

**Romancing the Masses:
Puig, Perón and Argentine Intellectuals at the *Fin de Siècle***

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Prepared for delivery at the 1997 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association,
Continental Plaza Hotel, Guadalajara, Mexico, April 17-19, 1997.

I'd like to begin by situating my intervention here in two contexts: that of my work as a cultural critic in the American Academy and that of my work on Peronism. My comments emerge from questions I have been asking myself regarding the meaning and place of intellectual work, questions that have been overdetermined by polemics central to both, Peronist discourse and the relatively new field of Cultural Studies. My immersion in Cultural Studies has pressed me to ask what it means to be an intellectual in what we might call the age of postmodernism; what are the new challenges that face us, given the new ways in which culture is disseminated, given the new technologies we have to contend with, given the literary permutations they've inspired in traditional genres and the transformations of the publishing world, etc.? What is our role? Are we still, in some way, gatekeepers, determining, as Daniel James has written, "notions of social and cultural legitimacy--what Pierre Bourdieu has defined as 'cultural and symbolic' capital"?¹ Are we secretly activists trying to convert students into militant subversives? What kinds of culture will we promote? What will we teach in "culture and civilization" classes and to what ends? What does it mean to form part of institutions that have adopted the mantra of "multiculturalism"? What do intellectuals in the North American Academy have in common with intellectuals working in Latin America? And what is at stake for each of us as we try to redefine the place of the intellectual at the fin-de-siècle?

While these kinds of questions are being asked by academicians working in a variety of disciplines and institutions all over the world, my own particular process of questioning grows out of the critique of intellectual work that originated with Perón and transformed the Argentine intellectual and cultural fields. The sorts of questions so central today to Cultural Studies practitioners are precisely those questions Peronism's inversion of cultural hierarchies forced Argentine intellectuals (and later, scholars of Peronism) to ask. One of the most far-reaching consequences of these challenges was a much more

¹Daniel James, "October 17th and 18th, 1945: Mass Protest, Peronism and the Argentine Working Class," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Spring 1988), 454.

populist approach to culture by younger generations of Argentine scholars, an approach that anticipated the types of interventions to which Cultural Studies has given a name.

I would like to suggest here, then, that Peronism functions as the catalyst for Cultural Studies in Argentina. I see Peronism as symbolic of a transformation in the intellectual and cultural fields, one that entailed the demise of a rarified cultural elite (in Argentina best represented by the journal *Sur*) in favor of a more populist (and I use the word intentionally) approach to culture. I say “symbolic of” because I believe that Peronism not only attacked the traditional intellectual and those establishments that determined social and cultural legitimacy (universities, the press); it did so strengthened by processes of urbanization and industrialization with which it coincided--processes that, indeed, must be credited with fueling Perón’s own rise to power. That is, I want to be careful here not to suggest a kind of cause-effect; but at the same time, I want to underline how, in the Argentine cultural imagination at least, the two (Peronism and modernization) have become inevitably linked.

In his piece on “Political Puig: Eva Perón and the Populist Negotiation of Modernity,” John Kraniauskas convincingly traces the geneology of the strong cultural element sustaining Peronism to the figure of Evita. He sees in her, as he puts it, an opening to studying Peronism as a cultural formation, evidence of “how Peronism (as regime and as national-popular movement) actually was constituted--at least in part--through cultural form.”² Along these lines he writes: “This story of Peronism ... takes us with Eva into and through an emerging mass media--musicians on tour, popular theatre, radio, film, and their associated magazines--which was beginning to make its presence felt on politics: Eva meets Perón, the media meet the military” (124). What I find useful in his reading is the notion that Peronism was constituted as a cultural phenomenon in as

²John Kraniauskas, “Political Puig: Eva Perón and the Populist Negotiation of Modernity.” *New Formations* 28 (Spring 1996) 125. Hereafter, page numbers will be noted following the citation in the text.

much as it was a political and economic one; however, I want to extend this claim to argue that while culture was central to the development of Peronism, the Peronist inversion of long-standing cultural hierarchies was, in turn, definitive for Argentine cultural production thereafter; more to the point, it determined, to a large extent, the interest intellectuals would come to show in previously disparaged cultural formations. Indeed, I would go so far as to claim that the state's negotiation of culture provided a model that later would be adopted--if not wholesale--by cultural practitioners and new generations of intellectuals attempting to forge alliances with the same audiences interpellated by Perón. (The creators of *Contorno* are an early example of this shift, a shift that risked obviating the "literary" altogether.³)

Kraniauskas' reading of Eva Perón as a fetish enabling the "mobilizing-demobilizing" dynamic that has been used to describe Peronist populism is also useful, as is his link, through her, to melodrama. But what I want to stress here is the effect of these associations on those established intellectuals and thinkers who were being challenged by this new model. As Kraniauskas points out: "Eva Perón invades the political space of the state, coded as male, in much the same way as Puig's screen-goddesses invade the literary work. Once great writers occupied and ran the state, now it had been taken over by a common actress whose political scripts were written by the same author as her radio plays!" (126) Where would this change leave those great writers? What were they to do?

