

SECOND READ

“KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN” ’S VOICES IN THE DARK

The Argentinean writer Manuel Puig’s novel-in-dialogue forces the reader to be both director and detective, interpreting how the lines will be spoken and searching each sentence for clues as to what is going on.

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Illustration by Fernando Cobelo

Vicki Baum, the author of “Grand Hotel,” once wrote that “you can live down any number of failures, but you can’t live down a great success.” After witnessing the fall and rise of his novel “Kiss of the Spider Woman,” Manuel Puig likely would’ve agreed with her. Originally released to critical dismissal—Robert Coover called it “a rather frail little love story” in the *Times*—the book landed with a thud, managing to make Puig a celebrity in the gay enclave of New York City’s Christopher Street, but not much else. Yet “Kiss of the Spider Woman” had a remarkable afterlife. A play adaptation, co-authored by Puig, became an international success, and led to an Oscar-winning film starring William Hurt and Raul Julia as well as a hit musical written by John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Terrence McNally. Puig disliked the film, and, shortly after a disastrous workshop of the musical at SUNY Purchase, died from a heart attack, at the age of fifty-seven. Yet for all his frustration with the adaptations of his novel, they guaranteed its longevity. “Kiss of the Spider Woman” is the only book of Puig’s in English that remains steadily in print—his first novel, “Betrayed by Rita Hayworth” was recently issued for the second time this century by McNally Editions—and the cover of the Vintage International paperback boasts the same typeface and image as the playbill of the Broadway production.

The film and musical so overshadowed their source material that, when I first encountered the book, in a course called Subjectivity in Literature my freshman year of college, I thought that my eccentric professor had assigned a novelization to us as a way of challenging our assumptions about which books were worthy of study. Within a few pages, I realized my mistake. “Kiss of the Spider Woman” is a mysterious, formally inventive, beguiling work about two prisoners during the Dirty War in Argentina: a Marxist guerilla named Valentín and a gay window dresser named Molina, who develop a

transformative relationship as the latter narrates the plots of his favorite movies to the former. When I was nineteen, “Kiss of the Spider Woman” struck me as a work about finding love and preserving one’s humanity in the most inhumane of places. It is in some ways the opposite of Ariel Dorfman’s “Death and the Maiden,” a play in which the psychic scars of the Pinochet regime in Chile prove a universal solvent, dissolving any attempt at decency, or humanity, or truth. Reading the novel in the period between the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act and the repeal of sodomy laws in *Lawrence v. Texas*, I believed it to be a work of protest art, one that defiantly asserts Molina’s personhood even amid the Dirty War’s depredations. Reading “Kiss of the Spider Woman” today, the prison seems less like a real place, and the novel seems far trickier, and far harder to nail down to any one meaning. “Kiss of the Spider Woman” slips between different interpretations, just as its late-night conversations wander from the most frivolous of trivialities to the deepest of truths.

Puig would likely have objected to the idea that frivolity was opposed to truth. His sensibility was rooted in *cursi*, a word that lacks a direct English translation but is key to the consciousness that underlies his work. *Cursi* is the Blanche DuBois to machismo’s Stanley Kowalski, passionately insisting “I don’t want realism, I want magic!” Its closest equivalent in the United States is camp, but the two are not exactly the same. There’s a yearning to *cursi*, and a nostalgic fabulousness. Puig was the great twentieth-century writer of the *cursi* sensibility. He disdained the self-seriousness of many of his contemporaries in the Latin American Boom, particularly Gabriel García Márquez, who he felt had been ruined by critical praise. “Every sentence pretends to be the maximum phrase of all of literature,” Puig griped, about the future Nobel Prize winner’s “The Autumn of the Patriarch,” “and each one ends by weighing a ton.” Puig’s novels are deliberately playful and provocatively effeminate. They often ride the line between satire and sincerity, producing a result that is somehow both sincerely felt and heavily ironized. As Puig himself put it once in a letter, “that’s the real me: *Cursi*

and truthful.”

“Kiss of the Spider Woman” grew out of Puig’s frustrations with the politics of his era and his contemporaries. He eschewed explicit polemic in his work, which led to his being viewed with suspicion by both the left and the right. His first novel was panned by the center-right magazine *La Nación* for using colloquial Argentinean Spanish and accused of having Peronist sympathies. Living among fellow exiled Argentinean intellectuals in Mexico City, Puig found that he “was still a reactionary for not having joined the movement. Worst of all my book had been banned by the right wing and the Argentinian left didn’t care.” From this pain, he began taking notes on a novel in which two men—one straight and one gay, who “doesn’t have much education, but a *great* fantasy life”—would “meet through a mediator—movies.”

