

# Popular Culture and Liberatory Transformation: Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the Biopolitics of Fascism, and Argentinian Socioeconomics

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The postwar history of Argentina is central to what Manuel Puig accomplishes in his novel, *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, a “a popular, if not canonical, novel in the history of Latin American narrative” that “holds an incontestable place in most canons of gay literature” (Allan 71). Despite its fundamental relation to the period and place in which the novel takes place, the novel “remains remarkably fresh,” as it “considers themes and questions that continue to resonate with readers: intimacy, love, psychoanalysis, identity, politics, and sexuality” (Alan 71). This makes the novel a relevant text for the study of popular culture – an important element and theme in the novel – in relation to both the local cultures in which mass media is consumed and the global socioeconomic matrix in which it is produced. The novel follows the conversations of two Argentinian prisoners of the state in the 1970s during their internment; the topics of conversation vary from, and both of these elements are important, political theory to popular culture, in particular film. To pass time while imprisoned, Molina relates to Valentin various films he has seen, six in total. These conversations become the basis of their relationship, which evolves throughout the narrative, and become essential to their survival while oppressed by the Argentinian state of this period. As observed by Patricia and William Marchak in *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s* (1999), the period before the military coup of 1976 was defined by “political anarchy and economic decline,” especially in the years immediately before the novel's release in Spain<sup>1</sup> (3). During Juan Domingo Peron's third stint

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<sup>1</sup> Puig was living in Mexico when he started writing and published *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, having already run afoul of the authorities in Argentina for previous works. In particular, he was CARLOS TKACZ has an M.A. from California State University, Bakersfield, and is currently a doctoral researcher at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he studies speculative fiction and pop-culture through an ecocritical lens and in the Global Anglophone context.

in office from late 1973 until his death in 1974, after which his wife took over, “up to two thousand people were murdered by paramilitary groups known as the Triple A, organized by a ministry of the government” (3). Both before and after the military coup, which brought in the government generally referred to as the junta,<sup>2</sup> “the stated objective of state agencies engaged in killing people was to destroy subversives, communists, atheists, and dissidents” (3). This was a period of Argentinian history in which all governments, elected or otherwise, engaged variously in the oppression of their political threats, perceived and otherwise.

At the same time, the novel hinges on the characters’ engagements with popular culture; in this, Puig seems to anticipate the increasing importance popular culture will have in the contemporary world. According to Brad Adgate at *Forbes*, the United States entertainment market – the money consumers spent – reached \$37 billion in 2021. This does not include the social media market, which, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, accounted for “10.2 percent of U.S. gross domestic product” (1). Furthermore, the total market value for entertainment and media worldwide has been steadily on the rise and is expected to continue, reaching 2.51 trillion US dollars in 2022 (Guttman “Value of the Entertainment and Media Market Worldwide from 2017 to 2026”). Douglas Kellner, writing in 2020, observes that there has been little work in exploring how mass media “could be transformed and used as instruments of social enlightenment and progress” (296); yet, we see that Puig, over forty years before, had already anticipated this possibility. Using Argentina as a case study, Puig traces the ways in fascist biopolitics function through categorizations dependent on misrepresentations of ideas of the “natural,” which in turn allow for the utter exploitation of people through forms of violence and through the movement of resources outside of a country. In this context, he uses the novel’s formal structure and the insertion of popular culture from international sources to make visible the paradoxical avenues for liberatory transformation stories of mass media can offer

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threatened for his novel *The Buenos Aires Affair*, which contained anti-Peron sentiments (Cruz 307-8).

<sup>2</sup> The *junta* ruled the country from 1976 until 1983 (“Argentina’s Dirty War” 63). In 1985, the “Trials of the Junta” began prosecuting the crimes committed during this period, the “Dirty Wars,” but these were brought to an end in 1986 when the military threatened another coup. Since 2005, however, the trials have continued (66). For more, see *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (2011) by Marguerite Feitlowitz and *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War: Fascism, Populism, and Dictatorship in Twentieth Century Argentina* (2014) by Federico Finchelstein.

as the material for identity engagements that burst through the categories the state forces onto its populations.