Clearly these questions--among others--are still with us today. I'd like to focus in the time that remains on two kinds of intellectuals, a literary and cultural critic (Beatriz Sarlo) and a writer of fiction (Manuel Puig), both writing after the death of Perón and in the shadow of the government repression that followed. I see them as intervening in a cultural field that was shaped, to a large extent, by the experience of Peronism that began

³ For a more thorough discussion of the *Contorno* group, and their transformation from literary critics to political activists, see the chapter "Mapping the Intellectual Field" in my dissertation, *Engaging Peronism: Gender Conflict and Culture Wars in Recent Argentine Literature* (1995).

in 1945 and still has not concluded (albeit the fact that Menem's policies have little in common with those of Perón's first or second presidencies). I see a populist edge spurred on by Peronism manifest both in Puig's fictions, and in Beatriz Sarlo's most recent book, Escenas de la vida posmoderna, although, as I will show, their positions regarding this cultural populism are radically different. While Puig's work seems to celebrate this invasion of the "screen-goddess", identifying with it and repeating it in his fiction, other writers and intellectuals--Sarlo among them--acknowledge the invasion only to shore up their resistance to it.

Indeed, Sarlo's text illustrates what I think has been the more typical position intellectuals (and I include writers of fiction in this category) have assumed vis-à-vis their audiences as cultural studies practitioners. While Sarlo has shifted her gaze in recent years to consider television, shopping practices, the popularity of Xuxa and nintendo, among other subjects, her work is tinged by a pervasive uneasiness that often clouds her most brilliant insights. I will explain.

In Escenas de la vida posmoderna, Sarlo addresses various forms of popular culture in an effort to recognize their importance in shaping historical subjects. While her study of these new formations is at times provocative as well as thorough, a sense of alarm pervades much of her text. About television, for example, she writes:

En lugar del caudillo político, que mediaba entre sus fieles y las instituciones, la estrella televisiva es una *mediadora sin memoria*, que olvida todo entre corte publicitario y corte publicitario, y cuyo poder no reposa en la solución de los problemas de su protegido sino el ofrecimiento de un espacio de reclamos y, también, de reparaciones simbólicas. Como los solitarios que van a buscar pareja a los programas de televisión, los olvidados y los rechazados buscan en ella la escucha que no encontraron en otra parte. (84)

And later: "En la intemperie relacional de las grandes ciudades, la televisión promete comunidades imaginarias y en ellas viven quienes hoy son escépticos sobre la posibilidad de fundar o fortalecer otras comunidades" (85). Television, in short, in Sarlo's estimation threatens to guide viewers, too seduced by the television screen to know any better,

towards symbolic resolutions bereft of memory or history. And in so doing, it threatens to forestall the possibility of action in “the real world” by providing viewers with imaginary communities that render grass roots, community-based initiatives practically obsolete.

I find this perspective highly problematic, not so much because of what it accuses television of doing--although this, too, I think, is open to interpretation--but rather because of the way in which it demeans its consumers. They are, in her words, like “solitarios,” “olvidados,” and “rechazados” who turn on their television sets to console themselves for injustices suffered in their daily lives. Moreover, I am not at all convinced that those who are interpellated by these televised imagined communities are, every one, “escépticos sobre la posibilidad de fundar o fortalecer otras comunidades.” I am not at all sure these two kinds of “communities” are mutually exclusive. I underline these associations because I find them symptomatic of a problem that recurs throughout her text--the infantilization and devaluation of a viewing public that actually may prove quite capable not only of engaging critically with what they consume, but of using the televised imagined community as a springboard for coalition building in the non-televised world.

