

Sentimental Postmodernism and the Politics of Identification

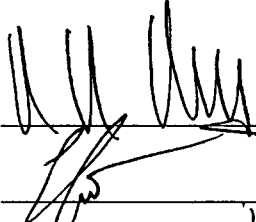
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## Abstract

This cultural study analyzes the politics of a hybrid genre that I call “sentimental postmodernism” and offers a reception study of its audiences. I examine contemporary popular texts from literature, film, and television that invoke two seemingly antithetical sensibilities--the sentimental and the postmodern. Offering an alternative to the nihilism and political apathy associated with postmodernism, sentimental postmodernist texts foster sympathy, embrace “feminine” values, and highlight the political stakes of identity formation. Focusing on such texts as Jane Campion’s film *The Piano*, Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and its film and musical adaptations, and the television series *Northern Exposure*, I examine how different American audience groups negotiate the conflicted treatment of gender, race, and sexual identity at work in these texts. Because sentimental postmodernist texts employ melodrama’s essentialist stereotypes while also engaging in a postmodern questioning of identity politics, they speak to people caught between competing conceptions of the self. Contemporary debates about identity politics are highlighted by this hybrid genre and its reception. Furthermore, audiences of sentimental postmodernism experience emotionally powerful political identifications that call into question existing theories of identification in literary and media studies. Many scholars have conceptualized identification as an unconscious process of self-recognition that solidifies unitary identities among spectators and readers. My study questions this essentialist and ultimately apolitical vision of the power of identification in contemporary culture, offering a more flexible model of identification that takes into account

postmodern notions of identity as fluid, ambiguous, and impure. While most audience studies investigate how reading is affected by a single axis of identity such as gender or class, my interviews with audiences underscore that the self is a web of multiple affiliations and ideologies, resulting in identifications that often exceed the boundaries of identity.



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dissertation does not wholly define me, and that I am as multiply-located as the subjects of my ethnographic study.

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## Introduction

*"Cynicism is not revolutionary." --Amiri Baraka*

Nihilism, alienation, apocalypse, dislocation, fragmentation, irony, self-reflexivity, parody, anti-foundationalism, the "death of the social," and a "waning of affect"--all of these terms have been associated with the cultural zeitgeist of postmodernism. Many literary critics discuss postmodern aesthetics as an extension of high modernist and avant garde techniques of defamiliarization, a disruption of the total immersion fostered by realist texts.<sup>1</sup> By foregrounding their own construction through the tactic of self-reflexivity, postmodern texts have been called "writerly" because they challenge a reader to construct meaning, to "rewrite" the text in a sense.<sup>2</sup> Many critics see postmodernism as an extension of post-structuralism, a philosophy that questions and demystifies Enlightenment foundations. Tobin Siebers argues that postmodernism "embraces a world of images and surfaces; it is distrustful of politics and deliberately shuns ideas of depth psychology" (31). The concepts of presence and essence have been replaced by surfaces, and the real has been replaced by images.<sup>3</sup> Social dislocation and the fragmentation of the self are key themes in postmodern literature and film, in which a cynical, ironic sensibility pervades. Postmodern film, in particular, has abounded in narratives of apocalypse.<sup>4</sup> This nihilistic sensibility and political detachment has led Fredric Jameson to conclude that contemporary culture is suffering from a "waning of affect" (*Postmodernism* 16).

Given these descriptions of postmodernism, *sentimental* postmodernism may seem to be an oxymoron or an impossibility. As Winfried Herget points out, “irony, above all, is alien to the sentimental purpose” (“Towards” 7). As opposed to the “writerly” and ironic texts of highbrow postmodernism, sentimental and melodramatic texts aim for total immersion by engaging readers emotionally rather than intellectually. Post-structuralism’s critique of the metaphysics of presence strikes at the heart of melodrama’s worldview.<sup>5</sup> Sentiment and melodrama rest on the very foundations--essentialist identities, in particular--that postmodernism appears to attack. Through the use of excessive symbolism, melodrama searches for plenitude and depth and refuses to accept a world without transcendence and meaning (Brooks 22). The utopic humanism of sentimentality and melodrama seems incompatible with the cynical, nihilistic vision often ascribed to postmodernism.<sup>6</sup>

Although the sentimental and the postmodern may appear to be at odds with one another, many contemporary texts in literature, film, television, and musical theater have nonetheless combined these competing worldviews. I argue that this generic and aesthetic mixture--of surface and depth models, of irony and sentimentality, of avant garde and melodramatic aesthetics--creates a productive tension that accomplishes important political work. My analysis of the political significance of the sub-genre that I call “sentimental postmodernism” focuses on the following key texts--*Kiss of the Spider Woman* (novel, film, and musical), *The Piano* (film), and *Northern Exposure* (television).<sup>7</sup> These hybrid texts work both within and against postmodernism to offer an antidote to the nihilism, emotional disconnection, anti-popular spirit, and masculinist

values of many of its fictional and theoretical texts. Jean Baudrillard and Lawrence Grossberg have argued that the “constant deconstructive cynicism of the postmodern sensibility” (Grossberg, *We Gotta* 282) has fostered political apathy.<sup>8</sup> In the face of such a crisis, sentimental postmodernism uses affect in the service of politics by providing people with “mattering maps” (Grossberg, *We Gotta* 82) that are essential to political engagement.<sup>9</sup> Unlike cynical postmodern parodies that treat the world of the “real” contemptuously, sentimental postmodernist texts insist that identities, feelings, and personal relationships matter. These texts locate hope for change in the micropolitical sphere of self/other relations, in the way that we construct our identities and interact with our social “others,” perhaps even to the point of identifying with them.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the political gestures of these hybrid texts can be linked to their strategic combination of the critical distance of high art with the emotional engagement and identification fostered by popular genres. Although these texts provoke intense identification with their characters, the reader or viewer is also encouraged to think critically rather than be sutured unconsciously into the text’s ideology. By engaging readers and viewers both affectively and intellectually, these mixed-code texts encourage audiences to rethink old paradigms while still acknowledging their emotional power. Because sentimental postmodernism satisfies traditional desires as well as upsetting entrenched thought patterns, it could be called progressive or liberal rather than radical. While some leftists may disdain such a “politics of compromise,” I argue that these texts offer a powerful alternative to both radical revolt, a stance that postmodernism has rendered suspect, and to the apathetic nihilism engendered by feelings of powerlessness.<sup>10</sup>

In response to the postmodern “crisis of the very possibility of politics” (“Postmodernity” 290), Lawrence Grossberg calls for an “impure” politics “for people who are never innocent and whose hopes are always partly defined by the very powers and inequalities they oppose. A modest politics that struggles to effect real change, that enters into the often boring challenges of strategy and compromise” (*We Gotta* 396). His vision aptly describes the tactics of sentimental postmodernism. Rather than criticizing ambivalence as a sign of paralysis or confusion, these texts embrace it as a potent political strategy.

This strategy of ambivalence plays a key role in the genre’s treatment of the politics of identity. Because the texts I discuss borrow from two distinct narrative logics, they represent subjectivity in conflicting ways, invoking melodrama’s essentialist stereotypes while also engaging in a postmodern questioning of gender, race, and sexual identity. Essentialism--a belief that identity is deep-rooted or even biologically determined--is juxtaposed in these texts with a post-structuralist notion of identity as a socially constructed and fluid surface.<sup>7</sup> I argue that sentimental postmodernism is culturally significant because it highlights contemporary debates about identity politics by speaking to people caught between these competing conceptions of the self.<sup>8</sup> For example, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* explores the fluidity of Valentin’s sexual identity from a proto-queer, anti-essentialist perspective, but the text also treats with respect Molina’s essentialist belief that he is innately different, a gender “invert.”<sup>9</sup> Sentimental postmodernist texts thus offer audiences a means of negotiating their own ambivalence about identity as both a limiting and enabling concept, one that offers important emotional grounding and political solidarity but that can also inhibit cross-group

identifications and coalitions.<sup>7</sup>

As I have implied above, I locate the political significance of sentimental postmodernism not solely in its hybrid textuality, but in the interface between text and audience, between representation and reception. While most critics who study postmodern culture offer only textual analysis and merely speculate about how such texts are consumed, I base my claims about the cultural significance of sentimental postmodernism upon interviews that I conducted with viewers and readers. Whereas formalist critics ignore the importance of readers in the construction of meaning, analyses of audience response in cultural studies often underestimate the role of the text in shaping or putting limits on interpretation. My methodology offers a symbiotic analysis of both textuality and reception, as few studies have done. This symbiotic approach is evident in my choice of audience samples, which were suggested to me by each text's thematic focus on particular identities and political positions. Because *The Piano* focuses on gender identity and was reviewed as a feminist film, I chose to interview thirty-one students and faculty members at the University of Virginia, all of whom are self-identified feminists. For my analysis of *Northern Exposure*, I studied a pre-existing audience group--an active Internet fanclub whose members enact the program's multicultural liberal values in their own on-line community. The themes of sexual and gender identity in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* led me to interview thirty homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual men and women residing in the Washington, D.C. area.

Ethnographic research allowed me to investigate how audiences negotiate and make sense of this textual bricolage of generic codes and sensibilities, and to discover

what these hybrid texts offer people in terms of political strategies for coping with the changes brought about by postmodernity. In particular, I set out to explore how audiences respond to the co-existence in these texts of both essentialist and anti-essentialist perspectives on the meaning of identity. Because identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality are contested subjects in these narratives, the process of audience identification with characters is complicated. Many scholars, particularly those influenced by sociology, Freudian psychoanalysis, and “apparatus” film theory, have defined identification as an unconscious process of self-recognition, of connecting with a character who shares one’s group identity or subject position. Sentimental postmodernism, and the kinds of identification that this hybrid genre inspires, raises significant challenges to such a definition. A theory that equates identification with simple self-recognition can not explain how audiences identify with texts in which identities are ambiguous rather than fixed, and overtly contested rather than assumed. My ethnographic work contributes to recent critical attempts to retheorize identification by taking into account a postmodern understanding of identity as mutable, ambivalent, and multiple rather than static and unitary. While many identification theorists view empirical audience research as irrelevant or even inimical to their speculative textual analyses, I see my work with audiences as a form of theoretical engagement, a means of corroborating and refining current formulations and opening up new ground for a more nuanced understanding of identification.

I focus on audience identification not only because it is a concept in need of revision, but also because it is key to the political impact of sentimental postmodernism.



Sentimental postmodernism underscores that constructing an identity and identifying with others are fundamentally political processes. As Diana Fuss notes, “there can be no politics without identification” since politics involves the formation of cohesive social groups (*Identification* 10). Rather than encouraging an unconscious identification on the basis of shared identity, the texts I discuss stimulate audiences to think critically about the political implications of their own self-construction and their relationship with others. For example, many of these audience members identified with characters on the basis of ideological affinity, such as a particular feminist viewpoint, rather than the mere fact of shared gender, race, or sexual identity. These identificatory moments highlight that identity is an ideological and political construct rather than an ontological given.

Because these texts question unitary and rigid forms of identity, many people were also able to identify with characters who seemed to be their social others. Many film theorists, influenced by Althusserian Marxism and psychoanalysis, have argued that mass culture fosters identification in order to seduce viewers into accepting conservative ideologies and rigidly defined, stereotypical identities. Contrary to this expectation, the works I classify as sentimental postmodernism encourage identifications that loosen rather than solidify the boundaries of the self, and thereby work in the direction of a progressive coalition politics. My interviews revealed that emotional connections were forged between men and women, gays and straights, minorities and those of the dominant culture. These cross-group identifications did not result in a facile solidarity that erases otherness, as some skeptics argue, because these texts also teach audiences to respect notions of difference. By fostering ambivalent forms of cross-group identification,

involving a recognition of difference as well as sameness, these texts promote possible coalitions without dismissing the gains made by identity politics.

In short, the particular kinds of identifications that sentimental postmodernism enables are the source of the genre's emotional impact upon audiences, and therefore of its cultural power. If feeling is crucial to political engagement, then identification is the means by which these texts get audiences invested in their meanings. *The Piano*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and *Northern Exposure* each recognize that identification is "the source of considerable emotional turmoil, capable of unsettling or unmooring the precarious groundings of our everyday identities" (Fuss, *Identification 2*) and opening up the possibility of connection across races, sexualities, and genders. These examples of sentimental postmodernism are "moving" texts in every sense of the word, offering not only an emotional experience, but one that disrupts stasis and leads a reader or viewer to new ground, to consider change in his or her own attitudes, relationships, politics, and self-constructions.

Before I begin my detailed analysis of the textuality and reception of sentimental postmodernism, I offer a chapter addressing the critical contexts in which my dissertation intervenes--postmodern criticism and theory, critical discussions of sentimentality and affect, cultural studies work with audiences, and identification theory. This chapter begins with a critique of the anti-popular bias of influential works in postmodern literary criticism, evident in their marked preference for cool ironic distance over affective engagement. Although many critics acknowledge that postmodern texts have relaxed the boundary between high and popular culture, many studies of postmodernism continue to

focus on ironic, self-reflexive works of high art and ignore popular texts invested in sentimental and realist forms of representation. Fredric Jameson and others have dismissed texts employing such popular strategies as mere cultural throwbacks, irrelevant to the cutting edge of postmodernism. As Andreas Huyssen has remarked, many postmodern critics remain wedded to the aesthetic values of high modernism and the avant garde (*After the Great Divide* 207).

Film scholars, on the other hand, have paid much more attention than literary critics to the “contamination of genres in postmodern cinema” (Degli-Esposti 6), but their criticism still employs a masculinist vision of the postmodern that disdains the sentimental.<sup>11</sup> Although postmodern film critics have addressed texts that mix avant garde and popular film strategies, they focus on masculine popular genres such as the thriller, film noir, sci-fi, and action picture--i.e. *Mad Max*, *Blade Runner*, and *The Matrix*. Furthermore, many of the favored texts of postmodern film criticism, such as *Blue Velvet* and *Pulp Fiction*, are nihilistic in tone and rife with misogynistic violence. *Blue Velvet* specifically attacks the “conventions of affect, romance, melodrama, and romantic symbolism, all forms associated with women” (Shattuc 84). In this section of Chapter One, I uncover the bias against feminine popular culture that pervades postmodern film and literary criticism, and I resist the equation of postmodernism with the avant garde.

Critics have tended to discuss postmodernism as if it were a wholly cerebral genre, unrelated to emotive popular culture, and thus they neglect to consider affect as a source of postmodernism’s political power. Fredric Jameson, for example, sees postmodernism as less subversive than modernism because of the “waning of affect” that

he finds in contemporary culture. Because he equates affect with modernist alienation, he overlooks the sentimentality that abounds in contemporary culture and therefore underestimates the subversive potential of comforting or tear-inducing “beautiful” emotions.<sup>12</sup> To offer a counter to Jameson, I discuss studies of sentimentality and affect by feminist scholars such as Jane Tompkins, Ann Cvetkovich, and Alison Jaggar, as well as the substantial body of work on melodrama. While critics in this field tend to see sentimentality and melodrama as either wholly subversive or wholly conservative, I attempt to look at the socio-political complexity of affect at work in each text without making generalizations about its function overall. In the texts I examine, sentimentality works in the service of traditional cultural values as well as potentially radical discourses such as feminism or queer politics. What most studies of sentimentality, melodrama, and affect agree upon is that emotions are part of the cognitive process and play an essential role in the formation of ideology and politics. In this section, I include a discussion of Lawrence Grossberg’s comments on the relationship between affect and ideology, between passion and politics. His work has been an inspiration for my project.

While my dissertation borrows from textual studies of postmodernism and of affective genres, my methodology attempts a symbiotic approach to text and reception that is rare in genre criticism. The next section of the critical contexts chapter explains the rationale for my ethnographic research. While many critics such as Linda Hutcheon and Ihab Hassan attempt to locate the politics of postmodernism in its aesthetics, I argue that politics is not textually determined because it is influenced by the subjectivities and ideologies of viewers and readers. Even those critics who study generic hybridity in

postmodern culture do not investigate the effect of such a relaxation of taste boundaries upon audience members. Critics who study sentimentality and melodrama, on the other hand, have addressed reception as well as textuality, but since most are concerned with 19th-century novels and films before 1960, they limit their analysis to the study of reviews and other textual traces of reception. My choice to do ethnographic work stems from my concern about the elitism of textual critics who dismiss audiences as unreliable sources, unable to offer coherent explanations of their reading process. Instead, I follow the lead of cultural studies critics who consider the narratives of audiences to be rich sources of information concerning the consumption process, despite or even because of the contradiction and incoherence common to these response narratives. I situate my ethnographic methods here in relation to the work of Janice Radway, David Morley, Ien Ang, and Jackie Stacey.