### Argentinian History: Politics and Popular Culture Assemblages

The novel is situated in the political history in postwar Argentina. The politics of Argentina in the period from after World War II until the military coup of 1976, regardless of the political leanings of whomever was in power, was engaged in cementing a stronger and stronger sense of nationalism. The parameters of this nationalism are important: “the conservative church and military, that of the bureaucratic unions, and that of guerrilla fighters and dissident unions” all “engaged in social engineering, or ethnic cleansing,” in order to “reconstitute the society according to its version of ‘pure,’ ‘good,’ and ‘perfect’” with “the tacit consent of a fair part of the population” (Marchak and Marchak 7). These efforts were informed by “conservative nationalism” and “the scientific construction of biological races” (Carter 144) and sought “an ideal Argentine race” (Carter 148) through “a carefully planned, very well organized, even bureaucratic, response to a perceived threat” (Marchak and Marchak 319) in which the “killing of subversives was an exercise in logistics, so much so that excellent minds were put to the task of finding improved means of disposing of bodies” (Marchak and Marchak 319).<sup>3</sup> We see here several threads that connect to the idea of “nature” and the need of oppressive governments to categorize their subjects: ideologies of “purity” trend towards biological framings that paint forms of dissent as aberrations in “nature,” which in turn allow for the state to utilize these same, spurious definitions as justifications for the removal of dissent in ways that almost always target the bodies of peoples who do not fit the desirable categories

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<sup>3</sup> This issue is complicated, for the biological constructions mentioned do not quite correspond only to racial categories. Argentina’s history is one of much immigration, with European people’s coming to the country well into the post-45 era. My own family’s story testifies to this – my grandfather moved from a disputed territory between Ukraine and Poland to Argentina sometime between the World Wars. My father, born in Argentina, grew up and lived through Peron’s rise and through the early parts of the Dirty Wars. Both of them, and myself, are Caucasian, Slavic. Argentinian culture, from the particular dialect of Spanish they speak to the traditional foods, bears the stamp of Europe. I have always been made to understand that this is point of pride in Argentina, and Argentine’s are known for the pride they have in their culture as different from the rest of Latin America. As such, the categories mentioned in this section are racial but are also heavily influenced by cultural and ideological elements.

established by the state as being friendly towards its power.<sup>4</sup> The two prisoners, but in particular Molina, suffer from these abuses of state power.

Another important part of the novel that relates to Argentinian history – both the history of the politics and the history of the economics of the country – is the treatment of films Puig includes in the novel. The films vary in their content from romantic to political to purely genre-based; we will return to the importance of these soon. For the moment, it is necessary to recognize the role popular culture like film played in the development of the country in the period from the end of World War I until the publication of the novel. Michael B. Karush, in his book *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina* (2012),