In the end, Sarlo’s text seems less concerned with the poor quality of television programming than with how this material is being read by the public; it is this second area that drives her attempt to re-define the role of the intellectual in a postmodern world. She is writing, at a most basic level, to validate the continued necessity for the kind of intellectual the experience of modernity produced. In her own words:

La figura del intelectual (artista, filósofo, pensador), tal como se produjo en la modernidad clásica, ha entrado en su ocaso. Pero algunas de las funciones que esa figura consideraba como propias siguen siendo reclamadas por una realidad que ha cambiado (y por lo tanto ya no acepta legisladores ni profetas como guías) pero no tanto como para volver inútil lo que fue un eje de la práctica intelectual de los últimos dos siglos: la crítica de lo existente, el espíritu libre y anticonformista, la ausencia de temor ante los poderosos, el sentido de solidaridad con las víctimas. (180)

In this framework, then, the question becomes not only whether we will reject or embrace mass and popular cultures, but rather who will teach us--consumers--to read and consume

them critically. She has little faith in consumers per se, in our ability to read critically without a little guidance, for a variety of reasons--lack of time being the most benign. And she has little faith in the various types of intellectuals postmodernity has produced (the effect is something like the splintering of her "ideal" public intellectual into academic experts who work as experts and not as intellectuals, electronic intellectuals, mass media specialists, etc.). At its best, her book might be read as an impassioned plea to other intellectuals not to abandon the cultural field to so-called "experts" or market analysts. Where the type of intellectual she advocates might be located, and to whom he or she should speak, remains a problem (Alberto Moreiras has signalled her ideal intellectual as peculiarly disembodied). But the risk of abandoning this field of study involves, in her view, enabling a "market absolutism" (*absolutismo de mercado*, 168) to take over and to decide for (or against) us.

While I agree with her view that much work needs to be done in the fields of mass and popular cultures and their critique, I am wary of what I read as a great deal of nostalgia for the traditional intellectual and other producers of so-called "high culture". This nostalgia is understandable if we read the consequences of the disappearance of the public/ideal intellectual as meaning the end of critical thinking and the beginning of market absolutism. But I'd like to suggest that this apocalyptic vision is due, at least in part, to confusing the production of mass and popular cultures with their critique. She argues, for example, that not all art forms are equal (197); she says that the study of Xuxa will get us only so far, by which I think she means to imply there are other types of scholarly agendas that must take precedence in the cultural hierarchy because of their inherent ability to produce better critiques. She seems to be comfortable assuming that the world is justly distributed into high and low, that these categories are valid and should be applied to intellectual endeavors, which, like art, aren't all equal. The unspoken fear seems to be the devaluation and marginalization of literature and literary criticism in favor of other kinds

of cultural critique--critiques that, in Sarlo's estimation, only can do so much.⁴ The enemies in this framework remain pop and mass cultures (the low), that not only oppose critical thinking (the task of the intellectual, the high), but further threaten to contaminate the intellectual field with so-called "experts" working in the academy and with market analysts--a condition that almost certainly would imply the end of critical thinking as we have known it.

It's interesting to me that in a book dedicated to the study of "la vida posmoderna," there should be such a pervasive sense of "high" and "low" culture organizing its theoretical positions. This structuring principle makes it virtually impossible for Sarlo to embrace any kind of cultural populism, because she always finds herself sitting on the other side of the fence, looking down at the masses too entranced by their television screens to look back up and recognize her.⁵ She worries in her final pages (198) that there aren't many individuals fighting over the means to address a disinterested public regarding the pleasures and hidden dangers of cultural consumption; I don't. She wonders whether cultural criticism will be a discourse adopted by intellectuals; I am sure that it will be, and that many will respond to her call to arms. What I am not sure of is whether we all will be fighting the same battle.

The most clear conclusion I draw from Sarlo's exploration of postmodern life is that she does not trust the forms she engages to produce the kinds of historical subjects

⁴ In the March 1997 issue of *PMLA*, Rachel Bowlby signals the same issue at the core of the Cultural Studies--Literature debate. To clarify the misconception that Cultural Studies, at its best, privileges non-textual methodologies over other more traditional kinds (i.e. close readings), and certain cultural "texts" over others (those deemed to possess an inherently aesthetic value), she writes: "Closely reading nonliterary writing doesn't imply an aesthetic valuation of that writing any more than asking a cultural question of an established literary text implies that the text is no different in its history or its provenance from, say, an extract from a marketing textbook. Not all literary work is cultural studies, and not all cultural studies involves modes or objects of reading that are literary. But the area in which the circles cross can unsettle both fields in potentially challenging ways..." (*PMLA*, Forum on the Literary vs. Cultural Studies, March 1997, 277).

⁵ Contrast the position of Antonio Skármeta in Chile who, for a while, took up residence in that very television screen in an attempt to make "culture" popular.

that might be considered model, engaged citizens; she sees these cultural products, rather, as rendering their audiences passive and muting all possibility for the formation of politicized and critical voices. Hence, she approaches her subject, having internalized the lessons of the Frankfurt School, at once recognizing the importance of pop culture and the mass media, and simultaneously recasting her intellectual mandate as that of warning her readers not to be led astray by them.

