

Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

Vol. 9 No. 2 December 30, 2008

Approaches to Teaching Puig's Kiss of the Spider Woman. Daniel Balderston and Francine Masiello, eds.
New York: MLA, 2007 169 p.

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Teachers of Spanish American literature will welcome *Approaches to Teaching Puig's Kiss of the Spider Woman*, the second book of the MLA "Approaches to Teaching" series dedicated to Spanish American literature. After *Approaches to Teaching García Márquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published in 1990, we have waited seventeen years for another Spanish American title to appear. The list now numbers four, as *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* came out the same month as *Approaches to Teaching Kiss* (November 2007), and *Approaches to Teaching the Writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas* appeared in November 2008.

In the able hands of Daniel Balderston and Francine Masiello, *Approaches to Teaching Puig's Kiss of the Spider Woman* offers readers a comprehensive overview of the novel and its relation to the film. It is divided into Part One, "Materials," and Part Two, "Approaches," which consists of six parts: "Overture," "Narrative Structure," "Reading and Reception," "Politics and the Novel," "Cinema in the Novel," and "Performing the Novel."

"Materials" is brief but packed with essential information. Particularly useful is the historical and political background which explains that while many readers believe that the novel is set in the Argentine dictatorship from 1976-83, it actually refers to the violent period preceding the coup in which leftist Peronists were jailed. It points out that although the political affiliation of the character of Valentín is never clarified, he embodies the revolutionary left. This section provides a succinct overview of narrative structure and plot elements. Also very helpful are the reading lists of critical studies of the novel, works dealing with Latin American film, camp, Puig, and the historical context, as well as audiovisual materials.

Ricardo Piglia's brilliant essay, "The Puig Effect," which constitutes the section called "Overture," reflects on Puig's unique narrative style and outlook. Piglia discusses, for example, the evolving relationship between the men—how these two conflicting models are mediated by the world of movies and how the text recounts a seduction and metamorphosis. He identifies as Puig's overriding interest the exploration of the way in which new social narratives have influenced the construction of the imaginary, and how the relationship between private life and public world is mediated—or devised—by stories.

"Narrative Structure" includes essays by Lucille Kerr, Rosa Perelmuter, and Richard Young. Instructors will find much practical information for classroom use in Kerr's essay. She explains how she breaks the novel into chapter clusters for each reading assignment and what issues the class discusses for each cluster. Using "reading in the dark" as a theoretical frame for reading and an organizing principle for the discussion of the novel, Kerr's method is based on guiding the student readers from the initial "darkness" of two unidentified voices in the night to gradual illumination and increasing insight. The essay's focus is on the reading experience in practical and theoretical terms. Attention is also paid to the enigmatic ending and the extended meaning of the figure of spider woman—Molina and Valentín each ensnare each other in their own web and the reader is ensnared by Puig.

Perelmuter focuses on the narrative voices in the novel. Paying particular attention to the abundant footnotes, she elaborates on the motivations for the footnotes and their point of contact with the text. She points out the thematic collaboration between the three narrative levels that she identifies: text, film, and footnote. Her essay builds up to the discovery that despite the apparent absence of a narrator, through the diverse narrative voices Puig tells his tale with all the privilege of an omniscient narrator.

Young's essay identifies the novel's principal structural elements and explains how they require an active/accomplice reader: the reader constructs the web of meaning at the same time that s/he is ensnared by the web woven by the author. Particularly useful is Young's discussion of the relationship between the real and imaginary worlds of Molina and Valentín.

Essays by Juan Poblete, María Eugenia Mudrovcic, and José Amicola constitute the "Reading and Reception"

section. Poblete discusses ways of reading in the novel, considering the critical and distanced reading initially identified with Valentín versus the sensual and direct reading presumably embodied by Molina. He explains how the Marxist revolutionary and the gay subject “first collide and then transform themselves within the spatial limits of the cell” (68). Their eventual confusion and cross-over of positions serves to undo binaries and the presupposition of a stable, predetermined subject. At the same time, their destinies as victims of state violence remind us of the political economy in which their utopian encounter was situated. Poblete’s discussion of how he uses *Kiss* in the classroom is included in a footnote. This is a very helpful addition but rather than being peripheral to the essay, this material could be its heart.

Mudrovcic deals with the history of the novel’s reception. Pointing out that it was initially lukewarm at best, with exceptions. The turning point came ten years after its publication when the Babenco’s film version came out. Mudrovcic discusses the changes in the cinematic translation of the novel, changes such as emphasizing the love story and soft peddling the politics of both state and gender. Her goal in discussing the failures of the film version is to bring out the fact that only due to the movie’s failure did the public start to read Puig’s novel “the way it was supposed to be read” (82).