An indifference to actual audiences, ironically enough, is also common in studies of identification, most of which are textually based and rely upon a psychoanalytic model of reading and spectatorship. Psychoanalytic critics have argued that the conscious responses of audiences reveal little about identification since they believe it to be an unconscious process. I conclude Chapter One by discussing the limitations and useful insights of identification theories within various fields. Through a critique of these theories, I elaborate my own concept of political identification based upon my ethnographic research. My interviews with contemporary audiences reveal that identification is often a more complex, conscious, fluid, ambivalent, and politicized process than many theorists assume, a process that can operate across divisions of race,

gender, and sexuality. I propose a more flexible model of identification that addresses the increasing sophistication of audience members about the political ramifications of their own social identities. Although I question many of the psychoanalytic principles of apparatus film theory, my model also borrows some insights concerning the multiplicity and fluidity of identity from more recent psychoanalytic and post-structuralist critics--e.g. Diana Fuss, Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Kaja Silverman. Further, because cross-group identification is so prevalent among my audience groups, I discuss the debate about the politics of identifying with “the Other,” and I defend cross-group identification from those critics who view it solely as a colonizing form of incorporation and erasure of the other.

With this theoretical and methodological grounding in place, I turn to an investigation of Jane Campion’s film *The Piano* and its reception by an audience of self-identified feminists in a university community. I read the film as an avant garde melodrama whose mixed codes speak to multiple sides of feminist debates about silence and voice, the “male gaze,” sexuality, suicide, romantic love, and “victim feminism” vs. “power feminism.” I argue that heated debates about the film’s politics were fueled by its invocation of both essentialist (melodramatic) and anti-essentialist (postmodern) conceptions of gender and feminist identity. Many of those I interviewed appreciated the film for offering a compromise feminist vision that satisfied their desires to denaturalize gender as well as embrace femininity, to pursue romantic love as well as resist patriarchy. These viewers did not simply identify with *The Piano* and its heroine according to psychoanalytic notions of the gendered unconscious; rather, their identification process

was primarily ideological, involving a conscious questioning of their identities as women and men. Although academic feminists may seem to be a homogeneous grouping, I discovered stark differences in their responses to the film that reflected each person's particular brand of feminism and how each had learned to think about gender within his or her discipline. In examining the political identifications that this text makes possible, I offer a critique of the essentialist view of gender common to feminist psychoanalytic film theories concerning the "male gaze" and identification.

Chapter Three examines a fan club's emotional investment in the television series *Northern Exposure* and in its multicultural utopian politics, values which the fans reproduce in their own Internet community, alt.tv.northern-exp. The program's mixture of romantic-humanist values with postmodernist aesthetics and sensibilities leads to conflicted narratives about racial, gender, religious, ethnic and sexual identities, and this textual mixture encourages viewers to think critically about their own subjectivities. Contrary to common-sense expectations about identification, most of the newsgroup participants did not identify with characters who mirrored their own subject positions. Sociological studies of television audiences are particularly prone to the false assumption that identifications can be predicted by the identity of the viewer. I argue that these examples of cross-group identification suggest the need to rethink theories that define identification as a process of solidifying unitary identities. The fans' ability to empathize with social others while maintaining respect for difference echoed the program's sentimental vision of a multicultural democratic utopia. Instead of merely supporting conservatively defined identities, as critics of mass-media culture usually argue of

television, *Northern Exposure* fosters a radical empathy between self and other that could extend beyond virtual communities to influence real ones. I conclude the chapter with an analysis of the concept of utopia in postmodern discourse, situating *Northern Exposure* as a postmodern utopic text that resembles Chantal Mouffe's vision of a "radical, plural democracy."

My final chapter analyzes the three media forms of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and their reception by gay, bisexual, and heterosexual fans in Washington, D.C. I position the text's dialogic negotiation between the popular and the postmodern in relation to the discourse of camp, as a form of sentimentality-cum-irony. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* offers a powerful rebuttal to the Frankfurt School's dismissal of sentimental mass culture and explicitly affirms the importance of emotion to political consciousness. Questioning Marxism's overemphasis on the macro-political, *Kiss* focuses instead on the politics of the personal sphere of identity formation. I argue that the text adjudicates between surface and depth models of gender and sexual identity (e.g. queer vs. gay/lesbian), and thus offers audiences a means of exploring their own ambivalence about such identities. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and the fans' responses to it demonstrate both the political promise and the limitations of queer politics, with its emphasis on performativity and surfaces over depth and rootedness. Furthermore, the diverse and complex identification patterns that my interviews revealed suggest that sexual and gender identity are no longer, or perhaps never were, static givens that overdetermine audience response.

I contend that sentimental postmodernism deserves critical attention because it reflects and helps to articulate tensions peculiar to our historical moment--tensions



between sentimentality and ironic cynicism, between a faith in stable identities as a means of political empowerment and a new postmodern awareness of how such identities limit our selves and social relationships. Rather than wholly embracing the sea-change in cultural sensibilities brought about by postmodernity, these texts register ambivalence and turn that ambivalence into a neo-liberal progressive politics. In the face of a troubling increase in public apathy concerning politics, these powerfully emotive texts get people reinvested in the political stakes of identity construction. My exploration of the cultural significance of this genre aims to illuminate key blindspots in critical debates concerning postmodernism and identification in literary and media studies. Through its use of ethnography, my study questions some of the assumptions of reception theory and moves toward a richer and more flexible model of identification that takes into account postmodern notions of identity as fluid, multiple, ambiguous, and impure. I offer my interdisciplinary methodology, integrating textual analysis and an ethnographic reception study, as a useful model for other cultural studies scholars who aim to investigate the politics of cultural objects. By using the diverse analytical tools of literary analysis, media studies, sociology, and philosophy, I have attempted to offer a more rounded picture of sentimental postmodernism and its cultural significance than could be seen through a single disciplinary lens.

## **Chapter One**

### **Sentimental Postmodernism: Interventions in Theory and Criticism**

My analysis of the hybrid genre of sentimental postmodernism intervenes in several critical fields, uncovering biases and blindspots in theories concerning postmodernism, popular affective genres, and reception. My initial interest in the project was sparked by contradictions that I observed in postmodern theory and literary criticism. While many of these critics pay lip service to the idea that postmodernism breaks down the division between high and popular culture, most of their exemplary texts are nonetheless high cultural or avant garde works. Focusing on irony, self-reflexivity, anarchic avant-garde aesthetics, and post-structuralist ideas about language, many of these critics draw a picture of postmodernism that differs little from high modernism. In contrast, I study postmodern texts that thoroughly mix high and low cultural codes, in order to question the equation of postmodernism with the avant garde and with the surface model of post-structuralism. Furthermore, I have chosen to analyze a neglected subset of postmodernism--hybrid texts employing the affective strategies of popular sentimental novels and film melodrama, genres stigmatized by their association with women--as an alternative to the predominant picture of postmodernism as a genre imbued with masculine cultural values and tastes.

By investigating affect as a source of sentimental postmodernism's political power, I take my lead from Jane Tompkins' work on the progressive aspirations of sentimental fiction and from feminist critics who have re-evaluated melodrama as a rich

form of social and political commentary. My study builds on the work of cultural studies scholars and political theorists who argue that emotion plays a crucial role in the formation of ideologies and political investments. Since the emotional responses of viewers and readers can never be totally predicted by a text, it is problematic that studies of affective genres exhibit the same textual determinism as postmodern criticism. My ethnographic work, investigating the emotional responses of audience members as key to the political impact of sentimental postmodernism, attempts to fill a gap left by formalist studies of sentimentality and melodrama.

My concerns about the textual determinism common in film theory, postmodern criticism, and genre studies of sentimentality and melodrama led me to offer a symbiotic analysis of text and audience ethnography. The rationale for my multi-layered approach can be found in Stuart Hall's theory of articulation. I discuss my methodology in relation to the work of Hall and the most well-known ethnographers working in cultural studies--David Morley, Janice Radway, and Ien Ang. My approach builds upon their insights concerning the pitfalls of ethnographic work. Such dangers include a problematic pursuit of objective truth and an insensitivity to the power dynamic between researcher and subject. Any study that considers the effects of social identities on interpretation also runs the risk of essentialism. I have attempted to pay attention to the complexity of individual subjectivity rather than to reduce people to mere representatives of demographic categories.

A similar form of essentialism also plagues theories about audience identification with texts, a process which is a focal point in my ethnographic analysis. Many

identification theorists have relied on a psychoanalytic model that treats identification as an unconscious process of self-recognition that works to solidify unitary identities. I argue that such models are inadequate to explain how audiences respond to sentimental postmodernist texts, which explore multiple notions of subjectivity and encourage audiences to experience identification as a means of loosening rather than merely fixing the self. Here I offer a critique of feminist “apparatus” film theory and of Freudian and Lacanian ideas about identification. As an alternative, I propose the term “political identification” to describe what I see as a conscious interaction between audience and text that fosters cognizance of the micro-politics of identity and social relationships. While my ethnographic work challenges apparatus theory, it corroborates some of the more recent contributions to identification theory made by post-structuralist critics within feminist and queer studies. Interviews with actual audiences have revealed that identification can be fluid, multiple, ambivalent, and politicized, as theorists such as Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, and Diana Fuss have argued. Like these theorists, I explore the politics of cross-group identification across divisions of gender, sexuality, and race, arguing for its subversive potential to destabilize identity and promote a politics of coalition.

### **Postmodernist Theory and Criticism: The Great Divide Lingers**

While theorists of postmodernism have all attempted to identify the differences between contemporary and modernist culture, many of them continue to show an allegiance to the aesthetic values of high modernism. As Andreas Huyssen has argued in

*After the Great Divide*, many postmodern theorists are still perpetuating the ruling ideology of the “modernist” Frankfurt School critics, whose insistence on the distinction between high art and mass culture revealed an elitist hostility toward an implicitly feminized mass audience. Relatively few postmodernist critics have fully explored Huyssen’s major claim that postmodernism has relaxed the “great divide” between high and low, as my study of sentimental postmodernism attempts to do.

For example, François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* is the most frequently cited of all postmodern theoretical texts, but it remains profoundly modernist in its disdain for mass culture. In his appendix, “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?,” Lyotard presents a negative characterization of contemporary culture as a “period of slackening” (71) in which the majority are trying to “liquidate the heritage of the avant-gardes” (73) by extinguishing experimentation and abstract, rigorous philosophical thought. Echoing the sentiments of Adorno and Horkheimer, Lyotard argues that “artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the ‘anything goes,’” a confusion of boundaries which he thinks will degrade art and literature (76). His appendix equates the avant garde<sup>13</sup> with postmodernism, which is modernism in its “nascent state” (79); this tautology is the crux of Lyotard’s theory. For Lyotard, postmodernism strives to impart a sense of the unrepresentable and stands against the illusions of realism, easy pleasure, and “the solace of good forms” (81). In his view, sentimental popular culture could not possibly be subversive, for he associates mass culture with fascism as did the Frankfurt School (82).

My study attempts to refute Lyotard’s central contentions--that postmodernism

and popular culture are fundamentally opposed, and that mass cultural forms always support fascist values. Now that avant garde or postmodern sensibilities have infiltrated rock music (e.g. Talking Heads, Beck, punk, and grunge), and television commercials occasionally look like Fellini films, the terms “popular” and “avant garde” no longer function as an absolute dichotomy. Lyotard’s modernist fear of the taste of the masses leads him to ignore the advent of mass culture’s adoption of avant garde aesthetic strategies, and to disdain an equally important phenomenon, that popular cultural forms have taken on an increasingly central role in the work of serious artists. For example, Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* immerses the audience in B movies (including Nazi melodramas) while simultaneously disrupting realist narrative technique. High and low culture become inextricable in Puig’s anti-Fascist novel, challenging Lyotard’s central dualism and his attitudes about the politics of mass culture.

I also see my project as a counterpoint to the work of Jean Baudrillard, who views the hybridity and loss of boundaries in contemporary culture as a sign of cultural degradation. While Lyotard sees postmodernism as a positive condition--the last bastion of the avant garde in our decaying culture--Jean Baudrillard finds the postmodern era to be defined by loss of boundary and of meaning, resulting in a hyperreal environment in which every event is merely a simulation of reality, and culture equals commodity.<sup>14</sup> Baudrillard echoes Lyotard’s modernist concern that contemporary culture has blurred the dichotomy between art and mass culture. In *The Transparency of Evil*, he writes: “When everything is political, nothing is political anymore, the word itself is meaningless. . . . When everything is aesthetic, nothing is beautiful or ugly anymore, and art itself

disappears” (9). Now that everyday life has been aestheticized through advertising, he laments that art has been obliterated and replaced by “a pure circulation of images, a transaesthetics of banality” (11). As Walter Benjamin predicted in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” art has lost all transcendence and been replaced by “culture.” But while the Marxist Benjamin believed that the replacement of transcendent art by mass-produced culture could be liberatory for the working classes, Baudrillard regards this cultural mixing and loss of the “law of value” in art as a falling down to the “cultural stage of primitive societies” (*Transparency* 17).<sup>15</sup>

I see postmodern hybrids as a welcome reappraisal of the hierarchical value system that Baudrillard espouses. His belief that art has disappeared reflects an adherence to the the Modernist opposition between art and commerce. With the world-wide dominance of transnational capitalism, art is now subject to commodification and market values. The film *auteur*, for example, is now a commercial marketing “strategy for organizing audience reception” rather than a mark of artistic enunciation (Corrigan 103). But this commodification does not mean that art has ceased to exist; rather, art has accepted complicity with capitalism. Despite the capitalist control of the culture industries, moments of transgression can still be found due to the power of language and images to signify in multiple ways. Critics who cling to the idealized notion of transcendent critique underestimate the power of “impure” subversion from within capitalism. One of the positive effects of this ubiquitous commercialization is an increase in public access to thought-provoking culture. I view postmodernism’s breakdown of the high/low divide as a democratizing phenomenon, spreading intellectual ideas and cultural

capital to a wider audience. For example, post-structuralist ideas about the fluidity of identity have surfaced in television texts such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and this development could lead to a popular reconceptualizing of identity formation.<sup>16</sup>

The modernist artistic hierarchies perpetuated by philosophical theorists can also be seen in postmodern literary criticism, which has established a high cultural canon. In his influential articles of the late 1960s and '70s, Ihab Hassan equates postmodernism with the avant garde, emphasizing anarchy, gnosticism, novelty, and resistance to the status quo.<sup>17</sup> In a later essay, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," Hassan moves beyond a focus on anarchy to explore the "Pop" side of postmodernism: "postmodernism . . . recalls the irreverent spirit of the avant-garde. . . [but is] far less aversive to the pop, electronic society of which it is a part, and so hospitable to kitsch" (91). Although he mentions Pop, his choice of representative postmodern texts is still undeniably highbrow, dominated by literary figures such as Beckett, Borges, Nabokov, Pinter, Márquez, Cortazar, Robbe-Grillet, Barth, Pynchon, Barthelme, and Ashbery (85). Because these writers employ irony, parody, and self-reflexivity, many of them have also been called high modernist. I find it ironic that Hassan refers to this list of high cultural postmodernists as "heterogeneous." While Hassan locates postmodernist aesthetics only in highbrow literary texts consumed primarily by a well-educated elite, I attempt to widen the field by discussing postmodern forms within the popular media of television and musical theater and within the popular genres of film melodrama and sentimental fiction. In "Putting the Pop Back into Postmodernism," Lawrence Grossberg notes an urgent need for more attention to popular culture in the debates about postmodernism. My study



contributes to a cultural studies approach to postmodernism, exemplified in Grossberg's work on postmodern rock music and Angela McRobbie's study of the postmodern aesthetics of youth fashion and culture.<sup>18</sup>

By mentioning the breakdown of high and popular culture as a constitutive feature of postmodernism, Ihab Hassan addresses the concerns voiced by Grossberg and others, but Hassan's facile embrace of the popular does not lead to an interrogation of institutionalized taste hierarchies. In his article "( ): *Finnegan's Wake* and the Postmodern Imagination," Hassan argues that Joyce's work makes it necessary to revise the categories of high art and popular culture because the text "abounds in wit and sentimentality, in folklore, ribaldry, and song; the sounds of music hall, the pub, and the street" (103). He calls *Finnegan's Wake* a mixture of Pop and poesy, of the "sublime and the ridiculous" (103). While Joyce's text may make reference to popular culture, Hassan wrongly assumes that *Wake* "could win the common as well as the uncommon reader" (103). The text's extreme difficulty and obscure references to many languages and cultures alienate all but the most erudite of the reading public. Hassan neglects to consider that such quoting of street ballads did not change the status of *Finnegan's Wake* as an inaccessible high art text; it did nothing to break down barriers between high and low cultural reading publics.