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<sup>4</sup> The categories of existence framed as desirable by the state, insofar as they extend the state's power, are built in part on forms of subjectivity that determined, through oppressive tactics, by the state itself. For Foucault, one of the principal features of modern human relations is a new form of power that "is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being" and, furthermore, to "man-as-species" (1442). He specifies that state discipline, in this newer form, "tries to rule a multiplicity of men" through their "individual bodies" with surveillance, training, and punishment" (1442). This leads to Foucault's conception of "biopolitics," which "deals with... the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as a power's problem" (245). More specifically, according to Vandana Shiva, emphasis on the "natural" and the ways in which those categorizations create biopower and biopolitics "[transform] diversity into a disease and deficiency because it cannot be brought under centralized control" (101). For the state, this justifies "the use of coercion, control, and centralization" and "introduce[s] violence at many levels" (101). Shiva, here, is theorizing on the effects of globalization and the prevalence of monocultures in that system. This is relevant to the history of Argentina: as we shall see, Argentina's history can be seen through the tension between extra-national influences and a strong sense of nationalism. In the end, both the global influence of other countries in Argentina – through popular culture and through business – and the nationalist rhetoric utilized by many of the governments active during the period in question – also, interestingly, through the same avenues of popular culture and industry – both depended on the kinds of categorizations made available through biopolitical machinations. The next important theoretical context necessary for situating *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* is the relationship between fascist and oppressive structures and conception of "nature" or of what constitutes the "natural." Recent scholarship in ecocriticism, some of which engages with the term "nature" and calls into question its usefulness for environmental forms of thinking and writing, is cogent here. This scholarship connects the term and attendant concept to homogenizing efforts that are, ultimately, tied to oppressive categorizations utilized by totalitarian states to project specific, acceptable identities and social relationships, which in turn are mobilized for the protection and continuation of the state itself and usually at the expense of significant portions of the citizenry. As observed by Timothy Morton, the concept of nature can act as "a way of establishing racial or sexual identity" in which the "normal [is] set up as different from the pathological along the coordinates of the *natural* and the *unnatural*" (16). What this means is that "nature" can be used "to point out what is intrinsically human, and to exclude the human," as well as to "justify competition and cruelty" among the oppositional categories the term enables (19). Nature is, then, "a norm against which deviation is measured" (14).

observes the fact that “workers made up a substantial proportion of the audience for mass culture in Argentina” and that “the mass culture they consumed must have had a significant impact on their consciousness” (1-2). Popular culture in Argentina “trafficked in conformism, escapism, and the fantasy of upward mobility,” but there was a kind of paradox at work from the very beginning (3). Because Argentine producers of mass culture like film had to compete with entertainment imports from the United States, they focused their energies on “delivering what foreign mass culture could not: Argentine authenticity” (Karush 3). A tension was born here. In the back and forth between Argentinian and US produced mass culture, a sense of Argentinian identity based on “consumerism and middle-class aspirations” developed, thereby reinforcing the trend away from working-class militancy” (Karush 2). At the same time, “[c]orporations in the United States, penetrating Latin American markets to an unprecedented extent, launched an ambitious effort to disseminate North American ‘corporate culture’ abroad” (Karush 7). As such, popular media in Argentina operated through two, seemingly paradoxical strands. Mass culture in Argentina was a part of the development of a new sense of national identity,<sup>5</sup> and with it “came a fascination with newness, an ethos of individualism, and the ideal of the self-made man” (Karush 7). This was developing at the same time as the groundwork for Peron’s style of populism, the *peronismo*, a political movement built on leftist politics guided by labor concerns in the industrializing country.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, foreign involvement in Latin America, Argentina included, had deep effects in the modernization push the continent was going through in an attempt to improve the lives and fortunes of, depending on who you ask, the common people and/or the elite. By the time the military juntas took control of Argentina in the 70s and the violence that had already been happening exploded

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<sup>5</sup> Claudia Contento writes that the “period starting in 1862 is referred to in Argentine national historiography as the period of “national organization,” during which the state gave substance to its sovereignty and institutions,” and is the beginning of the nation as an independent state; that said, “both popular culture and the official history generally agree that Argentina’s origins lay in the break with Spain in 1810 or even earlier, during the colonial period.”

<sup>6</sup> *Peronismo*, or Peronism, “envisioned a government in which business, the labor unions, and the military would collaborate on behalf of national development, social peace, and political sovereignty” (Brennan and Rougier 17) through “a transition from an agrarian to an industrial society” (19). Peron’s sincerity, in his commitment to the working class, has been long debated, but it is hard to ignore the “role industrial capitalists” (17) played in his political action, in which “capitalist groups retained preponderant economic power” and in which “political power... rested in the hands of the businessmen” (40).