Amícola identifies the transformation of characters and fusion of identities as central to Puig’s project with this novel. He relates the melding and interchangeability of characters in their thoughts and speech to the recycled films and Puig’s careful naming of the protagonists. The recycled films present a fixed codification of romance that is undermined by the rapprochement of Molina and Valentín. Amícola points out the novel’s broader social reach insofar as Puig uses films as a springboard to echo discussions of gender and politics.

“Politics and the Novel” incorporates essays by Juan Pablo Dabove and José Maristany. Dabove’s essay will be particularly helpful for instructors wishing to use *Kiss* as a platform to discuss changes in Latin American society and politics in the 1970s. He addresses how the novel can be used to present topics pertaining to Latin American cultural history, explaining how the dichotomies of the novel, founded basically on the differences between Valentín and Molina, can function to map changing political paradigms in Latin America. Dabove points out that Puig’s novel presents “a powerful indictment of lettered culture,” embodying the “failed dreams of a generation” (97-98).

Maristany looks at *Kiss* in the context of early Argentine gay movement and the tensions between political and sexual liberation in Argentine militant groups. His essay addresses how Puig examines the “error” in the misunderstandings between the political vanguard and homosexuals. In the utopian space of the prison cell in *Kiss*, Maristany explains, consciousness can be modified as Valentín reevaluates “truths” about gender/ideological position in regard to sexuality.

Graciela Speranza and David Oubiña provide essays for the section entitled “Cinema in the Novel.” Speranza discusses how Puig uses the mix of film and literature to exploit the potentialities seen by Benjamin to reconcile high art and art for the masses. Explaining that Puig’s novels, like Molina’s movies, always talk about something else, Speranza notes that in *Kiss* Puig uses “the classic melodrama of sacrifice made for love to talk about homosexuality and sexual politics as an unfinished chapter in the process of Argentina’s social transformation in the 1970s” (116). Speranza also talks about other issues related to Puig’s cinematic project, such as his favorite directors, Hollywood films versus art films, and the high and low within the film industry.

Oubiña’s essay focuses on “the literary appropriation of imaginary mass culture” as the basis of the novel’s esthetic (122). He notes that while in other Puig novels, movies are part of the mass culture to which the writer refers, in *Kiss* the movie stories narrated by Molina constitute most of the central material and the relationship between the prisoners develops through their conversations about the movies. Because Molina and Valentín are opposites, communication between them is impossible, but the films function as an arena where the opposites confront each other and connect. Oubiña also discusses problems that Babenco encountered in his film adaptation, for instance the contextualization of the dialogue that opens the novel and the conversion of Molina’s narration of the films into imagery. He points out that while all of Puig’s novels include constant reference to the movies and cinematic imagery, they turn out to be traps for filmmakers because in them “cinema has been converted in its own way to literature” (129).

The final section, “Performing the Novel” contains essays penned by Suzanne Jill Levine and Idelber Avelar. Levine gives us a fascinating look at the inside story of the making of the film, with a focus on Puig’s role and his interaction with the film script and the actors. While Puig was not pleased with many aspects of the film, particularly William Hurt’s heavy-handed and humorless characterization of Molina, it was a resounding critical and commercial success, consolidating Puig’s reputation as a writer.

Avelar addresses the challenges of teaching the novel along with the film, which often erases the ambiguity constructed in the novel. Instructors are cautioned to discourage a facile reading of Valentín as the typical Latin

American macho and Molina as the force of renewal. Pointing out that the film fails to portray the subtlety and ambiguity of the gender politics in Puig's text, Avelar warns instructors to guide students away from attributing the different takes on gayness between the novel and the film to differences in the medium. Avelar's study questions, included in an appendix, help students tease out the subtle ideological differences between the novel and the film.

In *Approaches to Teaching Puig's Kiss of the Spider Woman*, instructors will find a collection of well written and insightful essays by leading Puig experts that allow them to examine the novel from multiple complementary perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of many fundamental aspects of the novel and its relation to the film. At the same time, one wishes more attention were paid to classroom practices. With the exception of the essays of Kerr, Poblete, and Avelar, explanations of how the professors engage their students and concrete suggestions as to how their approaches to the novel could be adapted to a student-centered class are absent. While the essays deliver important insights that will enable the instructor to guide the students' understanding of the novel, this material must either be incorporated into lecture notes or the instructor must use his or her own resources to translate them into a student-centered class. Notwithstanding this shortcoming, we are pleased to see another publication of the MLA series dedicated to a Latin American author and hope to see more in the future.