Sentimental postmodernist texts differ from *Finnegan's Wake* in that they mix high and popular textual elements without hierarchizing them, and thus problematize the simplistic consumption categories of "taste" (i.e. highbrow and lowbrow) that postmodern criticism reifies. The belief that taste cultures are rigidly distinct has been

perpetuated by the influential work of Pierre Bourdieu in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Even though Bourdieu attempts to denaturalize taste and connect it to social class stratification, he suggests that these categories are largely impermeable because of the entrenched social and economic order in France. He neglects to consider that either texts or readers could exhibit both a “high aesthetic” taste for critical detachment *and* a popular taste for emotional investment. Bourdieu’s theory of class-stratified taste falls apart when confronted with sentimental postmodernist texts that promote both distance and engagement, thereby appealing to people who enjoy both high and low culture.

In contrast to Bourdieu and those postmodern critics who retain outdated notions of taste hierarchies, Jim Collins and Charles Jencks offer insightful discussions of the “fragmentation of taste cultures” within postmodernism (Jencks 49). Jencks attributes this fragmentation and the hybrid texts that it engenders to an explosion of choices in multiple media; this wide variety of choices allows people to develop a “taste for pluralism itself, and for the juxtapositions it entails” (55). In his book *Uncommon Cultures*, Jim Collins similarly argues that the bricolage of genres and aesthetic styles that characterizes postmodern textuality is a reaction to the “semiotic glut” of choices on television (78). The hybrid texts I discuss simulate the experience of channel-surfing between a made-for-tv women’s melodrama on the Lifetime Channel and a David Lynch film on the Independent Film Channel. Studying sentimental postmodernism therefore allows me to question assumptions about the division between high and popular culture erected by modernists and the Frankfurt School critics, a divide that is being perpetuated

by postmodern critics and sociological theorists of taste.

### **Affect and the Anti-Feminine Sensibility of Postmodern Criticism**

One of the most recalcitrant and troubling legacies of this high/low dichotomy in cultural taste is the gendering of this hierarchy. Andreas Huyssen has argued that modernism was partly a “reaction formation” against the threatening technologies of mass culture, which was equated with a passive femininity. As Huyssen notes, the modernists persisted in the “gendering as feminine of that which is devalued” (*Great Divide* 53). Feminist critics have long argued that this critical equation of the feminine with frivolous popular culture has kept serious works by female writers from being considered in discussions of high art. Unfortunately, postmodern theorists such as Baudrillard continue to invoke gender as if it were intrinsically related to artistic hierarchies. In *The Transparency of Evil*, Baudrillard connects the transaesthetic (textual hybridity) with the transsexual (gender-bending) and he sees both as mutations rather than positive developments. His longing for a world of hierarchical artistic value is implicitly connected to a rubric of gender difference. As Tania Modleski has pointed out, Baudrillard’s *Seduction* and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* create an association between femininity and the masses, who share the “revolutionary” ability to elude or refuse meaning and interpretation. By “equating the masses and mass culture with the feminine” (Modleski, “Femininity” 51), Baudrillard implies that a female artist is an oxymoron. These deep-rooted associations help to explain the under-representation of women writers and artists, and of genres that appeal primarily to female audiences, in

discussions of postmodernism.

Gender biases are particularly apparent in postmodern film criticism, where many of the critical favorites are avant garde films aimed at male viewers and focused on male protagonists whose identities are threatened by a “fading of . . . patriarchal authority” (Sharrett 4). Postmodern film critics have written copiously about *Blue Velvet*, *Repo Man*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Videodrome*, and the work of Peter Greenaway--films that embrace the masculine sensibilities of violence, nihilism, emotional detachment, and misogyny. Many of these critics see postmodernism as synonymous with avant garde film, a genre with roots in such misogynist surrealist endeavors as *Un Chien Andalou*. Norman Denzin describes postmodern film as a regressive “masculinized culture . . . [in which] the oppressive structures of racism and sexism are still firmly in place” (149). In a critique of the sexual violence of *Blue Velvet*, Jane Shattuc reads postmodern film as a “patriarchal form” (86) hostile to the goals of feminism and to the “conventions of affect, romance, melodrama, and romantic symbolism, all forms associated with women” (84). Although a good deal of film critics, unlike literary critics, have focused on the postmodern mixture of high and popular film genres,<sup>19</sup> many still conceive of postmodern film as an avant garde critique of melodrama, with its feminine sensibilities and reliance on affect.

These uninterrogated gender biases have led postmodern critics and theorists to routinely neglect the complex functioning of affect in literature and art. Even Andreas Huyssen, who convincingly argues that postmodernism mixes high and low culture, does not consider the effect of this hybridization upon the emotional content of these works. In the view of most twentieth-century critics, emotions rightly belong only to the domain

of melodrama, soap opera, and the sentimental novel, and these popular forms have been denigrated as mere “women’s culture.” As Ann Cvetkovich points out, “the association of femininity with affect has led to the simultaneous devalorization of both” (1). Although 19th-century male sentimental novelists such as Dickens were critically celebrated, aestheticism and modernism established a divide between intellectual high culture and affective genres that continues to influence contemporary critics.<sup>20</sup> This dichotomy between affect and high art is of course specious, since modernist literature depicted complex emotional states and occasionally veered into sentimentality.<sup>21</sup> In *The Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felski has pointed out that modernism and melodrama share an emotional sensibility in their romantic yearning for utopia (120). Modernist thinkers, however, only discussed emotions if they could be turned into rational intellectual concepts such as alienation.

Despite the arguments of feminists, the specious dichotomy between feminine affective genres and high art persists in contemporary criticism. Many postmodern theorists follow in the footsteps of New Criticism by celebrating art that is disaffected, cerebral, and coolly ironic, and this predilection often leads them to exclude affective popular forms or strategies from the discussion about postmodernism.<sup>22</sup> Two attitudes toward affect are prevalent among postmodern thinkers: 1) a preference for modernist and/or masculine kinds of affect; and 2) a disdain for affect of any kind because it is associated with the tyranny of the body (associated with femininity) over the rational mind (associated with masculinity).<sup>23</sup> Examples of the first attitude abound in postmodern film criticism. Although many film critics study postmodernism’s “contamination of genres”

(Degli-Esposti 6), even their choices of hybrid texts reveal a bias against feminine popular culture and the kinds of emotions it elicits. The only popular genres they discuss are those that appeal to masculine tastes, such as the thriller, film noir, sci-fi, and action picture. While these texts engage viewers on a popular affective level, their emotional palette is dominated by alienation, malaise, despair, titillation, anger, and the catharsis afforded by violence. Although women may also feel these emotions, I view them as masculine because our culture has deemed these feelings acceptable for men to express. Sentimental texts, often aimed at women, that induce feelings of comfort, security, empathy, hope, love, and pathos are absent from the postmodern film “canon.”

Frederic Jameson exhibits both of these attitudes towards affect in *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Jameson, strongly influenced by Baudrillard, views postmodern literature and art as less subversive than modernism, in part because of the depthlessness and “waning of affect” (16) that he finds in contemporary culture. Before the advent of post-structuralism, Jameson argues that art was invested in the depth-model principles of expression (an outward projection of inner feeling), repression, and the belief that a “signified” could be represented by a “signifier” (12). Post-structuralist theory discredited depth models as illusions and replaced the inside/outside paradigm with a fragmentation of the subject and a play of surfaces. Jameson wrongly concludes, however, that a postmodernist fragmented subjectivity precludes the expression of real emotion, which he finds crucial in the development of a progressive political stance (15). While Jameson and other Marxist critics laud modernist art for depicting and attempting to elicit alienation, angst, and despair, emotions which

could lead to political resistance, he reasons that postmodern art is often apolitical because of its lack of depth and affect.

I agree with Jameson's belief that affect is crucial to political consciousness, but he simply ignores that affective depth-models--sentimentality and melodrama--can still be found in postmodern culture. Overestimating the impact of post-structuralism upon postmodernism, Jameson implies that the existence of surface-model concepts (such as fragmented subjectivity) in a text completely nullifies any depth-model strategies.<sup>22</sup> The argument that a co-existence of surface and depth models is impossible would seem to contradict Jameson's stated belief that postmodernism thoroughly effaces "the frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture"<sup>7</sup> (2). Jameson seems to understand the flaws of Hassan's reading of Joyce as popular, for example, by citing the "emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the forms, categories, and contents of that very culture industry so passionately denounced by the ideologues of the modern. . . . materials they no longer simply 'quote,' as a Joyce or a Mahler might have done, but incorporate into their very substance" (2-3). Since he argues that postmodernism has incorporated popular culture into its "very substance," it would be logical to assume that the affective structures of popular culture are also present in postmodernism, but he does not make this connection.<sup>7</sup> By discussing the hybrid politics enabled by the conjunction of surface and depth models in sentimental postmodernism, I question the presumption that post-structuralism trumps all other sensibilities. While Jameson dismisses depth-model cultural products as merely "residual" impulses dominated by the larger "forcefield" of postmodernism (6), I view these "residual" affective forms as crucial elements of a

postmodern sensibility that expand its range of attitudes beyond that of ironic detachment.

Jameson's concerns about a waning of affect reveal his preference for intellectualized emotions over feminized forms of affect. He argues that only one emotion is prevalent in postmodern culture: a sublime awe or euphoria provoked by technology and the "whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself" (38). Lyotard also focuses on the sublime as a transcendental experience of recognizing the unrepresentable and the ineffable. By isolating the sublime as the only postmodern "emotion" worth theorizing about, Jameson and Lyotard perpetuate a hierarchy of emotions that began in the eighteenth century, when Edmund Burke and Kant established a distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. The sublime originally signified an emotion, a feeling of awe most common among women, but it was quickly turned into an aesthetic and then "elevated" to an association with the masculine by Kant (Suzanne Clark 28). Sublimity is often conceived of as an experience of transcending the body, which has long been equated with Woman. This gendered dichotomy lingers today, as popular culture continues to be denigrated for its association with the "beautiful," which originally signified pleasing, calm, comforting, and therefore lesser forms of art.

Jameson is one of many postmodern critics who still cling to the Enlightenment concept of the mind/body dualism, in which emotions are relegated to the realm of the body and thus denigrated. Lyotard and Ihab Hassan adhere to the modernist, Brechtian aesthetic of defamiliarization; they continue to value art which produces an alienation effect, which they believe creates cognitive insight. Unlike Jameson, however, they do



not define alienation as affect, but rather as a purely intellectual experience. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale's definition of postmodernism as a shift from the epistemological to the ontological realm underscores his bias toward intellectual abstraction as the defining value of art. His chapter "Love and Death in the Postmodernist Novel" exemplifies his disinterest in exploring affective relations.

McHale writes:

I am not so much interested in its potential for representing love between fictional characters, or for investigating the theme of love . . . as in its *modeling* of erotic relations through foregrounded violations of ontological boundaries (for instance through metaleptic uses of the second-person pronoun.) Love, then, is less an object of representation than a *metaobject*, less a theme than a *metatheme* (227).

By focusing on love as a metaphor for formalist artistic interests rather than as an emotion, McHale implies that thematic representations of love are uninteresting and have little to do with postmodernism. His formalist work ignores the social commentary that could be expressed through emotional themes.

Even more problematic than the critics' lack of attention to the affective strategies of postmodernism, however, is their blindness to the fact that affect is also a part of the cognitive process. While Michel Foucault argues that sexuality is discursively constructed, I see emotions as experiences that are also shaped by language. To counter the view that emotions are wholly instinctive, anthropologists have argued that affect is culturally specific, each culture granting specific meanings to different feelings or not recognizing some emotions at all. Postmodern theorists' reluctance to discuss affect

suggests that they still adhere to a depth-model view of emotion as a welling-up from the body, and therefore unrelated to reason. Jameson, for example, believes that a unified “deep” self is necessary for emotional expression, because he conceives of emotion as an outward expression of the inner psyche and body (11-14). As Ann Cvetkovich has argued, Jameson’s ideas about affect as pre-discursive “raw material” are based on the depth-model “repressive hypothesis” (29-30). In contrast to Jameson, feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar underscores the culturally constructed nature of emotions, arguing that they may be “necessary rather than inimical to the construction of knowledge” about our world (146).<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I will be looking at emotions as cognitive constructions, as ways to actively engage with and organize our society. Thus emotions may have either conservative or progressive politics (or some combination thereof), as they either support or resist the status quo. As Jaggar argues, “critical reflection on emotion is not a self-indulgent substitute for political analysis and political action. It is itself a kind of political theory and political practice, indispensable for an adequate social theory and social transformation” (164). This emphasis on emotion as active political engagement characterizes the postmodern hybrids of my study, many of which aim to foster empathy for people on the social margins.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Politics of Affect**

When critics have discussed the politics of postmodernism, they either ignore the role of affect by locating politics in formalist innovation, or they deem postmodernism apolitical or conservative because of its nihilistic evacuation of feeling. Others view the

ironic detachment of postmodernism as a subversive political strategy. As an alternative to these schools of thought, I study postmodern forms that uses “beautiful” emotions to further progressive political goals. My analysis of the politics of affect takes its lead from Grossberg’s work on the politics of postmodern popular culture, and from feminist critics writing about sentimental fiction and film melodrama.

Since many literary critics have located the politics of postmodernism in its aesthetic innovation, they neglect to consider a text’s ability to elicit particular emotional responses as a potential source of postmodernism’s political power. In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon argues that the parodic self-reflexivity of postmodernism offers a political “site of de-naturalizing critique” (3). Her formalist study of representational strategies does not mention the impact of a text upon audiences, thereby implying that consumption has nothing to do with politics.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Ihab Hassan reads postmodernism as subversive for its anarchic rebellion against structure. This kind of rebellion at the level of the aesthetic, however, is not likely to move readers to view the world differently or fight to change existing power structures. While I am interested in the politics of representational strategies, I think we must look at how they have impacted audiences in order to evaluate their political significance.<sup>2</sup> As cultural studies scholars have argued, the politics of a text does not reside solely in aesthetics, but also in the way it is interpreted and integrated into the lives of audience members. Emotional responses are often the key to understanding a text’s impact upon a reader or viewer’s knowledge of the world.

Those critics who understand affect’s connection to the political have located the

politics of postmodernism in its irony, nihilistic indifference, and cynicism. These affective sensibilities, or the sensibility of disaffection itself, have been variously interpreted to be progressive, conservative, or apolitical in nature. Baudrillard's concepts of simulacrum and the "death of the social" lead him to conclude that our postmodern era renders politics null and void. Because one can not tell the real from the image, Baudrillard argues that meaning, emotional engagement, and politics are impossible in this post-Enlightenment era. He does not see any possibility for resistance in our commercialized culture of simulacra. In his 1985 essay "The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media," Baudrillard revised his belief that postmodernism is apolitical to suggest that a nihilistic, passive, ironic detachment could offer a possible political strategy for the masses. Those critics who view postmodernism as subversive often cite irony as the source of its politics.<sup>23</sup> While I agree that irony can have subversive effects, I side with those critics who are concerned about the overwhelming nihilism and disaffection of postmodern culture. In *The Transparent Society*, Gianni Vattimo reads a post-apocalyptic irony as inimical to the concept of progress essential to political change (84). In film studies, the essay collection *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film* uses Baudrillard's theories to deem postmodernism "reactionary" (Sharrett 9) for its "unbridled negativity" (4) and cynicism. While I question this totalizing reading of apocalyptic film as reactionary, I am concerned that the ironic nihilism of postmodern culture has contributed to a political disenchantment and passivity that threatens the functioning of democracy.