into something still larger, the common perception among those who were being oppressed was “that terrorism in Argentina... was a consequence of an economic restructuring plan that had its origins outside the country” (Marchak and Marchak 8). This is often attributed to “monetarism or neoliberalism,” ideologies that we might accurately say were supported by the paradoxes implicit in the popular engagement with mass culture, Argentinian and foreign, that was growing during the same period. One of the first steps in this direction began under the rule of Isabel Peron, who took over after her husband died in 1974; Juan Peron had come to power for the first time in the 40s by close involvement with and support from labor unions. It was, then, the “destruction of unions” that “began under the Isabel Peron regime and continued through the next several years” so that “foreign investment could operate in the domestic market on the same conditions as national companies,” a process supported by the military, that allowed that same military to take over the country in 1976 (Marchak and Marchak 326). This, in turn, “destroyed small national companies but provided entry into the global marketplace for Argentine capital” (Marchak and Marchak 326); we see here again the same paradox described above in the tensions between foreign involvement and national production. In order to achieve these ends, which began with Peron’s return and continued both through Isabel’s rule and into the military junta that came next, all three governments used similar tactics: the “kill[ing] off [of] all actual and potential opponents, and... destroy[ing] the strong union movement” (Marchak and Marchak 8). The military government especially was engaged in brutal tactics, “kidnapping and killing workers, students, and others who might have mounted an offensive campaign,” and this process is best seen as an “economic restructuring” that was “part of the more general social engineering” underway in Argentina in the 70s (Marchak and Marchak 8). Foreign influence in Argentina, then, had “profound but complex consequences” which led to “hybrid discourses, rather than straightforward cultural domination” (Karush 7).

### Narrative Forms and Political Oppression

The plot of *The Kiss of the Spiderwoman* speaks to these realities:<sup>7</sup> the story involves two imprisoned men – one for being a political dissenter and the other, presumably, for being a homosexual. In this, already, we see both angles of oppression laid out above represented. Valentin, the communist, represents political dissent, and Molina, who is gay, represents biological dissent. Their punishment, imprisonment, speaks to the forms of biopower oppressive states engage in; they are being held captive. That is, the abilities of their bodies to move in space are being restricted. We see the same in the treatment of Valentin, who is poisoned so as to try and force him into giving up information: through the introduction of a foreign substance, the processes of his own body are turned against him.

These modes of oppression are indicated in the form of the novel: it is written wholly in dialogue without any descriptions from a narrator about the settings, characters, or actions. Another way to put it is that the characters in the novel, through the form, are denied their own embodied lives, becoming instead only words on the page. Combined with the fact of their imprisonment, the state's biopower over them is complete – they are stripped of any sense of material reality, presumably so they can be rebuilt, if possible, as the state sees fit. This creative choice by Puig mobilizes the cell as a “[symbol] of the roles that the culture's oppression has enforced on them and the seemingly inescapable fact of their ultimate powerlessness” in the “unalterable reality of the cell” (Tuss 327). Puig here attends to the connection between emphases on the “natural” and the biopolitical enforcement of specific ways of being, as if those ways of being are the only “correct” ones available to subjects of the nation. Puig's choice also captures the reader in this structure of oppression: the reader, as well as the characters, is “trapped inside the highly structured world of the narrative, a parallel of the oppressive regime of the Argentina of the novel” (Tuss 327-8). In this way, the prison is one of the country's “holes of oblivion in which the destruction not only of human dignity, but also of human spontaneity, are chief

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<sup>7</sup> As do, it must be said, the “intrusive footnotes” spread throughout the novel. These insertions present “textual authorities,” often taking an academic tone and usually dedicated to the scientific and medical discussion of homosexuality, and are intimately concerned with the “causes” and “effects” of homosexuality and look at the people who identify this way from and lens that further objectifies them, collapsing their identities with the categories described above by tracing an “unknown authority” that is “a part of the text, yet.. distinct” (Boling 79). The “omniscient narrator” these footnotes point towards “has complete control and exists simultaneously outside and inside the narrative” (Boling 79, 80).

aims” (Amin 189). That is to say, Puig’s decision to leave out the bodies of the characters, relying only on their voices, indexes the biopower the state exercises. This biopower is reinforced by biopolitical conceptions of nation and subject, through an absence that lays bare the structures of oppression at work in Argentina during this period.