Puig, who wanted to be a screenwriter and only turned to writing novels after his thirtieth birthday, all but grew up in a movie theatre. According to “Manuel Puig and the Spider Woman,” a biography of Puig by his translator and friend Suzanne Jill Levine, his home town of General Villegas, in the Argentine Pampas, had one movie house, which showed a different film every day. Beginning in 1936, his mother, Malé, with whom he would remain extremely close throughout his life, took him to see “mostly American stuff” almost daily, at 6 P.M. Staring at the screen, he fell in love with the female stars of the thirties, constructing a pantheon out of Rita Hayworth, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Greta Garbo, and others. “I understood . . . the moral world of movies, where goodness, patience, and sacrifice were rewarded,” he later said. “In real life, nothing like that happened. . . . I, at a certain moment, decided that reality was what was on the screen and that my fate—to live in that town—was a bad impromptu movie that was about to end.” Malé had initially only intended to stay in General Villegas for a year and passed her frustrated dreams of cosmopolitan life down to her son. “It was like living in exile,” he would later say, and, in his first two novels, he would create a thinly veiled version of his home town,

called Colonel Vallejos, and treat it unkindly. As Clara, his fictionalized aunt in “Betrayed by Rita Hayworth,” puts it:

When I got off the train, my first impression was awful, there’s not a single tall building. They’re always having droughts there, so you don’t see many trees either. In the station there are no taxis, they still use the horse and buggy and the center of town is just two and a half blocks away. You can find a few trees that are hardly growing, but what you don’t see at all, anywhere, is real grass.

The Puigs left Villegas, moving to Buenos Aires by 1949, and it’s unclear whether Manuel ever returned to his home town, except in his imagination. Much of his life was lived in one form of exile or another, particularly after his novel “The Buenos Aires Affair” was suppressed in Argentina in 1974.

“Betrayed by Rita Hayworth” highlights again and again the contrast between the magic of cinema and the tawdry doldrums of everyday life. Puig preferred melodramas, which he called “the language in which the unconscious speaks,” along with screwball comedies and, once he got over the trauma of seeing “Bride of Frankenstein” at too young an age, cheap horror films. In his essay “Cinema and the Novel,” Puig wrote that the films of the thirties and forties had such lasting power because they “really were dreams displayed in images. . . . When I look at what survives in the history of cinema, I find increasing evidence of what little can be salvaged from all the attempts at realism.” He disliked much of Italian neorealism and the films of Martin Scorsese (“so much pretension and slowness”), and called Meryl Streep, Ellen Burstyn, Jill Clayburgh, and Glenn Close “the Four Horsewomen of the Apocalypse” for ushering in a more realistic femininity onscreen.

Escape into the dream world of cinema was an obsessive quest. Later in life, he would write his friend Guillermo Cabrera Infante a long list of the authors of the Latin American Boom as Hollywood starlets. Borges was Norma Shearer (“Oh so refined!”), García Márquez was Elizabeth Taylor (“Beautiful face but such short legs”), Mario Vargas Llosa was Esther

Williams (“Oh so disciplined (and boring)”). Among the eighteen names was Puig’s own. He was to be played by Julie Christie, a “great actress, but since she has found the right man for her (Warren Beatty) she doesn’t act anymore.” Years later, after his writing had brought him money and international acclaim, Puig would buy television sets and VCRs for friends, and then cajole them into recording classic films for him, eventually amassing a library of more than three thousand movies on upward of twelve hundred video cassettes.