Instead of deeming postmodernism to be universally conservative or apolitical,

however, I focus on texts that pose a challenge to such a monolithic and pessimistic reading of postmodernism. In contrast to this apocalyptic postmodernism of shattered communities, dehumanizing violence, and ironic disaffection, sentimental postmodernist culture offers an alternative emotional and political sensibility. In the emotionally charged world of sentimental postmodernism, I see a resurgence in optimism and progressive political values. By employing the “beautiful emotions” of popular feminized genres, the postmodern texts in my study offer “empowerment in the face of, and to a certain extent the reality of, nihilism” (Grossberg, “Postmodernity and Affect” 290). While Lawrence Grossberg does not focus on the “beautiful emotions” of sentimental culture, he describes postmodern popular culture as an affective site of political empowerment (290). I see my work on sentimental postmodernism as a response to his call to identify such sites of affective empowerment. Emotive genres are politically powerful because they provoke identification, belonging, and investment, providing audiences with “mattering maps” which reveal “the places at which people can anchor themselves into the world, the locations of the things that matter” (*We Gotta* 82). As Grossberg argues persuasively, “affective relations are, at least potentially, the condition of possibility for the optimism, invigoration, and passion which are necessary for any struggle to change the world” (*We Gotta* 86).<sup>24</sup>

Grossberg’s concept of mattering maps provides a welcome alternative to Jameson’s rationalist concept of cognitive mapping. Jameson believes that the only subversive political stance made possible by postmodern culture is turning one’s experience of sublime awe at the power of technology into an intellectual grid, a

“cognitive map” which would “endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (54). However, Jameson sees this task as nearly impossible given the vast and unfathomable nature of the global networks of multinational capitalism. As Grossberg points out, Jameson’s cognitive form of political subversion is available only to the highly intellectual critic, not to a mass audience (“Putting the Pop” 174). Because Jameson’s Marxist leanings lead him to equate politics with radical subversion in the public sphere, his theories ignore the micropolitical sphere of gender relations and sexuality. Jameson underestimates the fact that people have never stopped “mapping out” the politics of their social relations in local settings such as the family, and they are often guided in this process by their emotions and by popular culture, as Grossberg points out.<sup>7</sup>

My focus on the relationship between affect and politics takes its lead from feminist re-evaluations of the political significance of sentimental fiction and film melodrama. These two related genres had previously been dismissed as apolitical, escapist, and reactionary for oversimplifying complex social issues and for turning systemic problems into conflicts that can be overcome by individual action. Anthony Savile voices the typical rationalist attack on sentimentality, which he calls an idealized “false-colouring of the world” (225) that insulates people from reality and truth and inhibits them from taking action to change their world. Even when Ann Douglas engaged in a serious study of nineteenth-century sentimentality in her book *The Feminization of American Culture*, she argued that sentimental rhetoric was an anti-intellectual force that limited the possibilities for reform.

As a corrective to Douglas' rationalist critical stance, Jane Tompkins was one of the first to argue that nineteenth-century sentimental fiction posed a radical challenge to the social order by discussing public social issues within a new context--the private, personal, *feminine* sphere. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, "the very possibility of social action [for the abolition of slavery] is made dependent on the action taking place in individual hearts" (128). Stowe's sentimental melodrama places political power, therefore, in the hands of women urging Christian compassion, and the text even goes so far as to promote a matriarchal society. Tompkins' *Sensational Designs* was groundbreaking because it re-evaluated the genre as a "political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time" (126). Her book paved the way for Mary Kelley, Joanne Dobson, and Nina Baym to uncover the subversive qualities of nineteenth-century "domestic fiction" written by that "mob of scribbling women" (as Hawthorne dismissively dubbed them).

More than a century after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, social problems continue to be represented as affective dilemmas, but twentieth-century sentimentalism has received overwhelmingly negative critical response due to the hegemony of modernist literary values and the association of sentimentality and melodrama with fascist kitsch (Suzanne Clark 4).<sup>25</sup> Instead of dismissing contemporary sentimental texts as purveyors of fake emotions in the service of bourgeois capitalism, I see in sentimental postmodernism some of the subversive potential of its nineteenth-century precursors. Like its predecessors, contemporary sentimentality offers a politically democratic rhetoric of pathos whose aim is to "move the reader from sympathy to compassion" (Herget 4) for victimized and

marginalized people, by appealing to a reader's "responsibility as a social being" (Herget 9). However, sentimental postmodernist texts resist different social norms than did their nineteenth-century cousins. The subversive power of contemporary sentimentality, I contend, comes from its opposition to the affective sensibilities of postmodernism--irony, cynicism, and nihilism.<sup>7</sup> Whereas sentimentality was a dominant affective strategy in the nineteenth century, now it could be considered a minority discourse. Because affect is a discursive construction, the political effects of affective genres depend on the particular social and historical context in which they are consumed.<sup>7</sup>

The narrative strategy of privatizing the political also needs to be re-evaluated against a contemporary backdrop of political apathy and defeatism. Echoing a common Marxist belief, Jackie Byars argues that melodramas tend to enforce the status quo by "encouraging [a misguided] belief in the power of the individual and ignoring the necessity for social change" (*All That Hollywood* 253).<sup>26</sup> As Tompkins has pointed out, treating politics on the level of the individual does not necessarily ignore the need for systemic change, but instead recognizes that such action must be preceded by a change of heart. In our current historical moment, huge capitalist and bureaucratic networks have contributed to feelings of powerlessness and a cynicism about the power of individuals to make a difference--a power that is a founding principle of democracy. By insisting that individuals can change themselves and their interactions with marginalized social others, contemporary sentimental and melodramatic texts counteract a pervasive political apathy.

By looking at the re-articulation of these affective strategies in their contemporary socio-historical context, I attempt to avoid the ahistoricism of those critics who locate the



politics of melodrama in its form, assigning a fixed ideological significance to the genre.

In the 1970s, Marxist-influenced critics began to celebrate Douglas Sirk's 1950s family melodramas for their use of irony and a parodic form of excessive *mise en scène*--

"distanciation" techniques that were said to undermine the bourgeois ideology of the surface narrative.<sup>27</sup> Christine Gledhill argues that "there occurred a slippage of the

'subversion' argument from its attachment to Sirk as 'author' to melodrama itself"

("Melodramatic" 7); stylistic excess was then treated as the source of the genre's politics.

This approach to melodrama is problematic, in my view, because it relies on a Brechtian,

avant garde value system to evaluate a popular form, implying that irony is more

subversive than sentimentality. This stance also elevates formal style above narrative as a

locus for subversion, as did the modernists and the Marxist Frankfurt School. Implicit in

these arguments is the assumption that melodramatic narratives are essentially regressive

and unworthy of intellectual scrutiny.

I am more interested in critical approaches to melodrama that locate its politics in

its narrative manipulations of affect and identification, because these strategies have a

strong impact upon audiences. Whereas film critics may be able to appreciate Sirk's

ironic formalist critique, it is unlikely that popular audiences would have been moved

ideologically by such strategies. Barbara Klinger makes this point in her comparison of

the popular reception history of Sirk's *Written on the Wind* with its appraisal by *auteur*

critics as a critique of bourgeois capitalism (Klinger 5). Marketing and reviews reveal

that the film reinforced a capitalist ideology among its viewers, who were attracted by the

"presentation of class and sexuality as pure 'consumable' spectacles" (Klinger 19).

Paying attention to how narratives were read by popular audiences, however, does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that melodrama always reinforces the status quo.

Feminist critics have seen subversion within women's films of the 1930s (and even in the more conservative 1950s domestic melodramas) because they provide female viewers with a sorely needed space for the serious exploration of women's emotional concerns.

By allowing female audiences to recognize their own suffering in that of the heroine, these films offer a protest against the impossible demands that patriarchy places upon women. E. Ann Kaplan, for example, argues that some women's films could be called resistant for their "questioning of woman's position as Mother" and their attempt to strengthen mother-daughter bonds that are often thwarted by patriarchy ("Mothering" 126). While Laura Mulvey believes that 1950s melodramas ultimately refuse satisfaction for their female characters, she finds it "socially and ideologically beneficial" that they allow a "dramatic rendering of women's frustrations" and of the repression of female desires under bourgeois patriarchy ("Notes on Sirk" 40). These feminist critics locate melodrama's politics in its ability to foster identifications that allow women to recognize the emotional conflicts engendered by their social positioning.

While I have learned much from these readings of the potentially subversive aspects of melodrama, I do not aim to assign a politics to the whole genre. Attributing an ideological position to melodrama depends on what aspects of the genre one chooses to emphasize, whether it be the realistic depiction of female suffering, the complicit happy endings, or the excessive *mise en scène*. Critics' generalizations about melodrama's politics also depend on their choice of examples--Sirk's films vs. 1930s women's

pictures, or particular texts within a given time period. As with any kind of political critique, the danger is that “critics’ own ideological positions” may “lead them to predetermined conclusions” (Byars, *All that Hollywood* 259). It would be unwise to attach a fixed ideological position to a genre that has spanned so many different cultures and historical moments, and whose target audiences have shifted considerably since its inception in 18th-century popular theatricals. Furthermore, the emotional volatility of melodrama also renders its politics unstable and mutable. Ann Cvetkovich reminds us that “the politics of affect is double-edged” (5) in that it is “as much a way to dominate as it is a way to resist domination” (10). I concur with critics who look at the ambiguity of sentimentality and melodrama, as forms which may “function either subversively or as escapism--categories which are always relative to the given social and historical context” (Elsaesser 47). It is useful to keep in mind Stuart Hall’s insightful argument that all popular texts are complex negotiations between dominant cultural values and resistant urges: “if the forms of provided commercial popular culture are not purely manipulative, then it is because, alongside the false appeals, the foreshortenings, the trivialisation and shortcircuits, there are also elements of recognition and identification” (“Notes” 233).

Melodrama and sentimentality offer just such a dynamic negotiation between patriarchal, middle-class values and a resistance to those norms from the perspective of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other socially marginalized people. In my analysis of the politics of sentimental postmodernism, for example, I see both conservative and progressive potential effects in this hybrid genre’s uses of melodramatic and sentimental narrative strategies. These texts’ invocation of essentialist identities and

stereotypes could be read as regressive, but they also offer an important counterpoint to the overzealous post-structuralist dismissal of identity politics. One could read these texts' acknowledgement of the desires for comfort and tradition to be nostalgic and escapist, or one could see it as a critique of the destructive tendencies of radicalism. By using sentimentality to depict the plight of homosexuals, women, and ethnic minorities, these hybrid texts could foster a progressive empathetic identification or they could result only in a complacent form of pity.

Ultimately, I believe that the politics of a text or a genre can not be determined by textual analysis alone. For example, the question of whether sentimental postmodernist texts foster progressive empathy or conservative pity can best be answered by studying reception by actual audiences. The need for audience studies is particularly important when dealing with affective genres since emotions are so volatile and hard to predict. For example, while many feminist critics and viewers celebrated *The Piano* as a subversive text, many other female viewers were enraged by what they saw as an anti-feminist film. Surprisingly, although many studies of sentimentality and melodrama locate the politics of these genres in their affective strategies, they neglect to consider that emotional effects can not be totally determined by the text. Psychoanalytic readings, which have tended to dominate melodrama criticism, suffer from both ahistoricism and textual determinism. Critics such as Tompkins and Klinger have attempted to discuss reception in their analyses of nineteenth-century fiction and 1950s melodrama, but the distance of time allows them to study only textual traces of audience response--reviews, advertisements, letters, and critical articles in the press. My study of contemporaneous audience readings

of the politics of sentimental postmodernism offers a new direction for critics interested in the politics of both postmodernism and affective genres.

### **Audience Ethnography--Rationale and Methods**

Although I engage in an ethnographic study of audiences in order to address some of the limitations of textual criticism, I do not underestimate the role of the text in setting up various ideological positions for readers. Rather than seeing ethnography and speculative textual analysis as antithetical as many critics do, I attempt to combine the merits of these two approaches in my examination of the political effects of sentimental postmodernism. I offer here a justification for my approach and situate my methodological choices in relation to key debates concerning ethnographic practices--debates about empiricism, the dominant/resistant reading paradigm, the relationship between researchers and subjects, and about the sociological urge to uncover demographic patterns.

My decision to learn the skills to conduct ethnographic research came from my dissatisfaction with the assumptions of many literary and film scholars about the absolute power of production over consumption. Even when critics are concerned with the ideological effects of a text upon audiences, they place the text at the center of meaning, invest its structural elements with the ability to produce univocal readings, and assume audiences to be passive. Rather than investigating the responses of actual readers, theorists of reception and spectatorship speculate about an "implied reader" or "implied spectator" who represents the "normal" response elicited by a text.<sup>28</sup> This indifference to

the responses of audiences signals a problematic understanding of how meaning and ideological effects are produced.<sup>29</sup> Film studies, in particular, has been heavily influenced by Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, which focuses on the power of mass-media texts to reproduce the viewer as a subject of ideology. Althusser's model tends both to underestimate the polysemic nature of popular texts, assuming that mass culture always inscribes a conservative ideology, and to ignore that readers and viewers often construct widely different interpretations of texts depending on their own cultural background and the discourses they have available to them.

In questioning the assumption that politics is textually determined, I take my lead from cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall. In the 1970s, Hall and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies offered a corrective to Althusser and communication theories by discussing the reader as an active participant in the process of meaning-production. Hall's groundbreaking 1973 essay "Encoding/decoding" sparked a flurry of ethnographic work, most notably David Morley's study of audience responses to the television news program *Nationwide*. In "Encoding/decoding," Hall argues for the "'relative autonomy' but 'determinateness,' of the entry and exit of the message" from text to audience, stressing that audiences do "interpretive work" (134) and can make different ideological interpretations of the codes they see in texts. While this theory grants agency to the viewer, Hall recognizes the power of the text to construct "some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate" (135). By pointing out that audiences tend to fall into clusters or patterns of interpretation, his theories offer an important warning against the "subjective relativism" of some ethnographic work--the

idea that each viewer produces a totally individualized response, thereby rendering the textual codes irrelevant.<sup>30</sup> Some reader-response literary critics have also given too much power to the reader to construct the text. Umberto Eco argues that all texts are “open,” inviting an infinite number of interpretations. Norman Holland also takes the subjective approach too far, arguing that readers use “the literary work to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves” (816).

While Hall’s “Encoding/decoding” influenced me to pay equal attention to both text and audience in the production of ideological effects, I take issue with Hall’s division of audience response into preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Using an example of television news, Hall argues that a preferred or “dominant” reading accepts the hegemonic “institutional/political/ideological order” that has been encoded into the newscast (134), while readers also have the ability to construct a resistant reading or a negotiated one which allows both “adaptive and oppositional elements” (137). Several problems arise, however, if one attempts to apply this model to fictional texts at further remove from the power centers of mass media. The labels dominant and oppositional are too dependent upon a critic’s own reading of the text’s ideological stance, which he or she claims to be the preferred reading. Furthermore, the concept of a dominant reading underestimates the polysemic and contradictory nature of texts, implying that they have a fixed and unified ideological meaning that necessarily reproduces the dominant cultural order. What would be the dominant or preferred reading of a sentimental postmodernist text, where two worldviews are juxtaposed, resulting in ambiguous and ambivalent political messages? Since the texts I examine negotiate between two cultural orders, and

depict moments of both resistance and containment, it would be impossible to assign the binary labels “dominant” or “oppositional” to interpretations made by my interview subjects. If one conceives of a text as a complex negotiation between resistance and hegemonic cultural forces, then these schematic reading codes are no longer cogent, since they rely upon a notion of textual ideology as unitary and fixed.<sup>31</sup>

Adopting the model of dominant vs. resistant readings has led audience ethnographers to focus mainly on audience populations who seem to be resisting the values of ideologically conservative mass-culture texts.<sup>32</sup> The reader is only granted agency if he or she can resist the dominant encoding of the text by reading “against the grain.” Since sentimental postmodernist texts contain oppositional discourses within them--feminism and queer theory, for example--the audiences I interviewed tend to work with rather than against the grain of the text. To search for pure “resistance” would be beside the point, since almost all of the readings involved some form of negotiation with the text’s multiple codes. As Chris Christie complains of much cultural studies work, “the focus is not on how interpretation occurs, but on how resistance occurs” (53). Instead, Christie attempts to look at how “audience’s interpretations of the text and their cultural background are connected” (54). Like Christie’s work, my ethnographic study sheds light on the very process of interpretation itself. Since my hybrid texts invoke multiple and contradictory worldviews, they make audiences work to reach a political interpretation. The multiple readings that I encountered evade categorization according to a dominant/resistant paradigm, although I did see clusters of response. Ideologies clearly influenced this clustering, but the patterns were produced by much more subtle



differences than the big rubric of dominant vs. oppositional. For example, some of the interpretive patterns I observed were influenced by whether audiences espoused difference-based feminism or postmodern feminism, or gay-liberationist or queer ideologies. While all the clusters were interesting because of what they revealed about the process of political interpretation, I paid special attention to the viewers and readers who produced “negotiated” or ambivalent readings that focused on the contradictions and tensions, on the space in between the sentimental and the postmodern threads of the narratives.

Much more useful for my project is Hall’s later work on Gramsci’s concept of articulation, which describes all texts and reading practices as complex negotiations whose ideological significance is contingent upon social forces. In his 1980 essay “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” Hall takes a clearer stand against textual determinism, arguing that “the meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever. . . .The meaning of a cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices with which it articulates and is made to resonate” (235). He uses the term “articulation” to signify a flexible linkage between a social group or a person and a discourse, text, or political cause. In the interview “On Postmodernism and Articulation,” Hall argues that cultural products are “never whole, never fully closed or ‘sutured’” (56) because their meaning depends on surrounding social contexts, the audiences that interpret them, and the discourses those readers have available to them. Any text’s political “messages” are contingent upon contexts and are mediated by a

reading subject with his or her own politics. My project investigates how sentimental postmodernist texts are articulated into contemporary discourses about the politics of identity, and how audiences use these texts to articulate their own ideologies and identities.