The characters themselves seem to, perhaps unconsciously, acknowledge these facts. The novel begins with Molina describing a film to Valentin – something that happens often in the narrative and a plot point we will return to soon. After a description detailing the appearance of a female character in the film, Valentin says, “Look, remember what I told you, no erotic descriptions. This isn’t the place for it” (Puig 4). It is the latter part of the quote that matters here: eroticism, which requires embodiment both for its phenomenology and its action, is for the moment left out of the realm of possibility within the confines of the cell, which represents the state as a whole. The original Spanish deepens this analysis:<sup>8</sup> in the original, the last part of the quote is written as: “Sabés que no conviene.” This can be translated other ways: “You know it’s not appropriate” or “You know it’s not suitable” or “You know it’s not advisable.” The tension between the English translation and the original Spanish is productive, in particular between the “This is not the place” of the English and the “You know” of the Spanish. The English version emphasizes the cell – a place and not a body. The Spanish version emphasizes the person being spoken to, who in this form is folded into the conjugation of the verb. What is more, the Spanish version speaks to the ways in which these conceptions are agreed upon formulations rather than facts of reality. Indeed, the root word for “conviene” is “convener,” which can also mean “agree on.” In their own ways, both erase the bodies of the speaker and spoken to. Cogent here are the concepts of “natural” and “unnatural” the state enforces. For Valentin, the erotic, that is the body, is left out of the realm of possibility because he still ascribes to the heterosexual definitions of sexuality endorsed by the government (a fact made clear through the imprisonment of Molina). Also important here is the way the words of the characters are delivered. The novel retains only the long dash as the markers of the words spoken by the characters –

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<sup>8</sup> For this portion of the analysis, I will be looking at the differences between the original Spanish text and the translation; I will not do this for the rest of the textual analyses in the novel; my emphasis is generally on elements in the novel that do not hinge on the subtleties of the writing itself—my focus is on elements of plot and action, as well as the format of the novel. These are textual elements that, in my opinion, work in either language. That said, I will provide the Spanish version, in footnotes, for each section of the text I utilize in my reading.



the technique most often used in Spanish language novels. What this means is that, in addition to not including any narration or descriptions of the characters, the novel also lacks any of the verbs most associated with speaking: says, asks, yells, etc. Verbs, of course, are words that indicate action, and the verbs used to denote speaking in narratives are indelibly tied to the body as they tie the words of dialogue to the physical actions that precipitate them. Through these techniques, Puig utterly separates the body from the narrative, thereby using the form of his novel to speak to the biopolitical machinations of the Argentinian state.

### Burst Categories and Liberatory Transformation

Through the conceit of the plot and the inclusion of film narratives in his own narrative, Puig begins to resolve the problems the citizens of oppressive states who do not conform to the dominant forms of subjectivity face: he was the “first novelist, writing in Spanish, who consistently utilized popular culture and the products of the show business industry in order to articulate his fictions” (Echaverren 581). For Puig’s characters, as can be seen in the novel, popular culture played an important role in their ability to survive their imprisonment. The films allow Molina and Valentin to “escape from reality once and a while” so that they “don’t go nuts” (Puig 78).<sup>9</sup> Valentin puts perhaps too fine a point on it when he says, while Molina is having stomach pains, “Tell me about the film so you don’t think about the pain, it hurts less if you try not to pay so much attention” (Puig 88).<sup>10</sup> The use of popular culture in this novel, however, goes beyond mere escapist tactics. Rather, as observed by Kimberly Chabot Davis, Puig’s use of popular culture as a form through which the characters interact – as the form of their dialogism, as it were – “moves audiences to weigh the merits and limitations of various dichotomous polls such as emotion versus reason, fantasy versus realism, and escapist kitsch versus Marxist critical thought” (1). That is to say, Puig’s engagement with mass-produced culture, through his characters, indexes the complex role popular culture plays in societies generally and in Argentina during this time more specifically. The inclusion of these films “betray[s] a lower

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<sup>9</sup> “Que me dejes un poco que me escape de la realidad, ¿para qué me voy a desesperar más todavía?, ¿quierés que me vuelva loco? Porque loca ya soy.”

