 'zombies' by the culture" of popular movies (157). The art-house film and the musical versions of *Kiss* also work hard to distance themselves from the kitschy inset films that Molina tells. In the musical, campy overacting in the number depicting the Russian melodrama provokes laughs from the audience, and Philip Swanson has noted that the film version of *Kiss* "asserts the superiority of Hector Babenco's film over popular B-movies" by highlighting the clichés and absurdity of the nazi melodrama (337).

All of these characteristics have led to a frequent classification of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as modernist, postmodern, or at least high cultural. I argue, however, that the text does not merely mock kitsch culture, but also exudes a pop sensibility itself. *Kiss* differs greatly from high modernist texts like *Ulysses* whose ironic inclusion of pop cultural references does nothing to alter their status as high cultural *objets d'art*. Despite its formal difficulty, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* also solicits emotional engagement and identification, much like Molina's favorite popular films. As one interviewee said of the text, "it's designed to pull at your heartstrings, and it works." Many were moved to tears because they saw it as a story about the basic human need for intimacy and love. Just as Molina pines for the romance of Leni Lamaison and her nazi officer, they long for such a connection with another person in their own lives. Molina's belief that "there are reasons of the heart that reason doesn't encompass" (259) emerges as a truth for the whole text, one which even Valentin learns to accept. The reader is even encouraged to respect kitschy love ballads because they "contain real truths" about human emotional life (139). According to critic Gustavo Pellón, Puig demonstrates "that the human element of sincere emotion can redeem even the most banal mode of expression" (198). This questioning of reason's supremacy and insistence on the importance of emotionality and romance places the text in a melodramatic lineage. The high value that *Kiss* places on emotionality also links it to camp; for example, Dyer attributes gay men's campy identification with Judy Garland partly to the fact that her songs register "intense, authentic feeling … and suffering" (*Heavenly* 149). *Kiss*'s attempt to foster identification with its characters and immersion in its fictional world is clearly a popular strategy at odds with the alienation effect favored by the avant garde. One gay man said he "cried like a river" at the age of fifteen upon encountering a positive, brave gay character that he could identify with. This solicitation of identification is accomplished through media-specific strategies: the novel reveals the characters' private thoughts through first-person narratives and stream of consciousness; the film offers point-of-view shots and subjective dreams and memories; and the musical's songs dramatize the character's feelings. As János László and Steen Larsen argue, texts that offer "inside POV" increase the emotionality of a reader's involvement in the text. Puig's novel not only induces identification, but also makes

the subject an explicit theme of the narrative. As Molina and Valentin discuss at length which film characters they identify with, the reader/viewer of *Kiss* is prompted to ask himself the same question of Puig's characters; this parallel implies that the inset popular films and the formally experimental outer text are not as different as they seem. Although leftists have often criticized popular culture for attempting to seduce audiences, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* endorses such a strategy. As one interviewee aptly put it, "there's this strong theme of seduction, as Molina and Valentin seduce each other through story-telling, and I was entranced and seduced by that plot myself." This reader, who normally considers himself a "lowbrow kind of guy," was also attracted to the story for its gradual building of suspense and tension, which he compared to detective fiction.

Although *Kiss of the Spider Woman* eschews the melodramatic prescription of happy and moralistic closure, it could also be argued that the ending borrows elements from tragic popular romances. Molina's "noble sacrifice" for Valentin's cause recalls Leni's romantic death defending the interests of her lover and the ill-fated relationship of Molina and Valentin echoes the tragic love between the singer and the alcoholic journalist (in the Mexican film). By mirroring these popular plots in his own tale, Puig acknowledges their emotional power. At the close of Puig's text, even Valentin acquiesces to his desires for fantasy, escape, and love, finally accepting the value of Molina's melodramatic worldview. The last shot of the film version, in which Valentin and Marta row off into the sunset in a boat, may be read as a parody because it is such an obvious melodramatic cliché; however, many viewers did not read this scene as ironic but, rather, experienced it as a respectful and poignant treatment of the human need for escapism. One reader in my study found this ending to be uplifting, much like popular texts, "since Valentin was finally free for the first time." As Jonathan Tittler notes of the novel, "escapism is not disparaged out of hand" (56). Even as it tries to critique such banal closure, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* clearly evokes the outlines of popular tragedies and melodramas and even endorses some of their romantic and escapist values. Similarly, although the text deconstructs the dichotomies of melodrama, the remnants of such rubrics are still present, appealing to audiences with popular tastes. About one-third of my audience group read the text in terms of familiar types and polarities (masculine/feminine, gay/straight, victim/villain, fascist/marxist) and did not notice any questioning of dichotomies. Their reading of the text, which differs from the predominant critical take on the novel, was influenced by their differing cultural sensibilities and tastes. While I and many other readers saw moments of deconstruction in the text, it is also clear that the author has respect for the emotional pull and clear world picture that binary cultural rubrics afford people, even as he resists the harmful effects of stereotypes. Like Molina, Puig was addicted to popular melodramas, watching as many as three or four daily (Manrique 24). *Kiss of the Spider Woman* mounts a defense of popular culture by suggesting that such films can work to open up the identities of viewers, rather than merely reifying traditional stereotypes. Although these movies solidify Molina's stereotypical feminine behavior, they help Valentin to face his emotions, uncover his *anima*, rethink his macho heterosexual identity, and connect with another person. The films' emphasis on empathy and identification humanizes Valentin and allows him to explore his complexity as an individual. Thus the text counters the critical view of melodramatic film as a duping mechanism which merely sutures viewers into limiting identities. Thus, by implying that popular texts, and not only the avant garde, can foster progressive change, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* challenges artistic hierarchies and the critical assumptions that accompany them. Such assumptions include the beliefs that only formally experimental, non-realist aesthetics can have transgressive politics, that popular culture never fosters critical thought, and that the emotional strategies of melodrama are merely manipulative and escapist tactics that foster conservatism or even fascism. While Puig's novel notes the drawbacks of both sentimentality and the rationalist alienation promoted by avant-gardists and high modernists, the text also attempts to fuse their merits, by fostering critical questioning and active reading as well as emotional engagement, human sympathy, and the recognition that the personal is political.