My methodology locates politics in the complex negotiation between representation and interpretation, in the moments of articulation between text and audience subjectivity. I examine them as they work together, rather than side by side as in a two-step process, because the theory of “articulation rejects the assumption that the two moments [of encoding and decoding] are, even analytically, separable, as if each were completed or complete” (Grossberg, “Putting the Pop” 169). I also attempt to situate both production and consumption in socio-historical context. Models for my approach include Jackie Stacey’s *Star Gazing*, Miriam Hansen’s *Babel and Babylon*, Ien Ang’s *Watching Dallas*, and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, all of which study female audiences or cultural forms aimed at women. Stacey and Hansen attempt to historicize spectatorship by looking at the social and public context of cinema-watching for fans of female stars in the 1940s and 1950s, and for female viewers of the spectacle of the male body in early silent film. Ang and Radway locate politics in the processes of reading and viewing, but analyze the text as setting limits on the range of interpretations. My project synthesizes their approaches by examining the symbiotic relation between text, socio-historical context, and audience response. I concur with Janice Radway’s belief that ethnographic studies of reading should not be a replacement for textual studies but should be part of a multi-layered approach (*Reading the Romance* 5-6).

By offering such a wholistic, multi-layered analysis, I attempt to bridge a rift that has formed between two camps--textual critics and ethnographers studying readers and viewers. Television audiences have been the focus of ethnographers, while studies of film and literature audiences are still relatively rare.<sup>33</sup> In many studies of television, the very notion of the text has been exploded, and critics focus instead on the viewing context, the cultural vocabularies of viewers, and the marketing and fan-culture surrounding programs (Stacey 35). While these critics shed important light on the social contexts that can affect viewing, I question their expansion of the boundaries of "text" to make the word almost meaningless. The fact that few researchers study the formal strategies of television programs implies a false belief that such texts are transparent and ideologically static. This approach not only underestimates the diversity and polysemy of television narratives, but it overestimates the power of the viewer over the text by blithely celebrating moments of resistant pleasure. David Morley warns television researchers not to forget the text's ideological power in their zeal to better understand the contexts of consumption.<sup>34</sup>

Many textualist critics have reacted defensively against the cultural studies' call to investigate consumption. Christine Gledhill sums up the perspective of Marxist-oriented film theorists, who criticize audience studies for exhibiting a naive populism that "ignore[s] the long-term task of overthrowing dominant structures" ("Pleasurable Negotiations" 71). Mary Ann Doane voices the general disdain of psychoanalytic critics for the practice of ethnography because it is based on the "working assumption that the primary effects of the media concern consciousness" rather than the unconscious

(*Camera Obscura* 146). Psychoanalytic critics complain that audience research reveals only easily articulated responses rather than hard-to-access unconscious reactions. By adhering to the common critical practice of viewing the female spectator as “a concept, not a person” (*Camera Obscura* 142), Doane neglects to consider the possibility that human audiences could offer any knowledge about the process of spectatorship, or even the functionings of the unconscious. Her logic--that human viewers have nothing useful to tell us about the workings of the human mind--ignores the fact that the principles of psychoanalysis were predicated upon case studies of patients.

While I dislike her condescending attitude toward real viewers, Doane makes an important defense of theory, arguing that “forms of abstraction are crucial to thought itself and are not necessarily in conflict with the ‘real.’ Our abstractions are our realities. We live them every day” (*Femmes Fatales* 10). I completely agree with this point, but it could unfortunately be used as an apology for not testing one’s theories in real-life situations or on real human subjects. People need abstractions, as Doane argues convincingly, but theories can also become untethered from reality. While I invoke theoretical concepts concerning spectatorship and identification to explain audience responses, I also use the ethnographic data to question and revise existing theory. In my study, ethnography and textualist theories are dialectically engaged with one another rather than at odds.

Many textualist critics of audience research are rightly concerned that such studies reveal a problematic belief that scientific, objective truth about consumption can be found in empirical data. Audience researchers trained in the humanities have voiced similar

concerns about some of the sociological suppositions of ethnographic work.<sup>35</sup> Janice Radway, in a 1991 retrospective introduction to *Reading the Romance*, criticizes her own attempt to find “empirical truth,” to avoid subjective interpretation by using multiple-choice questions and by breaking down the responses of her subjects into statistical data. My own approach to ethnography reveals my humanities training in textual analysis, accompanied by a suspicion of the drive for objective truth common in the social sciences. I examine audience responses as narratives, paying attention to the discourses that audiences use to describe their reactions and interpretations. I do not view these narratives as offering a totalizing truth about the reception of sentimental postmodernism, but rather as one possible reception story that nonetheless reveals some important detail about the socio-political significance of these texts, and about the process of identification at this particular historical moment. We can never hope to explain how reception works in any universal manner, but can only work to produce local histories and to measure them against one another.

Ethnographers David Morley and Ien Ang have both tackled the question of how to avoid the false claims of empiricism, and I find Ang’s arguments more convincing. Morley locates the problem in one’s data-gathering technique. In his study of “Nationwide” audiences, he attempts to stand against the empiricism of quantitative mass-communications research, which uses multiple-choice questionnaires to obtain objectified knowledge. Instead, Morley conducts “qualitative” interviews with groups of viewers, in which the discussions were open and undirected.<sup>36</sup> Morley rightly points out that multiple-choice questions limit the respondent and do not tell the whole story. For

example, a “yes” answer may mean different things for different people (*Nationwide* 31).

Morley’s work has been so influential that qualitative interviews have now become the standard for cultural studies of audiences, and I use this method in two of my chapters.

However, I question the ruling belief that only in-depth interviews can yield viable results. Ien Ang has pointed out that the qualitative method does not necessarily free a researcher from the pitfalls of empiricism. Despite his interview method, Morley still speaks with the imperious voice of objective truth and presents his own interpretation of the text as the definitive “dominant” reading. While his work is a considerable improvement over mass-communications research that objectifies audiences, Morley still makes universalizing and essentialist comments about class and educational background that reduce the complexity of individuals. As a counterpoint to Morley, Ien Ang questions the assumption that a particular methodology will guarantee “the validity of the outcomes of research” (“Wanted” 106). As she argues, “the collection of data, either quantitative or qualitative in form, can never be separated from their interpretation,” since all data must be interpreted, and all interpretation is political (105). The validity of ethnographic analysis depends on the conclusions a researcher makes about his or her data, rather than on the data itself.

I attempt to avoid the political pitfalls of an empirical approach by viewing my project not as a search for objective knowledge, but for a better understanding of how some individuals have used cultural texts to make sense of their world. I chose to conduct interviews for my chapters on *The Piano* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* because they provide easier access to the discourses of audiences. I chose the questionnaire

method for my study of the *Northern Exposure* Internet fanclub because of the geographic dispersal of the group, and because they also interact via the written word in their on-line posts. I have taken Morley's warnings about quantitative questionnaires into consideration, however. In order to conduct a questionnaire that spoke the language of the respondents, I culled phrases and vocabulary from the newsgroup postings that I observed for a full year. Modeling my questionnaire on the one Jackie Stacey uses in *Star Gazing*, I always followed up multiple-choice questions with broader short-answer questions which asked the respondents to use their own words, so that I could compare the two answers for qualification. Discrepancies between my constructed choices and the respondents' own explanations were revealing because they highlighted the subjective nature of interpretation and its connection to the cultural discourses available to the viewer. My data-gathering methodology was not intended to uncover truth, but to underscore that all knowledge is partial and situated.

Since the goal of my research was to gain access to discursive structures, both my interviews and questionnaires employed open-ended questions that engendered long and complex responses. This strategy was suggested to me by Ien Ang's study of Dutch viewers of the American soap opera "Dallas." In *Watching Dallas*, Ang reads her sources--letters solicited by a magazine advertisement--as intricate texts in themselves, and she seeks to uncover the "relation between pleasure and ideology" in the fans' responses (11). In her view, viewers' responses to melodrama depend upon their cultural orientation and attitude towards soap operas, television, or popular culture in general. Ang therefore examines each letter for statements that she sees as representative of either

an “ideology of mass culture” (a leftist stance against the culture industry) or an “ideology of populism.” Ang’s treatment of the “audience as text” has been criticized by Jane Feuer, who finds it problematic because it endlessly defers meaning, and contradictory because it displaces interest away from people and once again onto texts. Feuer also argues that if audience responses are read as representations, then “the reception theorist constantly risks falling back into an empiricism of the subject, by granting a privileged status to the interpretations of the audience over those of the critic.”<sup>37</sup> Her conclusion, then, is that textually-based audience studies like Ang’s offer no greater insight than speculative textual readings done by psychoanalytic film theorists, which she prefers.

I disagree with Feuer’s conclusions because they ultimately serve to legitimate the elitism of critics. Feuer believes that theories about unconscious responses offer more insight than audiences’ descriptions of their conscious responses; this condescending stance reduces viewers to mere dupes who are in need of psychoanalysis. In a special issue of *Camera Obscura* devoted to the theoretical concept of the “female spectator,” Miriam Hansen voices the criticism that ethnographers wage against such theoretical elitism: “we need to grant the ‘ordinary’ female viewer a certain interpretive capability, a reflective distance in relation to the roles she is expected to assume” (172). Like Hansen, I would like to grant audiences some credit for offering insightful narratives of their reception practices. Since all of us are informed by the discourses that we have acquired to describe our lived experience, I believe that a study of audience response narratives is still the most important means of learning about reception. As Robert Wuthnow reminds, we need to “admit our lack of knowledge about hidden states and examine the discourse



itself, because that is all we have” (63).

While Feuer believes that audience interpretations are taking precedence over critics’ interpretations in reception studies, I am more concerned about the reverse tendency. Critics usually “read against the grain” of respondents’ discourses in a manner that is politically problematic. Ang herself worries that the gaze of the researcher often objectifies audiences into an exotic “other,” and she calls for more “audience research which is on the side of the audience” (“Wanted” 104). While Radway’s *Reading the Romance* has its share of methodological shortcomings, her balanced and respectful attitude towards her subjects is exemplary. She insightfully argues that the process of reading itself may be radical, even when the books consumed are overwhelmingly conservative. Radway listens to what the Smithton women say about the meaning of reading in their own lives, and amplifies their own analyses, rather than merely reading against the grain of their responses. She argues that their reading of romances functions as a “minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest” against patriarchy (222). In short, Radway treats her subjects with the respect that Angela McRobbie notes is lacking among academic feminists, who tend to “underestimate the resources and capacities of ‘ordinary’ women and girls . . . to participate in their own struggles as women but quite autonomously” (McRobbie “The Politics” 53).

Likewise, I have attempted to learn *from* the audiences in my study, rather than merely learning *about* them, like butterflies under a microscope. Although I have been attentive to inconsistencies in their interpretations, I have tried to respect each person’s response. Rather than dismissing them as confused, I underscore the difficulty of

navigating mixed-code texts and stress that no one's ideology is ever seamless or unitary. My goal was not to weigh their interpretations against my own, but to investigate what these texts do for them and to uncover what influenced them to respond as they did. In conducting empirical research, Morley and Ang insist on the importance of being open to surprises "not prefigured in one's starting paradigm" (Morley, "Changing" 25), and this advice turned out to be crucial for my project. When I began the research, I expected people's responses and identifications to correlate roughly with their gender, race, or sexual identity, but the cross-group identifications and diverse interpretations that I observed forced me to rethink my assumptions, opening up a much more interesting avenue for analysis.

All ethnographers must acknowledge the power that academic researchers wield over their subjects, especially since this power differential can interfere with one's results. If subjects are intimidated, they may alter their responses to try to sound more educated, or to tell the researcher what they think he or she wants to hear.<sup>38</sup> While it is impossible to construct a power-free interview situation, I adopted several strategies to address the political problems of ethnographic work. Fortunately, my status as a young, female graduate student helped to reduce the intimidation factor. I also attempted to alleviate anxieties by first answering the respondent's questions about my research goals.<sup>39</sup> I asked them direct questions about whether they felt their gender or sexual identity influenced their readings, so that they could participate in turning a critical lens on themselves. When a person's interpretations or emotional responses echoed my own, I often said so, which created a feeling of solidarity and affirmation that made the

interchange operate more like a friendly conversation. If I felt the person was not easily threatened, I occasionally played devil's advocate, presenting an alternative point of view for them to respond to. David Morley might argue that I talked too much, and that my words pushed audiences into taking up particular stances.<sup>40</sup> But I believe that an interchange between two people who each express their thoughts is ultimately much more revealing because it resembles the negotiations that take place in a real conversation, the kind people might have with their friends outside of a movie theater.

I tried to maintain a balance between giving the respondents some sense of me as an individual, and suppressing my own political views so as not to prejudice their responses or provoke them unnecessarily. Adopting a relatively neutral stance was sometimes useful in putting people at ease to express their true thoughts; some even felt comfortable enough to voice anti-semitic or anti-feminist views, which they might not have done had they known my politics or religious affiliation. I only mentioned my own political leanings, such as my feminism, if they were in accord with those of the respondent. Despite these precautions, a few moments of tension did occur, but I view those misunderstandings as productive rather than detrimental to the interviews because they resulted in frank dialogue. I was able to address and partially erase the suspicions of a black man who made assumptions about me because I am white, and of a gay man who wondered why a heterosexual woman was interested in gay culture. During the interviews, I acknowledged my own locatedness at moments when it would serve to open up honest dialogue rather than close it down.

Critics might counter that such interviewing strategies could not wipe away the

differences between an academic researcher and a mass-culture fan with little cultural capital.<sup>41</sup> For example, David Morley argues that claiming a shared kinship as a fan (as does John Fiske) “merely obscures the researchers’ dominant relation to their subjects in terms of access to cultural capital” (*Television* 32). The goal of my interview strategies, however, was not to erase or ignore difference, but rather to prevent differences from impeding communication. Furthermore, a significant difference between my project and many other audience studies is that nearly all of my respondents are middle-class, college-educated, and liberal. To varying degrees, they are of my cohort since they had also acquired cultural capital. Our similar class status granted me the position of “insider” and alleviated some of the power differential common to ethnographic work. Differences other than class, however, sometimes moved me to the margins, as in my conversations with gay male fans of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. My point is that class difference is not necessarily the only hurdle to overcome in conducting ethnographic work, because difference comes in many forms and must always be negotiated sensitively.

Studying audience groups with cultural capital gives me the opportunity to fill a gap in cultural studies analyses of reception. While postmodern critics have slighted popular texts, cultural critics have emphasized texts aimed at a mass audience. Because of the Marxist underpinnings of cultural studies, ethnographers tend to focus on the “subordinate and the disempowered” (Fiske 5), the uneducated consumers of lowbrow mass cultural texts, typified in the figure of the housewife. Few researchers have studied educated audiences, as if the critic’s own reading could stand in for that diverse class of viewers and readers. This bias indicates a false assumption that the elite, or even the

middle-class, do not consume mass-cultural texts, or that their responses are univocal.

Ethnographers imply that the television-watching masses are somehow separate from the class of the observer. Janice Radway has suggested the need for a study of romance reading among highly educated women in male-dominated professions (*Reading* 50), to investigate how these texts might function differently for them. My study takes a similar tack, although I look at hybrid texts that employ both high cultural and sentimental popular strategies and thus appeal to audiences with mixed tastes.

The diverse readings that I encountered among people of similar class backgrounds make it necessary to question the assumption that class predicts interpretation and taste. In his study of *Nationwide*, David Morley organizes his audience groups according to similar socio-economic positioning, and categorizes each group's interpretations as either dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. In order to come up with such a neat and schematic grid, Morley relies on essentialist beliefs about class difference, suppressing individual difference and the potential influence of other identities.<sup>42</sup> As I have already noted, a similar bias can be found in *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu's study of taste stratification in France, in which he implies that taste for high or low culture necessarily devolves from class. How would Morley and Bourdieu explain the fact that middle-class people with cultural capital enjoy popular sentimentalism as well as the "writerly" qualities of highbrow texts? Rather than focusing solely on class (and education) as a predictor of interpretation and taste, as do many ethnographers, my study examines the impact of a variety of identities--gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality--upon the process of reading.