<sup>10</sup> “Contame así no pensás en el dolor, te duele menos si te distraés...”

middle class, ravenous appetite for commercially packaged products” (Echaverran 581) and, at the same time, argues that “popular texts, and not only the avant-garde, can foster progressive change” (Davis 9). This move both “mounts a defense of popular culture” (Davis 9) and situates that culture, the culture of the masses, as the zone of revolution and change – this is further evidenced simply through the proximity of the characters in the novel and their dependence on each other. Valentin, the educated revolutionary, relies heavily for his physical and mental survival on Molina, the consumer of popular culture. This undercuts the idea that “only formally experimental, non-realist aesthetics can have transgressive politics, that popular culture never fosters critical thought” (Davis 9).

What is more, the novel “suggest[s] that such films can work to open up the identities of viewers” (Davis 9), an idea that connects popular culture to the idea common at the time that a new world will require a new kind of person.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted, here, that Molina’s use of popular culture in some ways mirrors Valentin’s communist ideology, which places the zone of power in the masses rather than in the few elite. By using the narrative techniques described above, Puig includes popular culture, a form of art geared towards the masses, in the broader ideological assemblage of revolutionary politics Valentin represents. There is, of course, a strange kind of paradox here – the Hollywood films Molina describes are, as is all mass-produced pop culture, the products of capitalism; indeed, they are only possible, in that form and due to the costs associated with their production, in a capitalist society that creates a surplus of wealth available to certain parts of its population. The loop here then becomes clear: the economic policies Argentina was increasingly engaged in during the years leading up to the publication of the novel, an early version of neoliberalism, moved wealth and resources outside of the country and increasingly to the United States. This at once degraded the living conditions of the working class in Argentina and

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<sup>11</sup> This is perhaps best seen in the many communist movements from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their goal to “remold the mind, psychology, and even character of individuals by various party and state policies designed” to do just that (Cheng 1). This “aspiration for changing human nature” (2) reflected “a calculated and systematic cultivation of ideas and perceptions, consciousness and subconsciousness, personal character, psychology, and even physical constitution” that constituted the concept of the “new man” (3), who then would become “an alternative human model” and a “a new stage in human evolution” (3). This idea is not unique to communism, however, and connects “with a more profound and enduring tradition of human society throughout history” that points to “a much deeper and more anxious concern about human development amid...changing circumstances” (7).

increased the wealth of the elites both there and in the United States, in turn allowing for the production of the very films that became tools for the survival of both prisoners.

Altogether, Puig's emphasis on popular culture engages in a kind of liberatory transformation that bursts open the authoritarian, biopolitical categorizations the fascist governments of Argentina in the postwar period used to, as explained above, control the population and enrich the elite. It is this transformation that resolves the paradoxes implicit in the use of popular culture for the liberation of the political subjects of authoritarian regimes: popular culture, "like culture more broadly, both enables and constrains" but ultimately provides "a set of discursive raw materials from which consumers can build their own meanings" that become "important sites for the elaboration of identities, values, and aspirations which can and do become the basis for political action" (Karush 5-6). This is not to say that the films Molina narrates in the text were made with these possibilities in mind. They were, of course, commercial products made for profit. Rather, the films become sources, almost found materials, that Molina and Valentin repurpose for their own needs.