While this may be putting it rather strongly, it is a position that echos that of other cultural practitioners drawn to the popular and mass mediatic while distrusting its supposed effects (I'm thinking here, particularly, of Tomás Eloy Martínez, who could not have written more eloquently about Peronism, whose fascination with Perón and Evita Duarte could not be stronger, but who at the same time writes in order to break Perón's spell, in order to show his audience a better way to "enlightenment" and freedom; indeed, in the final pages of La novela de Perón, Perón and Sarlo's T.V. screen become one and the same, an indistinguishable mirage that, by promising believers salvation, actually seems to ensure their silence, passivity, isolation, and possibly even death).⁶ The alarm Sarlo's book sounds, finally, raises the question that concerns me here--what is to become of us, of traditional intellectuals, of any kind of intellectual, in light of a cultural revolution that threatens to render her and us obsolete? Is there a place for intellectual critique in the world of zapping? My preliminary answer is yes, if by intellectual critique we understand more than a high cultural practice interested primarily in aesthetic valuation.

I want to suggest that we might find a different model for cultural work and for relating to our audiences through Cultural Studies in the narratives of Manuel Puig. I want to focus briefly here on two of his novels, El beso de la mujer araña and Pubis angelical, that explore the relationship between intellectual work and the potentially

⁶ I explore this position rather extensively in my dissertation, *Engaging Peronism: Gender Conflict and Culture Wars in Recent Argentine Literature* (1995).

liberating pleasures afforded by popular culture and the mass media. In El beso, this relationship is drawn through the figures of Valentín, a political prisoner and politicized critic, and of Molina, an imprisoned homosexual and avid movie-goer. In Pubis angelical, Puig links this debate explicitly to 1970s Peronism, exploring some of the issues it raises through the conversations of an exiled Argentine woman dying of cancer in a Mexican hospital and a militant Peronist seeking her help in furthering his cause. What Puig manages to do in both these texts is to use unorthodox mediums (B-movies, the institution of marriage) as vehicles for constructing rigorous socio-cultural critiques.

Sarlo's concern that focusing on pop culture can only take us so far as critics is a notion completely deflated by Molina and Valentín's exemplary engagement with Molina's B-movies; as is her fear that the entertainment value they provide necessarily excludes the creation of politically committed, imagined communities beyond the movie or television screen. True: Valentín and Molina are fictional characters, but Puig's engagement with pop culture leads him to imagine and represent it as a possible bridge to political action. However we read Molina's and Valentín's transformations at the end of the novel--and particularly, whether or not we see Molina's death as that of a politicized individual dying for a cause he believes in or as that of a movie fan emulating a movie star's death--El beso makes clear that movie memories, that the stories they tell, can be central experiences in shaping historical subjects. In her work on French fascism, Alice Kaplan suggests as much when she asks: "What is the connection of the analytically powerful screen memory to people's memories of their favorite films? Is film-watching tantamount to building a personal history, an alternative to 'lived experience' with a fresh set of images offered to the individual by the culture?"⁷ For Molina, the answer is a resounding yes: the movies he tells are indeed central to shaping his sense of self, and the work of interpretation undertaken inside the prison cell serves as an opportunity for further self-transformation.

⁷Alice Kaplan, Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 5.

But before that work can be undertaken, the cell has to become a safe space where a community of learners can grow. Only then can they engage in a meaningful dialogue about their culture and begin to read it critically--a crucial step towards liberation and a model for the work of cultural studies.

In Pubis angelical (1979), Puig revisits this debate, centering it this time on the ideological struggle to define 1970s Peronism. The narrative position that most clearly approximates that of the intellectual is Pozzi's, a lawyer who has been working to release political prisoners and fighting to reinstate what he sees as "true" Peronism. Ana's position in some ways mimics Molina's in El beso: she is politically uninterested, although her relationships with various men have managed to trap her in a web of political intrigue. Their respective views of Peronism are summed up in the following exchange:

--Ana, yo tengo que volver, no me puedo resignar a quedarme. Con las cosas que están pasando allá. Me siento . . . me parece . . . que está mal quedarme acá, en vez de ir a hacer algo.

--Para mí este gobierno es el peronismo verdadero, de matones y nazis.

--No es el peronismo por el que yo trabajé, y vos sabés cuánto trabajé.