However, regardless of what social identities a researcher may emphasize, one is still faced with the problem of the “creeping essentialism that lurks behind the classificatory move” (Ang, *Living* 116). As Ang argues, by boxing people into social categories, the “inconsistencies and variances within informants’ accounts . . . remain unaccounted for, or are even actively repressed” (*Living* 117). This problem rears its head in many studies of reading that focus on a single axis of identity, thereby reducing audiences to their gender, race, or class. For example, Radway’s single-axis study of female romance readers could have benefited from a consideration of how class, religion, race, and educational background could result in more diverse patterns of interpretation. By looking at differences among women (e.g. differing feminist ideologies and educational backgrounds), the essay collection *Gendering the Reader*, edited by Sara Mills, successfully moves beyond the essentialism of earlier work on “the woman reader.” I have attempted to follow such a model by investigating multiple axes of identity in all of my audience studies. In my chapter on *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, for example, I look at differences of interpretation among a group of gay men, differences influenced by political affiliations, gender-identifications (effeminate or macho), and adherence to either an essentialist (gay) or anti-essentialist (queer) identity model. To combat the problem of essentialist classifications in ethnography, it is important to consider that identities are multiple and layered, and that there are many different ways of experiencing even a supposedly singular identity, such as femininity or homosexuality.

While it is important to disrupt facile, essentializing equations of identities with a particular interpretation, taking a non-essentialist approach does not mean that

ethnographers should ignore social groupings altogether. While Ien Ang, in *Watching Dallas*, acknowledges that a viewer's experience of tragic feeling depends upon his cultural orientation, she does not explore this contention in any detail. In her attempt to avoid essentialism, Ang unfortunately ignores that the discourses she studies may be correlated to specific social locations. By not soliciting any demographic information about her audience group, Ang misses the chance to explore significant patterns of response that could have shed light on group differences in melodramatic sensibilities. It seems particularly odd that she elides the fact that the national political culture of her Dutch subjects, who are more leftist and hostile to mass culture than Americans, clearly affected their response to this American soap opera.

While there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between identity and reading, that does not mean that such linkages never occur. My take is that the social positioning of audience members can influence their interpretation of texts, but that we need a new understanding of the concept of "social positioning." I find Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive community" to be a useful one, but the communities he discusses, such as American college students and literary critics, are too broadly conceived. Instead, I look at subtle shadings within the umbrella categories of race, gender, and sexuality, and even within interpretive communities such as academic feminists, breaking down such identities and social locations into smaller components and subcommunities. For example, all the women I interviewed did not interpret *The Piano* in the same way, but those who espoused gender-essentialist, difference-feminist beliefs did tend to produce similar readings. My ethnographic study differs from essentialist treatments of group

difference in interpretation by emphasizing that identities are ideological rather than biological, and multiplicitous rather than unitary. This anti-essentialist understanding of identity also informs my ideas about how audiences identify with a text and its characters, a process which has been the focus of much critical debate in film and literary studies.

### **Political Identification**

Much of the critical work on identification has been based on a psychoanalytic model developed by feminist film theorists, although contributions to the discussion have also been made by queer theorists, critical race theorists, and cognitivist film theorists. Identification has preoccupied a wide range of thinkers because of its social and psychic importance as a means by which our identities and ideologies are constructed and reinforced. Psychoanalysts Laplanche and Pontalis define identification as the “psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified” (205). Building on psychoanalytic principles as well as Althusser’s theory of interpellation, “apparatus” film theorists treat identification as an unconscious process of self-recognition that works to solidify unitary identities among viewers. They argue that film structures repeatedly place or “suture” the viewer into the same subject positions, “thereby giving the subject the illusion of a stable and continuous identity” (Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* 221).

Few audience researchers have attempted to evaluate the usefulness of such



theories by investigating the identification patterns of actual viewers, as opposed to theoretical spectators. I follow the lead of Jackie Stacey, who has used empirical work with fans to re-evaluate identification theory. Such a reconsideration has become increasingly necessary given the recent sea-change in understandings of identity. Developed to explain the spectator's relationship to classical films that rely upon essentialist identity categories, the "suture" model of apparatus film theory is inadequate to explain how audiences identify with texts that reflect and encourage a postmodern questioning of identity. <sup>7</sup> I see my work as a contribution to recent attempts, made primarily by feminist and queer theorists, to rethink identification in order to take into account a post-structuralist understanding of the subject as mobile, "contradictory, divided, and fragmented" <sup>7</sup> (Mayne 100).

However, the crucial difference between my ethnographic approach and these recent post-structuralist theories is that many of them continue to base their arguments upon psychoanalytic premises and therefore assume identification to be an unconscious process. My study argues, on the other hand, that identification is a form of articulation that can involve a conscious process of negotiation between self and other. For example, feminist audiences of *The Piano* recognized that their identification and/or disidentification with Ada was influenced by their particular feminist ideologies. Their identification process included a conscious understanding of the politics of gender identity, a possibility often ignored by psychoanalytic theorists.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the texts I have chosen pose a challenge to this body of theory because they explicitly aim to move identity formation out of the realm of the unconscious and into the conscious mind of

viewers, where it can be analyzed as a social process with political significance. By presenting audiences with conflicted representations of identity (as either essentialist or anti-essentialist), sentimental postmodernism upsets a simple unconscious process of sliding into familiar and stable subject positions. These texts aim to produce critical distance, but they avoid the avant garde strategy of disrupting identification altogether, a tactic that has been criticized by some feminist theorists.<sup>44</sup> Instead, sentimental postmodernist texts encourage identification as do most melodramas, but they work to bring identification into consciousness, to make audiences aware of the process and its potential political significance.

In addition to an unwillingness to discuss conscious, ideological identifications, another drawback of psychoanalytic theories is their reliance on universalizing and essentialist models that define gender identity as an extension of the body. While psychoanalysis is a theory of the social construction of the psyche, Freud nonetheless based many of his ideas about gender on the recognition of biological difference (e.g. woman as castrated). As Jane Gaines argues, because Freud “strikes a mean between the biological and the social” (80), his ideas have been used to support biological essentialism. On the other hand, Lacan has been hailed as an anti-essentialist who focuses on discourses rather than bodies, but his notion of the “subject position” nonetheless relies on essentialist underpinnings (Fuss, *Essentially* 29).<sup>45</sup> Even more problematic, Diana Fuss argues, is his universalizing treatment of woman as lack (12). Feminist identification theorists who adopt Freudian and Lacanian notions often end up reifying gender difference. Spectatorship theorists Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane

neglect to consider female viewers as actively desiring subjects and voyeurs for whom gender is only one of many identity formations. For example, women in my study groups did not always identify with other women, since their sense of gender identity varies widely. Not only do these apparatus theorists of the “male gaze” seem to perpetuate a Lacanian equation of passivity and lack with femininity, even as they aim to critique such cultural myths, but they also reduce the male viewer to a voyeuristic eye, ignoring that men may identify with rather than objectify female characters. Their exclusive focus on gender difference leads them to underestimate the differences *within* each gender, caused by other social identities such as race and class, or by political ideologies. In my view, any current study of identification needs to acknowledge that “subjectivity does not devolve from the body; . . . [but] is defined by social and historical processes that are irreducible to singular categories” (Rodowick 139-40).

Theorists in the 1970s and ‘80s often viewed identification as a means of solidifying unitary identities among spectators. This idea, which conflates identity with identification, has also been referred to as the “folk” or common-sense view of identification--that women identify with women, blacks with blacks, etc. Such a limiting definition does not address the complexity of identity and the ways in which people are multiply located. The problem begins with Freud, who theorized in *Group Psychology* that identification is “typically masculine” and phallic, serving to solidify and erect the subject (105). Building on this idea, Anne Friedberg argued that classical film offers fixed gender identities, encouraging the viewer to solidify one’s own identity as an existing type of femininity or masculinity as a result.<sup>46</sup> The related notion of “suture” is

based on the idea that spectators are stitched into static subject positions within the narrative fabric. The belief that identification shores up and rigidifies identity has led many feminist critics to view it negatively. Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane focus on identification as a form of entrapment that seduces female spectators of classical film to acquiesce to their “proper” feminine role.<sup>47</sup>

While most identification theories concern gender identity, critics within race studies have also adopted a view of identification that reflects unitary notions of subjectivity, largely due to the influence of essentialist identity politics. Jacqueline Bobo’s study of “the black female audience” for *The Color Purple* portrays this group as a unified block identifying with the film and novel in the same basic way; no attention is paid to exceptions that might complicate the picture. Manthia Diawara simply grafts Laura Mulvey’s theories onto a race model, arguing that film is created for a white spectator, so a black spectator’s only resort is to resist identification. While bell hooks agrees that black women often take an oppositional stance to mainstream films, she rightly questions the essentialist assumption (made by Bobo and Diawara) that African Americans, male or female, have an “inherently different field of vision” (“Oppositional Gaze” 300). She reasons that black individuals respond differently to the pressures of dominant cultural values. However, while hooks is attentive to differences among black women, she unfortunately tends to essentialize white spectators as a monolithic block.<sup>48</sup> Although racial identification theory does not often invoke a psychoanalytic model, a reliance on identity politics results in a similar oversimplification of reception that fails to account for differences within a racial group. Among many African-American critics, the

resistance to post-structuralist anti-identitarian theory is a consequence of a desire for empowering notions of racial solidarity.<sup>49</sup> As Diana Fuss points out, “the Afro-American subject . . . begins fragmented and dispersed” (*Essentially* 95), so fragmentation is seen as something to be overcome rather than embraced. While I question the universalism of essentialist principles as a basis for identification theory, I have recognized the pull of essentialism for many of the subjects I interviewed, and I respect their desire for the political empowerment that identity politics can enable. While identification can work to foster useful group solidarity, I disagree with critics who underestimate the potential of identification to loosen identity boundaries for progressive purposes.

A key problem with essentialist models is that they define identification as a process of recognizing sameness, disallowing that identification may also entail an awareness of difference. Working with Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey reduces identification to the simple pleasure of recognizing oneself as in a mirror (17-18). Freud’s identification theories have generally emphasized sameness over difference: “identification endeavors to mould a person’s ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model” (*Group Psychology* 106). Jackie Stacey has criticized these theories for treating identification primarily as a recognition of similarities that perpetuates static views of the self; alternatively, she looks at fans whose identifications with female stars “involve the productive recognition of differences between femininities” (171). My study also focuses on people identifying with subjects whom they recognize to be different than themselves. Many of the gay men in my study of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, for example, identified

with the gay character while simultaneously asserting that they are not as effeminate and apolitical as he is. The concept of a singular identity is a fallacy, since there are many ways of experiencing any identity. As Judith Butler reminds, “femininity itself might offer an array of identificatory sites” rather than a single one (*Bodies* 239). Likewise, many women identified with Ada McGrath in *The Piano* “as a woman,” but experienced that identity in various ways.

Freud’s theory of identification is particularly problematic because it relies on a notion of “incorporation.” Identification, Freud reasons, operates like a hostile, colonizing incorporation that “behaves like a derivative of the first, oral phase . . . in which the object that we long for and prize is assimilated by eating and is in that way annihilated as such” (*Group Psychology* 105). Freud wrongly assumes that identification always involves turning the other into the same, thereby erasing difference. This theory cannot account for the fact that many members of my audience group experienced a more ambivalent identification process, which involved a recognition of incongruities and a respect for difference rather than a desire for assimilation. My ethnographic work underscores that identification is often ambivalent and partial because of the contradictory, multiple, and fractured nature of subjectivity. Among my audience group, I saw many instances of ambivalence in which people both identified and disidentified with the same character. Their selves were not completely swallowed up by the other, and vice versa. Theorists need to take into consideration that identification is partial or “aspectual” rather than whole, since two subjects are never equivalent.<sup>50</sup>

Although some theorists have addressed ambivalence in identification, I use the

term “ambivalent” to mean something slightly different. A common argument is that an ambivalent identification involves both a connection and a refusal, sympathy as well as hatred. Freud’s theory of incorporation admits this kind of ambivalence, since identification “can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as a wish for someone’s removal” (*Group Psychology* 105). In *Totem and Taboo*, he argues that the “sons hate their father but they also simultaneously love and admire him” (Fuss, *Identification* 34). Likewise, Judith Butler notes that “identification is always an ambivalent process” (*Bodies* 126) since it can include “unresolved aggression” (143). However, I do not read the ambivalent identifications among my audience groups as necessarily indicative of hatred or aggression lying beneath outward sympathy. Many of these people were able to identify while also recognizing their differences in respectful and non-hostile ways, in the ethic of “live and let live.” Instead of reading ambivalence as reflective of the aggressive and violent underpinnings of the universal human psyche, as do these psychoanalytic theorists, I see ambivalent identification as a positive social development, an awareness of difference that prevents a colonizing incorporation yet leaves room for sympathy and connection. More so than Freud, Lacan acknowledges that identification involves the recognition of difference, but he sees these moments as frustrating for the individual, who despairs that he can never equal his ideal other. Lacan argues that the subject is always alienated and split between self and an ideal image/other. While Lacan’s concept of the split subject prefigures post-structuralist notions of identity as contradictory and unstable, I find it problematic because it is predicated on a premise of psychic hostility just like Freud’s theories--that the self and other are “rivals” rather than teachers or potential

allies.<sup>51</sup> There is no consideration in Lacan's theories that encounters with the other could help to broaden and enrich the self.

Instead of looking at ambivalence as a sign of unconscious hostility or alienation, I read it as a sign of "the possibility of multiple and contradictory identities coexisting in the same subject at the same time" (Fuss, *Identification* 34). By pointing out subtle differences between themselves and characters that they identified with, these audience members were attesting to the complexity of subjectivity and challenging a belief that identification equals identity. Furthermore, many of the people in my audience study identified with two seemingly opposed subject positions at once--both male and female, both racial minorities and whites, or both gay and heterosexual characters. Several theorists have attempted to address this kind of identificatory oscillation, but they tend to focus only on vacillation between gender polarities.<sup>52</sup> Opposed to apparatus theorists such as Doane, who argues that women are forced to over-identify with female characters, Teresa de Lauretis has discussed a "double or split identification" of the female spectator with both the active male gaze and the passive feminine image. Her theory of the ambivalence of women's cinematic identification is predicated on Freud's notion that some women are "bisexual," experiencing a "repeated alternation between periods in which femininity or masculinity gain the upper hand" (Freud, "Femininity" 131). Like Lacan, de Lauretis views this ambivalence or split identification negatively. She sees it as a trap that seduces women into consenting to femininity by allowing a compensatory but illusory identification with the power of the male hero. De Lauretis does not consider the liberatory possibilities of a loosening of the boundaries of the self. Further, she does not



allow that men may also experience double identifications with masculinity and femininity, as did many of the men in my study group. The central problem with her model is that it relies on a universalizing binary system of gender difference, ignoring that women may identify with men (or vice versa) because they share other identities (such as race) or ideologies.<sup>7</sup> Because it is too narrowly conceived, her theory can not explain the wide variety of ambivalent identifications that both men and women in my audience groups experienced.

The diverse and fluid identifications that my ethnography uncovered highlight the fact that people are multiply located. Some identification theorists have focused attention on the multiplicity of identity, moving beyond unitary and binary models. Elizabeth Cowie was one of the first film theorists to discuss identification as fluid and multiple. Invoking Freud's essay "A Child Is Being Beaten" which addresses the fluid positions of desire in fantasy, Cowie argues that films offer spectators the opportunity to try out many subject positions (mother, child, male, female). Critical of the concept of suture with its notion of fixed identities, she contends that viewers identify with types of desires in an Oedipal scenario rather than with identities (72-3). While her work is useful in disrupting the rigid view of identity posited by suture theorists, Cowie seems to underestimate the hold that identities have over people. By emphasizing the free-flowing unconscious, Cowie pays no attention to social constraints mitigating against entirely fluid identifications. Many people that I interviewed still identified with people who shared their group identity, even if they experienced more fluid cross-over identifications as well. Moreover, because Cowie is only concerned with psychic fantasy, she does not

discuss the potential socio-political consequences of such multiple and fluid identifications, as I aim to do.

Better models of the multiply located subject can be found in the work of Sallie Munt and Judith Butler. Lesbian theorist Sallie Munt describes a “multivalent self” based on a useful model of “intersecting plates, so that the ground of the self shifts and recombines with the intervention and chafing of other selves, which sculpt a new self based on intersubjectivity” (2). Judith Butler uses a similar figure to describe the subject as a series of intersecting “vectors of power” that can include sexuality, gender, and race (*Bodies* 167). An understanding of the self as intersubjective and dialogic helps to explain how it could be possible to identify with many seemingly distinct or even antagonistic subject positions in a narrative, as did many of my interview subjects. My interviews revealed the intersubjectivity of these audience members, uncovering interconnecting vectors of affiliations and experiences that resist efforts to place these subjects into tidy identity boxes. Butler argues that recognizing one’s multiple identifications may have crucial political consequences: “if that very subject produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity, the crossings of identifications of which it is itself composed, then that subject forecloses the kinds of contestatory connections that might democratize the field of its own operation” (*Bodies* 115). Wary of the “violence of exclusion” that can result from identity politics, Butler instead favors an “expansive set of connections” that allow political coalitions (118). I too am interested in the progressive potential of cross-group identification. In studying the identifications of audience members, I have seen many examples of what Sallie Munt calls the “visiting self, which

leans into the experience of others and listens and learns” (4). For many of the people I interviewed, identification is “an amalgam of experience and desire, a process not of exclusion, but of ‘pivoting.’ This sensibility produces a sense of belonging, a sense of ‘we,’ which is not an attempt to universalize” (Munt 4).