Popular culture at its most *cursi* undergirds Puig’s work. It’s there in his titles— “Betrayed by Rita Hayworth,” “Heartbreak Tango,” “The Buenos Aires Affair,” “Kiss of the Spider Woman,” “Pubis Angelical,” “Eternal Curse on the Reader of These Pages,” “Blood of Requited Love,” “Tropical Night Falling”—which feel as if they could be printed in the most lurid of fonts, accompanied by the most sensational of exclamation points. His frustrated attempts to work as a screenwriter gave birth to his signature style, in which dialogue, stream of consciousness, and fake secondary sources like diary entries, surveillance reports, and newspaper articles bump up against one another. This marriage of high modernist experimentation with low cultural reference points and subject matter frequently led to his dismissal by Argentinean literati. He struggled for years to publish “Betrayed by Rita Hayworth,” and the accusation that he was a lightweight shadowed him even after his death. Reviewing Levine’s biography in the *Times*, Vargas Llosa wrote that “of all the writers I have known, the one who seemed least interested in literature was Manuel Puig,” before sniffing that “Puig’s work may be the best representative of what has been called light literature . . . an undemanding, pleasing literature that has no other purpose than to entertain.” Vargas Llosa’s estimation couldn’t be further off the mark. While Puig’s novels are entertaining—often riotously so—his formal techniques aren’t mere games, and his experimentations with dialogue still seem radical and groundbreaking decades after his death.

The novel in dialogue form is not new—authors from Diderot to Woolf and

Gaddis have experimented with it—but there is something eternally transgressive in its austerity. To work only in dialogue is to limit or altogether renounce such pleasurable tools as point of view, description, free indirect discourse, and narration. Playwrights know that their dialogue will be mediated through a production, through the choices and interpretations of a director and actors, and they can leave instructions in the form of stage directions and notes explaining their intent. But the novel in dialogue forgoes all this. It forces the reader to be at once director and detective, interpreting how the lines will be spoken, and searching each sentence for clues as to the basic facts of what is going on.

“Kiss of the Spider Woman” takes place in prison, yet it is six full pages of testy back-and-forth before the reader gets any glimpse of where the story is situated. Even these clues are related briefly:

- Wait a minute . . . Is there any water in the bottle?
- Mmm-hmm, I refilled it when they let me out of the john.
- Oh, that’s all right then.
- You want a little? It’s nice and fresh.
- No, just so there’s no problem with tea in the morning. Go on.
- Don’t worry so much, we have enough for the whole day.
- But I’m getting into bad habits. I forgot to bring it when they opened the door for the showers, if it wasn’t for you remembering, we’d be stuck without water later on.

As with Puig’s other novels, “Kiss of the Spider Woman” requires far more work on the reader’s part than we are accustomed to, but the result is a profound imaginative and emotional investment. We have, to an extent far greater than normal, created the world of the story we are reading. We are in that jail cell with Molina and Valentín, eavesdropping on their conversations, witnessing their slow transition from antagonistic cellmates to friends to lovers to something that cannot quite be put into language. Our struggle to piece together the action of their scenes together mirrors their struggle to understand each other and, perversely, the struggle of the secret police to determine what Valentín may know about the resistance unit he has

until recently been leading.

“Kiss of the Spider Woman” further confounds as it goes along. Just when you think you have a handle on it, it wriggles away and changes shape. The book begins with voices in the dark, as Molina relates the real-life 1942 film “Cat People” from memory, waxing rhapsodic in his micro-detailed descriptions of clothes, lighting, faces. Soon we learn that the two men have agreed to an experiment. To help pass the time after lights out in their cell, Molina will recount films to Valentín. These movies—there are six of them in all—form the book’s backbone. As he narrates the story of “Cat People,” Molina is expansive, romantic, and charming. Valentín is the opposite: terse, controlling, and analytical. When Molina describes the protagonist as “not thinking about the cold, it’s as if she’s in some other world, all wrapped up in herself,” Valentín responds, “If she’s wrapped up inside herself, she’s not in some other world. That’s a contradiction.” (Later, Valentín establishes the rules of their talk, demanding that Molina’s stories contain “no food and no naked girls.”) Valentín only likes the movie once he is able to interpret it in Marxist and Freudian terms. The highest praise he can offer is “it’s all so logical, it’s fantastic.” Our sympathies are drawn toward Molina. He’s the dreamer, the romantic, the sincere one, and Valentín—who studies all day and cannot even tell his girlfriend that he loves her, because the resistance needs them both more than they need each other—feels almost inhuman in his discipline, incapable of recognizing that his dream of Marxist revolution is a romantic fantasy of its own.