Valentin, who here is speaking more generally but within the context of one of the films Molina is retelling, speaks to these possibilities when he says, "[R]eality...isn't restricted by this cell we live in. If you read something, if you study something, you transcend any cell you're inside of" (Puig 78).<sup>12</sup> Valentin is talking here about his own political studies; however, the fact of his very proximity to Molina, whose interests are more directly engaged with popular culture and with whom he shares the cell, and the fact that quickly he asks Molina to continue telling the film shows that this statement applies more broadly to the use of popular culture as well. Indeed, this transcendence of their reality goes deeper than the physical and cascades through their own mental processes as well. Later, when Molina is telling the story of the zombie film, he begins to have what might be called intrusive thoughts, presented by Puig as stream of consciousness and indicated in italics: "*police patrol, hideout, tear gas, door opens, submachine gun muzzles, black blood of asphyxiation gushing up in the mouth*: (Puig 158).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> "Porque escuchame, tu realidad, tu realidad no es solamente esta celda. Si estás leyendo algo, estudiando algo, ya trascendés la celda, ¿me entendés?"

<sup>13</sup> "patrulla policial, escondite, gases lacrimógenos, la puerta se abre, puntas de metralletas, sangre negra de asfixia sube a las bocas."

Note the content of these thoughts: images of state power that end with an image of death and silence. Those thoughts continue seamlessly, without punctuation, into Valentin's next spoken words: "Go on, why did you stop?"<sup>14</sup> There are two things of note here: Valentin, beset upon by what appear to be memories of his capture by state authorities, memories that increasingly threaten to take over his mind and destroy his resolve to survive the cell so as to continue his political fight, immediately turns to the story Molina is telling in order not only to escape the thoughts but to move past them, to find space on the other side of them that allows him to live another moment. Second, the final thought-image in the stream quoted above emphasizes death and the mouth and becomes a metaphor for biopower and biopolitics in which the subject's inability to speak is a part of the oppressive categorization fascist regimes use to control their populations – only certain groups, certain types, are allowed a voice. It is significant then that Valentin's next statement is about the film Molina is describing. It is the very engagement with popular culture, which by this point of the novel has begun to act as a kind of a bridge between the two men, that allows Valentin both the chance to speak and the chance to connect with another equally oppressed subject.

The novel also includes popular culture elements beyond film; later in the novel, after their first sexual encounter, Valentin asks Molina to describe "a toy [he] really liked" when he was young, "the one [he] like[s] most of all" (222).<sup>15</sup> Molina describes "a dolly with very blonde hair, all braided up" who "could blink her eyes, and wore a Bavarian costume" (223).<sup>16</sup> While this "bought" toy is interesting in and of itself – the fact that it represents a different culture than the one the two men, who don't fit within the dominant culture of their own country, is itself yet another testament to the ways in which mass produced culture can bring subjects into contact with other modes of being that then opens up their own senses of the possibilities of being – what is perhaps most cogent here is what happens next in the plot: Valentin laughs at Molina's memory. Molina's response is telling: "I think this is the first time you've laughed since I had the great

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<sup>14</sup> "Seguí, ¿por qué parás?"

<sup>15</sup> Que me digas si te acordás de algún juguete que te gustó mucho, el que más te gustó... de los que te compró tu mama."

<sup>16</sup> "No, una muñeca bien rubia, con trenzas, y que abría y cerraba los ojos, vestida de tirolesa."

misfortune to end up in your cell” (223).<sup>17</sup> When Valentin protests that he has certainly laughed before, Molina clarifies, saying, “Yes, but it’s always been when the lights were already out. I swear I never *saw* you laugh before” (223).<sup>18</sup> Laughter here is fundamental<sup>19</sup> – it exists in the space between the two men, nurtured and made possible by their growing relationship, which in turn was begun through their mutual engagement with the popular culture Molina spends most of the novel describing to Valentin. That is to say, this moment when Valentin laughs becomes the culmination of the liberatory transformation the novel engages with throughout the plot and text. It is here that they are both seen – for even though it is Valentin who is seen, seeing itself presupposes the see-er and brings both into being, especially in a text that forgoes almost all physical markers of the characters – and that includes both their personal and political ontologies. It is here, in the multi-faceted engagement with the world that popular culture engenders rather than in Valentin’s political study, that political liberation from the oppressive regimes of Argentina becomes possible.