Cross-group identification has been a key concern for feminist critics, who fall into two camps--those who view identification across gender lines as illusory, and those who view it as potentially subversive. These two camps are distinguished by essentialist vs. anti-essentialist views of gender identity. In “Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure,” Mulvey admits that female spectators may identify with an active male protagonist, but she calls such an identification a sad act of transvestitism that leaves female spectators without a “stable sexual identity” (30); Teresa de Lauretis takes a similar attitude in her description of double identification. Mary Ann Doane also views the pursuit of a “well-defined subjectivity” (*Desire* 177) as a positive goal for women that is often thwarted by film, rather than considering the liberatory possibilities of a blurring of the boundaries of the subject via destabilizing identifications. I take issue with the suggestion that “transvestite” cross-gender identification is to be lamented as illusory, a kind of false consciousness for women. Women viewers identifying with male characters could be read as a progressive rather than a regressive political development, a reflection of a growing anti-essentialist feminist sensibility and a rejection of female stereotypes.

Instead, I align myself with critics such as Carol Clover, Kaja Silverman, and Eve Sedgwick, who have explored the potentially subversive effects of a loosening of the boundaries of the self through cross-group identification. Unlike Cowie, these critics

situate fluid identifications in social context and argue for their political significance.

Clover, Silverman, and Gaylyn Studlar have all examined male identification with women as a destabilizing process with progressive political effects. Studlar sees her work on male masochism and submission to the female gaze as a corrective to that of Mulvey and Doane, who neglect the “possibilities of male identification with the female (even as an ego ideal) or his identification with a “feminized” masculine character” (278).

Similarly, in her book *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Carol Clover discusses the “Final Girl” survivor in slasher horror films as an androgynous figure, both hero and victim; this narrative device allows young male viewers to identify with the position of victimized femininity. While Studlar’s generalizing psychoanalytic model unequivocally celebrates male masochism, Clover qualifies the subversion that she finds in this gender-bending identification, since it still involves a projection and deflection of male fears onto a girl. Despite the phallocentrism of the genre, Clover finds slasher films to be transgressive because they play with gender, allowing males to explore “an imaginative curiosity about the feminine” (55).

Kaja Silverman’s *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* is a more careful study of male masochism than Studlar’s because she does not assign a fixed political significance to a cross-over identification with the feminine. Looking at a range of texts, Silverman considers the regressive, imperialistic elements of Lawrence of Arabia’s masochistic identifications as well as the radical aspects of Fassbinder’s films, which involve an “assault on male subjectivity” (265) and a total loss of self in the feminine other. Her attention to textual nuances is exemplary, and I have also attempted to locate my

arguments about cross-group identification in the local context of each particular text/audience interface. Her work also offers a necessary corrective to Freud's theory of "identificatory incorporation" by defining an alternative "heteropathic identification" as a "lifing of the psyche up and out of the body . . . into other sites of suffering" (275). This masochistic or empathetic form of identification "works against the consolidation of the isolated ego" (275) and against the "imperialism of the self" (265), thus offering a powerful political attack on masculinity and violence.

Queer theorists striving for a politics of coalition have also been interested in the radical potential of cross-group identification. Gay male identification with women has long been a focus for theorists of camp and drag; in his book *Heavenly Bodies*, Richard Dyer discusses Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland as stars whom gay men have seen as *sympaticos* in suffering. Silverman makes the important point that a gay male identification with the feminine has been too quickly dismissed in the backlash against the "inversion" theory of homosexuality, and she argues that it still offers a subversive "phallic divestiture, as a way of saying 'no' to power" (*Male Subjectivity* 389). Eve Sedgwick has inverted this familiar identification by discussing her own cross-group fascination with gay male culture. In *Tendencies*, Sedgwick notes that "the word 'queer' itself means across" (xii) and proposes her book as a study of the "passionate queer things that happen across the lines that divide genders, discourses, and 'perversions'" (xiii). Challenging the idea that sexual identity necessarily predicts one's identifications, Sedgwick sees queerness as an affiliation, a boundary-breaking coalition that embraces once-excluded bisexuals and transgendered people. The queer coalition has even made

room for anti-homophobic heterosexuals, although the politics of this particular cross-group identification has been the subject of some debate.<sup>53</sup>

Critics who explore the politics of identification across racial and ethnic lines, rather than across gender and sexuality, take a much more negative view of the process, particularly when members of the dominant culture claim to identify with minority others in a text. Because of the recent influence of post-colonial theory, such crossings are now viewed with mistrust, as a form of appropriation akin to Freud's incorporation concept. Post-colonial theory has rightly led critics to be wary of the assimilationist desires lurking behind facile identifications with "the native, the oppressed, the savage;" this fascination and drive for knowledge of the other can mask a "not-too-innocent desire to seize control" (Chow 53). In a chapter on Frantz Fanon, Diana Fuss concludes that "identification . . . is an imperial process, a form of violent appropriation in which the Other is deposed and assimilated into the lordly domain of self" (*Identification* 145). While there was clearly need for a correction to the rosy picture of cross-cultural identification drawn by advocates of multicultural harmony, I contend that critics have gone too far to the other extreme, dismissing such crossings as necessarily colonizing and politically retrograde.<sup>54</sup>

For instance, Doris Sommer's work on white readers of texts written by racial minorities makes some astute points, but I take issue with several of her comments about cross-group identification, empathy, and sentimentality. Sommer is suspicious of a white liberal identification with the other, deeming it an "appropriation in the guise of an embrace" ("Resistant Texts" 543) and a "violation by sentimentality" (*Proceed with*

*Caution* 22). Although she rightly points out that identification can lead to a dangerous insensitivity to real difference, Sommer is overly dismissive of empathy as a subversive political tool: “empathy is the egocentric energy that drives one subject to impersonate another, the calamitous dismissal of politics by feeling” (*Proceed* 22). Here Sommer echoes Freud’s view of identification as a hostile form of envy rather than true understanding, and his belief that identification is a “metaphoric” substitution of self for other that erases difference. Furthermore, Sommer’s preference for difficult texts that promote critical distance rather than identification, and her hostility to a “politics of feeling,” suggests an elitism similar to that of the Frankfurt School. This anti-sentimentality stance implies a contempt for the many minority writers who have relied heavily on affective strategies to further their political goals.

I also find it interesting that Sommer calls the distancing strategy of these minority writers a “life and death game to stop us short” (*Proceed* 30). While I do not mean to underestimate the serious consequences of assimilationism, it seems to me that a lack of identification between racial groups is much more likely to lead to life and death crises such as the Holocaust or “ethnic cleansing” in Serbia. A useful counterpoint to Sommer can be found in Andreas Huyssen’s article concerning the airing of the television miniseries “Holocaust” in Germany, a program which offered German viewers the opportunity to identify emotionally with a family of Jewish victims. Huyssen argues that this mass-culture television text accomplished more important political work among the German populace, resulting in a national “collective mourning” (135), than had all the avant garde Brechtian theater and rationalist political dialogue of the post-war years. By

allowing Germans to remain at a distance, these avant garde treatments of the Holocaust had fostered a repression of guilt and responsibility, and were powerless to combat the recurrence of anti-semitic sentiments. It is clear to me that critics should not globally reject cross-group identifications, but must consider these identificatory moments in local context before deciding on their political effects.

While Sommer dismisses identification as a metaphoric erasure of difference, she herself offers a useful model for potential alliances between members of dominant and subordinate cultures, calling for a “metonymic association rather than a metaphoric” substitution of self for other (“Resistant Texts” 539). My work with audiences underscores the metonymic qualities of identification and its ability to foster respect for difference. I remind that identification can operate much like Audre Lorde’s figure of the erotic as a “longing for the other, not to colonize, but to understand” (Munt 24). While identification can allow a facile form of sympathy that does little to destabilize the viewer’s own subjectivity, it also allows the possibility of a more radically unsettling form of empathy. Paul Ricoeur writes of the power of empathy: “It is always through some transfer from Same to Other, in empathy and imagination, that the Other that is foreign to me is brought closer” (184). My study of audience responses to sentimental postmodernism highlights the “heteropathic” potential of identification to shake people from the moorings of their identities and steer them in new political directions.



## Chapter Two

### Mixed Reviews of an Avant Garde Melodrama: *The Piano* and Feminist Political Identification

In the past ten years, I can think of few films that have provoked such vehement debate as did *The Piano*, particularly among female viewers. At one otherwise tame New Year's Eve party in 1996, as I described my research to a woman I had just met, she launched into a violent diatribe against the film, which soon attracted five or six others who began shouting out their own reviews. The fiery conversation ended when another woman stormed off, declaring that she couldn't bear to see her favorite film so maligned, to see Ada "dragged through the mud" once again. Although *The Piano* (written and directed by Jane Campion) was one of the most critically acclaimed and popular<sup>55</sup> films of 1993, it was and still continues to be a site of controversy. Campion's story of Ada McGrath, a mute Victorian woman struggling with expression, sexuality, her prescribed gender role, and her own powerful will, was hailed as a feminist masterpiece by some, but others complained that it merely perpetuated women's victimization and oppression. In addition to the debate over its ambiguous feminist politics, its aesthetic strategies and generic roots also caused much confusion and disagreement, particularly among reviewers. Some reviewers and audience members thought it pretentious, arty and overly symbolic, while others disparaged its melodramatic tone and romantic happy ending.

I contend that audience confusion about the film's feminist politics is partly caused by *The Piano*'s formal hybridity--its mixture of art-house, avant garde cinematic

technique influenced by surrealism and postmodernism, along with the generic strategies of low cultural forms usually associated with women, i.e. melodrama, romance, and the Gothic. Since different genres construct or imply different relationships between text and audience, from melodrama's emotional engagement to the avant garde's critical distance, audience members' interpretations are usually influenced by what genre or type of narrative they think they are viewing. When these kinds of cultural codes are confounded as in *The Piano*, the process of spectator identification with the text is complicated and results in a multitude of political readings and emotional responses. Because one woman at the New Year's Eve party had expected to see an intellectual, subversive art-house film, she had been annoyed to find instead what she called a "manipulative piece of trite pop culture" with an "insidiously anti-feminist" message. Although postmodern culture has been lauded by critics for its freeing mixture of high and popular cultural aesthetics, it is clear that such a mixture still provokes anxiety among some viewers, and creates confusion about the politics of such a hybrid text. In my attempt to explicate the dense complexity of the film's political gestures, one of my aims is to resist such a simplistic equation of high art with subversion and popular culture with retrograde conservatism.

Although the formal features of *The Piano* are crucial to my analysis of its reception, I combine an attention to text with a study of reviews and interviews with audience members interpreting the text's political gestures. The film's generic and narrative hybridity raises questions that can not be answered by psychoanalytic theory, the preferred tool of film theorists for understanding spectator identification. A textual reading assuming an "implied spectator" underestimates the social factors influencing

viewer responses and can not fully explain the process of identifying with a text *politically*. Psychoanalytic theory's emphasis on the functioning of the unconscious makes it less useful to explain the more conscious and social process of political identification. Building on the work of Stuart Hall, I argue that politics are not merely a function of a text's formal features, but are produced in the interaction between text and audience. To better understand the political impact of the film as it was consumed, I interviewed thirty-one self-identified feminists at the University of Virginia (professors, graduate students, and undergraduates) in order to analyze how viewers identified with or against such a conflicted text. The viewers' interpretations of this film were clearly affected by their previous connections to feminism as a discourse, and by their own identities as sociologists, literary critics, anthropologists, victims of sexual assault, spouses, lovers, and women and men. I argue that highly variable audience responses to *The Piano* are a function of textual hybridity, of the viewers' own intellectual and personal histories, and of historical shifts in the feminist discursive context in the 1990s.

Although this film is centrally concerned with gender as a defining aspect of human experience in the 19th century, it simultaneously engages with a postmodern questioning of gender identity. This historical "period" film about gender and power hit a contemporary nerve, since interrogation of gender as a social category has moved beyond feminist circles to become part of the general public consciousness. Crucial to the reception history of *The Piano* is the extreme fissuring of feminist discourse in the 1990s, as essentialist identity structures face challenges from postmodern critics. Among only thirty-one respondents in my study, the diversity of feminisms was quite striking, as each

expressed an allegiance to one or several of the following particular feminist “identities:” postmodern, anti-essentialist, materialist, psychoanalytic, essentialist, pro-sex, difference-based, lesbian, victims’ rights, Marxist, radical separatist, practical or liberal, equal-rights, French feminist, and even postfeminist. These identities informed viewers’ interpretations of the text, but did not necessarily predict their responses, because the film invokes or critiques many of these conflicting feminisms, even in a single scene.

Contemporary debates in feminism are highlighted by this film, because it enacts a conflict between surface and depth models of the self--between essential gendered identity and a deconstruction of such categories. This duality resonated with audiences who struggle with these various conceptions of gender in their daily lives.

While I see the film as engaging in the postmodern debate about gender identity, it stages that debate within an intensely emotional realm not usually associated with postmodernism, but rather with melodramatic popular culture. No longer just an obscure academic debate, the postmodern theoretical questioning of identity has become central to our personal lives and our popular texts. Furthermore, the highly political nature of my audience group’s emotional reactions underscores an important and often ignored relationship between affect and political identification. What *The Piano* does so effectively is provoke audiences to feel--anger, empathy, fear, desire, love, frustration--and to use those feelings in the service of their ideologies. The film’s use of the affective strategies of melodrama makes its postmodern interrogation of gender identity more powerful, bringing politics into the realm of the popular and the everyday, and this combination makes the film enormously useful for a study of political identification.

## Feminist Film Criticism--Theorizing Text and Audience

Psychoanalytic textual analysis has been the privileged discourse for discussing gender and identification in film studies. I believe that my methodological approach, combining textual analysis with an ethnographic study of audiences, can more adequately address the process of *political* identification in a postmodern culture where identities are fluid and up for grabs. Psychoanalytic feminist theorists' most important contribution to film studies has been their consideration of how women's relationship to language, desire, and to the gaze affects their identification with film texts. This chapter uses interviews with feminist audiences to question some of the premises of these "apparatus" theorists. Laura Mulvey began a lengthy debate about the "male gaze" of cinema when she argued that woman in classical film is represented as enigma, as lack, and above all as an object to be looked at. Classical cinema, she argued in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," constructs the viewer as a male attempting to control the enigmatic figure of woman and to ward off fears of castration. Mulvey's use of the Lacanian premise that women are always passive objects of the male gaze rather than active voyeurs launched much theorizing in the 1970s and 1980s about how women enjoy film. Revising her earlier essay, Mulvey suggested that women can assume the active male spectator position in an act of transvestitism; Teresa de Lauretis made a similar point in her theory of women's "double identification."<sup>56</sup> Mary Ann Doane argued that female spectators have the choice to identify masochistically with a degraded female image on screen, or to distance themselves from the image through the act of masquerade.<sup>57</sup> While these feminist critics are sensitive to the ways that classical film may constrain female

spectators, they fail to consider female viewers as actively desiring subjects for whom gender is only one of many identity formations. Not only do these spectator theorists often accept a Lacanian equation of passivity and lack with femininity, but they also reduce the male viewer to a voyeuristic eye, neglecting to consider that men may identify with rather than objectify female characters in film, as many of the feminist men I interviewed identified with Ada McGrath in *The Piano*.<sup>58</sup> I also challenge Doane's contention that identifying with a woman character who is objectified by men is primarily a masochistic process for the female spectator. For many in this audience group, their identification process was a more empathetic or sympathetic one, involving a connection to Ada but also a recognition of their difference from this 19th-century woman with more limited choices.

While psychoanalytic critics pay important attention to the ways that media construct women differently from men, their essentialist approach ignores the socio-historical roots of such female "difference," and obscures the fact that viewer identification is a hugely variable social process. Some psychoanalytic critics are responding to these charges of ahistoricism, and are doing excellent work that historicizes particular desires and psychic formations.<sup>59</sup> Despite this promising work, most psychoanalytic textual critics remain largely wedded to a "master" key system of reading, based on Freud's Oedipal scenarios, that essentializes female sexuality and thus women's relationship to language, looking, and desire. The main problem with speculative textual criticism, in my view, is that its rigid spectator positions simplify and may in fact obscure the processes of viewer interpretation by reducing audiences to sameness.