The next movie Molina swoons over is “Destino,” a Nazi film about the evils of the French Resistance. The movie, a composite invented by Puig, is an inversion of the Hollywood film “Paris Underground,” its female protagonist rather unsubtly named Leni. Molina knows that it’s Nazi propaganda but loves it, “because it’s well made, and besides it’s a work of art.” The stage appears to be set for an extended dialogue about the relationship between art and truth, aesthetics and politics, naïveté and logic, and so on. Yet Puig shifts gears again, introducing footnotes written in parodic academese that trace a

post-Freudian theory of homosexuality. The footnotes grow so extensive that they take over the book, drowning out the prisoners for pages on end. These give way to stream-of-consciousness asides that take us into Molina and Valentín's thoughts, the former self-pitying and sentimental, the latter obsessive and fevered. The text becomes marked with ellipses to denote physical actions that would normally be described, culminating in a sex scene composed solely of the words spoken by the two men:

I can't see at all, not at all. . . . it's so dark.

. . .

Slowly now . . .

. . .

No, that way it hurts a lot.

. . .

Wait . . . no, it's better like this, let me lift my legs.

. . .

A little slower . . . please . . .

. . .

That's better. . . .

"Kiss of the Spider Woman" moves from an avalanche of verbiage to a space where language is inadequate, and out again, with the two characters, having physically joined their bodies, finding new selves beyond the limits of their roles. It's not entirely clear whether, were the book written today, Molina would even be described as a man. He often identifies as a woman throughout "Kiss of the Spider Woman" and at one point says, "As for my friends and myself, we're a hundred percent female. . . . We're normal women; we sleep with men." Here, Molina is contrasting his social circle with "the other kind [of gay men] who fall in love with one another." The objects of Molina's desires are straight men. "What we're always waiting for," he says—she says?—is "a friendship or something, with a more serious person . . . with a man, of course. And that can't happen because a man . . . what he wants is a woman." Molina is filled with self-loathing, and unable to form any kind of real community or engage in political action, because "you

see yourself in the other ones like so many mirrors, and then you start running for your life.”

Molina and Valentín’s prison cell, a filthy space of isolation surrounded by the threat of torture and execution, becomes a nearly utopian arena where identity can be transcended. The two characters live, briefly, in a world beyond the self, beyond sexuality, beyond gender, beyond language. Molina describes this as feeling like “I’m someone else, who’s neither a man nor a woman” while Valentín describes the feeling as being “out of danger.” The novel that began as a series of oppositions—gay and straight, woman and man, naïve and political, dream and reality, *cursi* and honest—hasn’t resolved any of its conflicts so much as called into question whether these categories, and many of the others we use to organize our lives, aren’t arbitrary, as limited as they are limiting. Among the book’s many insoluble contradictions is how it demonstrates these categories being overcome but only in a prison cell and only through a near-total deconstruction of the self. “Kiss of the Spider Woman” refuses to neatly suit any kind of political program—Puig called gay readers offended by his portrait of Molina “Stalinist queens”—instead burrowing deeper and deeper into what its author called “the struggle for human dignity.”

It is no wonder, then, that the adaptations, which reduce the story to a romance between two seeming opposites amid a backdrop of degradation and fantasy, proved so much more successful. Ultimately, however, it is the book that will survive. The musical hasn’t been produced in New York since its hit Broadway run ended in 1995, and the film today feels painfully, at times hilariously, dated. William Hurt, an often wonderful actor, was miscast as Molina. Puig had objected to Hurt, responding to his signing on to the film with “in my bed maybe, but not as Molina!” And even though Hurt won an Oscar for his performance, Puig was right. Hurt, physically too large and obviously impersonating rather than inhabiting a fabulous gay character, somehow overacts and underplays at the same time. The director, Hector Babenco, primarily known for documentaries, lacks the sense of visual style

the film demands, and the movie seems embarrassed by the two men's sexual relationship. The screenplay reduces Molina and Valentín's affair to a one-off favor that Valentín does for Molina, and the camera cannot even show us the titular kiss between the two characters, on which the ending hinges. The film is a work of compromise, between director and stars, between screenplay and Hollywood mores, and between Puig and his pocketbook—one that reinforces the very categories that the novel sought to break down.

Unlike the movie, which feels fixed in time, the novel of “Kiss of the Spider Woman” feels timeless, or perhaps newly relevant again and again. Its meaning has already shifted for me over the decades, from a moving insistence on gay personhood to a prescient and acutely felt dramatization of how the gender binary imprisons us all. Who knows what it will mean when I revisit it again in a decade—but it will be waiting, provocative, defiant, *cursi*, and ready to challenge whatever boundaries we put around ourselves. ♦