--Pozzi, vos te imaginaste el peronismo a tu antojo, y te casaste sin conocerlo. Y es ahora que la fiera te muestra los dientes. . . . Lo que sos es . . . un inocentón, un iluso, que te metiste en todo este lío por qué sé yo . . . por romántico. Igual que yo me metí en el lío de casarme con un hombre que no sabía quién era. Y sos también un irresponsable, porque colaborás con gente que toma las armas sin saber lo que hacen. Tan irresponsable como yo, que traje al mundo a mi hija porque sí nomás. Así que somos los dos iguales, unos ilusos y unos irresponsables.⁸

I am taken with Ana's assessment of Peronism here because it suggests an equivalence between marriage and political affiliation, both processes having to do with a willingness to suspend disbelief in subscribing to one or the other romantic fiction. It suggests a kind of social conditioning that leads to bad marriages and alliances, on both personal and political fronts. And it represents an attempt to explain, from a female perspective which

⁸Manuel Puig, Pubis Angelical (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981), 148-149.

counterbalances the macho intellectual gaze, the blind fervor and passionate allegiance to the dream suitor, be he Perón or the long sought for perfect husband.

Ana also sums up what many intellectuals believe is at the heart of the political turbulence that has marked Argentina's twentieth century and the profound ambivalence at the center of its intellectual history. She speaks to the romance of the masses with Perón, his ability to seduce millions of would-be readers away from their other willing caudillos--intellectuals ready to lead them into an enlightened future, away from the presumed barbarism of their lowly pasts and misguided faiths. In this framework, Peronism, as a mass cultural fiction (akin to Sarlo's and Martínez's television sets), continues to be perceived at best as a source of ambivalence and at worst as a serious threat to political stability. But--and here's the rub--while Ana's words are intended as a condemnation of Peronism (and marriage, at least how she has lived it), they also capture the kinds of desires and fairy tale narratives invoked by Perón, narratives as ingrained in the processes of identity construction as are the gendered scripts that can lead to heterosexual desire and failed marriages. In short, her words return this intellectual debate to the realm of affect.

Puig's representation of Peronism as a kind of romantic fiction strikes me as more than accurate, as does the suggestion that by the late seventies, whatever revolutionary potential Peronism encoded--both in terms of gender and in terms of economic and social justice--had been channeled into a violent show of macho force that did not hesitate to use torture in molding the nation to its liking. His decision to read Peronism through gender (marriage being a framework traditionally deemed more appropriate for "feminine" sentimental fictions than "masculine" political analysis) bears a strong resemblance to my own intuition that Peronism must be studied as more than a series of political and legislative moves, and as more than a fiction that appealed only to blind and passive masses. Puig's text suggests that Peronism must be studied as a kind of romance, a mass cultural fiction that continues to seduce not only because through it many Argentines for

the first time were interpellated and constituted as historical subjects, but also because the dream of justice it conjured remains viable to this day.

What I am trying to suggest here is that the spectre of Peronism offers us an opportunity--like it offered Puig--to re-situate ourselves as cultural critics, and to re-examine the desires driving our own theoretical interventions. If in Pubis angelical, Peronism becomes, at a certain level, the object of study, it is an object that manages to bridge high and low in the kinds of critical challenges it poses. It is "high" to the extent that, as a political movement it takes over the national arena and the political imaginary, thereby requiring rigorous analysis and theoretical attention; it is "low" to the extent that, as a mass cultural fiction it captures the cultural imaginary and thereby can be readily dismissed as yet another "novelita rosa". The questions it poses for study are taken up by a woman with no intellectual aspirations and by a man highly skilled in constructing arguments. And yet, the final verdict on Peronism is one which unites the two positions, breaking down the distinctions between high and low, between intellectual and popular responses. It is a reading that underlines the desires Peronism provoked, and the consequences their satisfaction and repression entailed. It is a reading that demands that we take seriously those TV screens that are capturing the public's attention, and that we engage honestly and critically with the needs and desires mass and popular cultures nurture. As Ana reads it, Peronism is essentially a cultural phenomenon that demands an emotional response; and as such, it is a reading that can guide our own work in Cultural Studies.

If we understand Peronism as the secret history of Cultural Studies, we can begin to contextualize some of the fears Sarlo's text conjures. It is a history, however, that teaches, as I read it, the crucial place of mass and popular cultures in shaping historical subjects. It is this call to arms, finally, that I find most compelling--one that embraces the transformative potential in mass and popular culture and that gives credit to the hardworking imaginations of its consumers. If we find that we are capable of engaging

with our objects of study not only as critics, but as consumers, as muddled by needs and desires as those audiences with whom we are attempting to initiate dialogues, I am convinced we will issue in a new era of cultural work whose transformative potential will match--if not surpass--that of Sarlo's most beloved traditional intellectuals.