In focusing on this fusion or mediation, I take issue with those critics who argue that Puig's ironic tone totally undermines any sentimental moments in the text. Stephanie Merrim, for example, reads *Kiss* as a parodic exposé of mass culture's stupefying properties (157). Merrim echoes the viewpoint of Fredric Jameson, who believes that the presence of irony and post-structuralist sensibilities in post-modern texts preclude any investment in deep feeling (15-16). By presenting irony as omnipotent and sentimentality as anemic, these critics reveal a prejudice that blinds them to the complexity of hybrid texts. Literary critics Bacarisse and Naomi Lindstrom are among the few who recognize the hybridity of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and its postmodern mediation between high and low culture. Bacarisse notes that Puig does not mock his characters but instead employs irony as a means of identifying with them as victims of life's ironic situations (*Necessary* 99-105). Here irony works to increase identification and sympathy rather than to undermine it. In *Impossible Choices*, Bacarisse further points out that Puig refuses to observe the "'Great Divide' between mass culture and the canon of high modernism" (2) because he sees "no vital difference between highbrow and lowbrow art, which are both valid indicators of personal and collective truths" (9). While several critics have noted the novel's dialogic vacillation between high and popular culture, many of them still display a preference for critical distance and a prejudice against kitsch reminiscent of the Frankfurt School. Like Bacarisse, Gustavo Pellón focuses on Puig's ambivalent "double vision" as a merging of criticism and empathetic participation in popular culture, and he rightly points out that many critics have missed Puig's appreciation of kitsch (193). However, Pellón nonetheless reveals an anti-popular bias by referring to kitsch as a "parasitic art form" that betrays viewers into self-deception, "intellectual passiveness," and "servility" (199). Since he deems Puig's attempt to merge high and low culture a "fascinating contradiction" (199) that ultimately is impossible to sustain, he underestimates the political power of such hybridity. Similarly, Philip Swanson views the dialectic at work in *Kiss* (novel and film) as a problematic contradiction rather than a productive tension, and he equates popular culture with conservatism (341). Arguing that Puig's texts "consistently deconstruct any ideology or sentiment they appear to be expounding or expressing" (332), Swanson concludes wrongly that the novel's dialectic leads to "self-cancellation" (332) and confusion rather than a plurality of ways of seeing or a productive double vision.

I am not the first to recognize the dialogism of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*; however, my paradigm of sentimental postmodernism treats such hybridity as politically potent rather than regrettable and avoids the anti-popular biases exhibited by so many of these critics. In addition, nearly all of the critical articles on the text's dialogism offer formalist readings, rather than situating the strategy in cultural or political context as I aim to do. Laura Rice-Sayre points out that "most critics have taken refuge in a formalist discussion of the plurality of styles, the multiple play of discourses, and the polysemic qualities of the text and have tended to ignore or even deny the political content and form the novel's dialogue embodies" (248). Santiago Colás counters this tendency in his book *Postmodernity in Latin America*, offering useful readings of Puig's postmodern mixture of high and mass culture against the backdrop of Argentinean Peroniste politics. However, his argument focuses only on the macropolitical, rather than investigating the text's considerable investment in micropolitical change. Furthermore, the few critics who analyze the political content of *Kiss* and explore its surrounding contexts are mainly concerned with identifying the sources of Puig's ambivalence. None has considered what effect his ambivalent texts have upon audiences or has attempted to locate the politics of the text in its articulation by readers and viewers.

For a brief example of the effects of the hybridity of sentimental postmodernism, I turn to my students' responses to *Kiss of the Spider Woman.* We read the novel and watched the film for a unit on postmodern narrative technique, and the previous text on the syllabus was John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which the class found to be a clever but dry exercise in parodying Victorian culture. Because Fowles's characters did not solicit identification or even sympathy, the survey subjects were engaged minimally although they found it to be an intellectually challenging read. Although they

were also challenged by Puig's narrative style, these formal innovations did not result in reader alienation or ironic detachment. In contrast, many of the students were moved to tears by *Kiss of the Spider Woman's* affirmation of the power of human intimacy. Because they identified so strongly with Molina and Valentin, their debates about the political meanings of *Kiss* were also more heated than their discussions of Fowles's highbrow text. Their ability to think critically was not hampered by their emotional responses, as detractors of sentimentality often argue; in fact, it was enhanced. In contrast to disaffected highbrow postmodernism, the emotional engagement fostered by this hybrid text gave it more power to affect these students on a political and ideological level, to get them thinking about the meaning of gender and sexuality. But unlike typical Hollywood melodramas and sentimental fiction, *Kiss* upsets rigid notions of identity rather than confirming them. Because the text deconstructs rigid character types, heterosexual students were able to identify with the effeminate gay character Molina, which helped them to rethink homophobia and gender stereotypes. It even prompted them to communicate more respectfully with a gay student in our class. This fusion of emotional and critical strategies is central to the cultural and political power of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and of sentimental postmodernism as a style.

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