We see here the ways in which this kind of engagement with popular culture, precisely because of its wide-ranging reach, mobilizes “idiolects which function within a culture or subculture” for the expansion of identities “whose frame[s] of reference [are] ordinarily restricted and whose range of meaning is severely limited” (Cohen 18). It is the “popular” part of “popular culture” that gives oppressed subjectivities access to liberatory cultural networks that are cordoned off in other forms of media. Mass produced culture is, by definition, easily accessible and difficult to gatekeep, allowing for characters like Molina and Valentin, who are confined both physically and in terms of their respective identities, to generate new “myths from bits and pieces of previous readings in given universe of culture” (Echaverren 583). These, in turn, create “a common world of speech and action from which they are forcibly eliminated and invest their dismal, isolated existence in the prison cell with a sense of reality” (Amin 191). In this way, these characters “appropriate fragments of a code of

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<sup>17</sup> Me parece que es la primera vez que te reís desde que tuve la mala suerte de entrar en tu celda.”

<sup>18</sup> “Sí, pero ha sido siempre cuando está la luz apagada. Te lo juro: nunca te había visto reírte.”

<sup>19</sup> Many philosophers have commented on laughter and its place in the human experience. For more, see: *Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy* (2019), edited by Pierre Destrée and Franco V. Trivigno; *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987) by John Morreall; and *Enjoyment From Laughter to Delight in Philosophy, Literature, the Fine Arts, and Aesthetics* (1998), edited by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka.

representation in order to” both survive their imprisonment and, through that survival, find a path through the paradoxes of their positions in Argentine society (Echaverren 582). The liberatory, transformative success of these engagements with popular culture can be seen in two moments in the novel (beyond those already described above): Valentin and Molina’s sexual relationship and Molina’s choice, after he gets out of prison, to defy the government by attempting to help Valentin and his revolutionary friends. Both of these moments have been written about extensively elsewhere. For my purposes, it suffices to say that the former, the fact that the two prisoners have sex, speaks to the ways in which their coming together transcends the boundaries generally implicit in all fascist governments and specifically at work in Argentina in the 1970s. Think back to the purposeful formulation of the Argentinian identity and the emphasis on purity noted in the first part of this article. In particular, it is Valentin, a heterosexual male, who bursts through these boundaries and categorizations to realize a new version of himself that exists within a broader network of possibilities. The latter, Molina’s political engagement once he is out of prison and at the behest of Valentin, signals a similar transformation; Molina, throughout the novel, is actively not political in his thinking, and yet he chooses, at great personal risk (which is actualized in his death), to become involved. Both of these moments speak to the liberatory possibilities the characters access through their engagements with popular culture, which is to say through their engagements with each other, thereby arguing for a broader understanding of the political uses of such mass produced culture.

## Conclusion

Manuel Puig was prescient in his emphasis on popular culture in the political imaginations of the people. The processes that were beginning, during the period in which he wrote *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*, to spread popular culture far and wide have, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, reached a kind of apotheosis of influence. Puig saw the transformative power of popular culture early and made this power an important element in his fiction, at once exploring and displaying the possibilities of mass media to make change in the world. Puig’s prescience is in full display in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as entertainment media has crossed over into all aspects of modern life, including the formation of identity. According to Douglas Kellner, media and entertainment have “helped produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and

providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities” (1) and therefore are “not innocent entertainment, but are thoroughly ideological products bound up with political rhetoric, struggles, agendas, and policies” that have “political significance and effects” (52). This observation lends still more importance to Puig’s imaginings of the potential power of popular culture for transformative social ends and strengthens the need for further academic study into these potentialities, work this article begins. As we look both forwards and backwards for ways to remake the world in increasingly more just and equitable forms, it is clear that popular culture has been and remains an important part of the construction and realization of those possibilities.

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