While my chapter offers a critique of psychoanalytic textual criticism from the perspective of cultural studies, I also distinguish my work from other feminist critics in the field of audience studies. Jackie Stacey and Janice Radway, in particular, see feminism as their own privileged discourse, a critical model of reading that their interview subjects lack. In my study, feminism is not just the framework of my analysis, but it is also the object of analysis. I am interested in how feminism as a public discourse has shaped people's everyday identities and the way they interpret popular texts. This chapter treats feminism *as* popular culture, not just as a means of reading popular texts that only academic elites are privy to. It is for this reason that I have chosen feminists as my audience group, because I consider them to be a popular audience experiencing popular culture.

Reception theorists such as John Fiske may argue that my audience group is insufficiently popular, because they come from an elite context--the university. Fiske argues that members of the dominant culture can participate in popular culture, "but to do so they must reform their allegiances away from those that give them their social power. The businessman entertaining his colleagues in a private box at a football game is not participating in popular culture" (43). I find Fiske's division of audiences into dominant and popular to be too simplistic, because many people are ardent consumers of both high and popular texts, and can occupy both subordinate and dominant subject positions simultaneously (e.g. a black female professor). While some of my audience group used academic discourse to analyze the film, most of the primarily emotional responses came from a common, popular discourse for discussing film. Furthermore, I resist the

implication that feminists in an academic community are necessarily outside of or in opposition to “the real world” or “the people.” My audience group’s discussions of the feminist politics of the film borrowed from popular feminism and reactions against feminism as much as from any academic theorizing. I should also point out that academic and popular feminism have shared a rich history of fruitful exchange.

“Academic feminist,” then, does not indicate a definitive articulation site, because the ideologies of the respondents were influenced not only by their lives outside the academy, but by disciplinary boundaries as well (e.g. nearly all of the sociologists responded in similar ways to the film’s sexual politics). Since academic feminists have wrongly been characterized as homogeneous in the popular press, I aimed to show that even a single university setting can harbor quite a range of discursive communities and political viewpoints. In her essay, “Reading As/Like a Feminist,” Sara Mills argues that feminist critics interested in reading need to pay more attention to the existence of a wide range of feminist positions. In opposition to Judith Fetterley’s notion that women are “resisting readers” of canonical masculinist texts, Mills conducted a study of women resisting female-authored texts, aiming “to question that there is a unified woman’s reading position or even that there is a unified feminist reading position” (“Reading” 31). The diverse response to Jane Campion’s film *The Piano* among this group of academic feminists (both female and male) underscores Mills’ point and challenges the essentialist assumptions of many reception studies.



### **The Piano as Hybrid Text: Melodrama Meets the Avant Garde**

Although my study attempts to counter the overemphasis on textual analysis in work on spectator identification, the text of this film obviously plays a crucial role in suggesting a variety of feminist “positions” for audiences. This identification process is complicated, however, because of *The Piano*’s reliance on both high and popular cultural codes. Genre critics have highlighted the fact that recognizable categories raise expectations about the purpose of the film and the proper audience response. Further, where a text is perceived to fall on the high/low culture continuum can have a significant impact on audience interpretation. Pierre Bourdieu notes that the appropriate response to highbrow cultural forms is one of distance and critical appreciation, while popular cultural forms invoke intense participation, both emotional and bodily.<sup>60</sup> The socially acceptable response of the viewer to a particular text, from the pole of distanced appreciation to that of active engagement, is suggested both by the text itself and by the reception context, such as reviewing, publicity, and type of theaters showing the film.

How then, did viewers construct their relationship to *The Piano*, an avant garde melodrama which upsets such simple categorizing? I argue that the film invites both engagement and critical distance simultaneously, and that this symbiosis is essential to its political import. Important to my analysis is the film’s dual investment in surface and depth models for understanding both textual representation and the self--models that have often been associated with avant-garde art and popular culture respectively.<sup>61</sup> In the 20th century, critics have often defined as “high art” those texts which emphasize surfaces of textuality, employ irony, question realism, and deconstruct essential character to reveal

the shifting and constructed nature of subjectivity. Popular culture, on the other hand, has been known for its manipulation of emotions supposedly welling up from the depths of the viewer's psyche and for its acceptance of realism and essentialist identities. *The Piano*'s commentary on the process of representation, and in particular, the process of representing gendered identities, borrows not only from avant garde and postmodern texts by questioning realistic representation and essential identities, but also from depth-model melodramas by employing "readable" character types and symbols to convey an emotionally drenched scene of heightened realism. This mixture confused reviewers, some of whom were disturbed by inconsistencies in the film's tone and narrative structure, and most of whom simply ignored the film's relationship to melodrama by trying to cast it as an unambiguously highbrow picture.

While many reviewers recognized the film's romantic or Gothic qualities, they ignored the fact that these genres have usually been considered popular, and instead compared *The Piano* with high cultural literary texts such as *Wuthering Heights*. The press releases for the film and interviews with Campion also perpetuated this highbrow categorizing. Oddly, Campion has never placed her work in a film lineage, but instead mentioned literary influences, primarily 19th-century canonical novels. This literary frame of reference is somewhat curious, since the film's plot structure and devices have much more in common with 20th-century cinematic melodramas. The plot begins with mute heroine Ada McGrath and her daughter Flora journeying to the New Zealand bush, where Ada is to be wife to Stewart, who acquired her through an arranged marriage. Once there, Ada's strong will and her passionate piano-playing attract neighbor George

Baines, with whom she has an affair that causes an explosive reaction from Stewart. Stock elements of the melodramatic film genre, which can all be found in *The Piano*, include a focus on a suffering heroine and the realities of her domestic life, family conflicts, romantic triangles, swelling background music and rich landscape to accentuate the emotional content, dichotomous structures and allegory, and a pronounced emphasis on the symbolic potential of *mise en scène*.

Ada McGrath bears some similarities to heroines of melodramas and Gothics in that she is both victimized by men and is yet a powerful woman. Campion, in making Ada McGrath mute, has ironically literalized the stock trope of the silenced martyr. Mute characters abounded both in “women’s pictures” of the 1940s such as *Johnny Belinda* (Doane, *Desire* 54-56), and in French theatrical melodrama, which found its roots in pantomime (Brooks 62). The fact that Ada is “sold” to a husband that she has never met also recalls female slave narratives, an early melodramatic form. This film echoes the plot of many Gothic films, such as Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, which depict the anxieties of vulnerable young wives about their seemingly dangerous husbands.<sup>62</sup> Despite her similarity to other female victims in melodrama, Ada also contains strong reserves of female power and self-sufficiency as do film heroines Stella Dallas and Mildred Pierce. While Ada is just as headstrong and controlling as Stella Dallas, the end of *The Piano* revises the end of the 1937 film, in that Ada gets to keep her daughter, her sexuality, and her man whereas Stella sacrifices all. The endings of melodramas and Gothics have been noted as one of their most conservative features, because bourgeois order is usually restored, and any subversive female desires and complaints let loose earlier in the plot are

contained.<sup>63</sup> *The Piano*'s ending complicates this pattern in important ways, as I will discuss later in the chapter, but it nonetheless contains recognizable elements of Hollywood romantic closure, as Ada, Baines, and Flora appear to live happily-ever-after in their white town house, far from the sexual and dangerous jungle.

The fairy-tale resolutions common to melodrama often depend upon a usage of dichotomous structures, allegory, easily recognized character types, and uncomplicated symbols. In this genre, gender and race are presented as essential identities that overdetermine a character's function in the plot; thus, melodrama offers a depth-model view of the self, implying that the inside equals the outside. Its reliance on legible symbols also suggests a depth-model view of representation (rather than a post-structuralist one), a belief in the power of the signifier to represent the signified.<sup>64</sup> *The Piano* employs many dichotomies common to melodrama, such as male/female, primitive/civilized, angel/devil, hero/villain, victim/oppressor, and many overt symbols such as the hatchet, Flora's angel wings, hoopskirts, Ada's silence, and the piano itself.

Campion, however, also twists these melodramatic structures in moves much more common to the avant garde. *The Piano* deconstructs many of those dichotomies and obfuscates some of the symbols, thereby deviating from melodrama's usual attachment to legible meaning and simple categories. Ada's silence is perhaps the single most elusive "symbol" of the film, and the diversity of interpretations offered by my audience group makes it difficult to argue that this film invokes a popular allegory obvious to all viewers. The film also critiques melodrama's frequent essentializing of gendered and racial types (the happy-go-lucky native, the harlot, the virtuous hero) by creating characters who

escape their initial typecasting. For example, George Baines evolves from voyeuristic pervert to sympathetic lover, and Flora defies categorization as either angel or devil child. Although many of melodrama's dichotomies and usual hierarchies are shattered in *The Piano*, some remain, possibly as a testament to the entrenchment of such cultural categories. Many critics have found the depiction of the native Maoris as simple and sexual to be racist, while some feminists have complained that the film gives new life to the old stereotype that women really love being objectified.<sup>65</sup> While *The Piano* attempts to undermine melodrama's stereotypes, it nonetheless disturbed some viewers who felt that the types were uncritically presented.

Although the film both invokes and critiques melodrama's symbolic language and character typing in important ways, it wholeheartedly employs the affective strategies common to the genre. A few reviewers praised the film for its "lack of sentimentality" but ignored the fact that a manipulation of emotional response is nonetheless a primary strategy of this film, as of all melodramas.<sup>66</sup> Extreme emotions of terror, disgust, passion, joy, frustration, and anger dominate Campion's palette, and are emphasized by the piano score, by close-ups of faces, by the grisly depiction of the scene in which Stewart chops off Ada's finger, and by the alternation between cold blue and warm gold tones in the lighting and film stock. The film's love story plotline, complete with a romantic ending uniting Ada, Baines and Flora, is also a crowd-pleasing melodramatic tactic. Many of my respondents commented that they were moved to tears, to anger, to revisit the film in their dreams, or to the point of clutching their companion's hand in the theater. Such somatic responses, as Bourdieu has argued, are common to the experience of viewing popular

cultural texts.

Many critics dismiss melodrama's affective strategies as merely money-making, anti-intellectual devices to either mollify or thrill audiences. Stuart Klawans of *The Nation* objects to *The Piano* on the grounds that it is a "contrived, allegorized melodrama" (705) that "gives reason nothing to do" (706). Klawans here sets up a false dichotomy between emotion and reason that I would like to contest. I argue that melodrama's emotions carry intellectual weight, and thus are connected to the realm of the political. Feminist philosopher Alison Jaggar questions the cultural dichotomy of reason and emotion, arguing that emotions are a socially constructed, interpretive discourse, a means by which we "engage actively and even construct the world" (152-53). Our emotional capability is linked to a capacity to evaluate our social condition and thus engenders the very possibility of politics; displeasure may lead to change, and happiness to stasis. Thomas Elsaesser has likewise read melodrama as an important conduit of socio-political mores: "the height of [melodrama's] popularity seems to coincide . . . with periods of intense social and ideological crisis" (70). <sup>1</sup> Melodramas, therefore, must be recognized as offering important social commentary, as engaging with politics at the level of everyday life. <sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that I think *The Piano* borrows most fruitfully from a melodramatic heritage; by engaging us in Ada's desires and struggles, the film uses emotion to provoke political thought. While the film both inherits and challenges some of the more conservative aspects of melodrama, its use of popular techniques of emotional engagement may be the factor most crucial to its political impact.

While *The Piano*'s melodramatic, popular cultural elements have received little

attention from critics and reviewers,<sup>67</sup> its avant garde style has been much discussed. *The Piano*'s reception as highbrow *objet d'art* was furthered by Campion's reputation as arty director of the films *Sweetie* and *Angel at My Table*, and by the fact that the film was shown primarily in art-house theaters until it made a mainstream marketing bid for the Academy Award for Best Picture.<sup>68</sup> In addition to the many awards that the film has won, it has become somewhat of a darling among academic film theorists, who analyze it as a feminist avant-garde text. The film's deconstruction of the character types and gender roles of classical film, and its ironic postmodern commentary upon film theories of voyeurism and the male gaze, have spawned several critical articles in *Screen* praising the film's "subversive" critical messages.<sup>69</sup> In one scene which upsets gender stereotypes that usually ground melodramas, Ada curiously examines Stewart's naked body but refuses to let him touch hers. The sexually repressed Stewart is emasculated and objectified, as Ada and Campion turn the tables on the familiar scene of the woman as object, of men's gaze and of the camera's. And while Baines at first appears to be the stereotypical male voyeur, he is later feminized by acknowledging his desire for Ada's love rather than just sex, a shift that is underscored by his admission of weakness, "I can't eat, I can't sleep." The film clearly attempts to break down the stereotypes of woman as passive object of the gaze and man as desiring subject, and also shatters the age-old equation of male desire with sex and female desire with love. In addition to reworking theoretical debates about voyeurism and gender in film, *The Piano* makes postmodern self-reflexive moves in the scenes in which Stewart peers through a camera at Ada, and in which he peeps at Ada and Baines making love. These "viewing moments" imply that Stewart is an impotent rather

than an all-powerful voyeur, and thus force the audience of *The Piano* to question the illusion of control and power that viewing usually entails. By laying bare the construction of gender stereotypes and the nature of film as a voyeuristic medium, *The Piano* embraces an avant garde questioning of classical film strategies that offer audiences a fantasy of themselves as powerful, unitary subjects with clear gender roles.

*The Piano* is also postmodern in its subtle questioning of realism, the system of representation through which classical films maintain the illusion that film is a mirror of reality, rather than a myth-making construction. Although most melodramas offer a depth-model view of representation by extending the project of realism and implying that the signifier equals the signified in a mimetic way, Campion's film calls attention to its construction and periodically shatters the mirror. Despite the fact that much of the film adopts realist stylistic techniques such as continuity editing and point-of-view shots, and offers "authentic" details such as period costumes, mud, greasy hair, and the severed fingertip, a few techniques borrowed from surrealism upset the illusion of depth-model realism. In order to simulate the claustrophobia that Ada experiences, the cinematographer shot many of the scenes with blue-tinted film and a telephoto lens that flattened the image and accentuated the surface of the film. Campion's own interest in film began with her work in surrealistic art circles, which could have influenced her to emphasize surface and design, and to flout the realist view of art as an extension of the human eye. *The Piano*'s cinematographer occasionally places the camera in spaces that would be literally impossible for a human eye to inhabit; when the shot emerges from inside Stewart's pocket or inside the piano, the viewer's sense of reality is challenged,



albeit subtly. The most deliberate attempt to upset a realistic aesthetic is the insertion of a cartoon frame depicting Flora's father, transformed into a torch. Placed after Flora's melodramatic yarn "explaining" her father's death and her mother's silence, the cartoon underscores the fictionality of the girl's speech, but the two-dimensional insert also calls attention to the disjunction between reality and representation and disrupts the viewer's immersion in the depth of the on-screen world.

In highlighting the disparity between reality and representation, between the signified and the signifier, *The Piano* creates crucial "sublime" moments of ambiguity characteristic of postmodernist and avant garde works. Unlike many popular cultural texts, this film makes the viewer work to find meaning, just as the male characters must work to understand Ada's voice. Just like Ada, Campion leaves a lot unsaid--for example, why is Ada silent? Who was Flora's father? Does Ada truly love Baines? Why does Ada choose life? Some of my audience group were alienated by this ambiguity because they desired the answers they are accustomed to receiving from "entertainment," while others enjoyed the interpretive challenge. This freeing ambiguity, especially in the double ending sequence, was most often cited by my respondents as the reason for the film's status as art. The film reaches for sublime moments, particularly in the final shot, that stretch the limits of representation, perhaps even to the point of silence. Ada's silence itself could be seen as sublime, since it both resists simple interpretation and highlights the paucity of language. In contrast to the melodramatic romance ending sequence where Ada and Baines live happily ever after, the last shot leaves us with the sublimity of silence and death, as Ada dreams of herself drowned, at

the bottom of the ocean with her piano. As we see this shot, Ada recites a stanza from a sonnet written by Thomas Hood, a 19th-century poet influenced by a master of the sublime, John Keats: "There is a silence where hath been no sound/ There is a silence where no sound may be/ In the cold grave, under the deep deep sea." This empty silence serves as a dramatic contrast to the plenitude of melodramatic closure, which speaks in excess by "wrapping it all up" and leaving nothing untold. The last underwater shot of *The Piano* speaks the language of avant garde film, whereas the previous happily-ever-after scene speaks the language of melodrama.

This coexistence of both avant garde and melodramatic elements in *The Piano* is crucial to its impact upon audiences. Although some viewers may ignore either strand in their interpretive process, I contend that the bricolage of these high and low cultural aesthetic, generic, and emotional registers has contributed to the film's power to provoke strong political responses among its viewers. While questioning the representational logic of classic realistic film, *The Piano* promotes critical distance but avoids a more extreme Brechtian alienation effect by combining this distance with the emotional engagement of melodrama. This hybrid text allows viewers to think while feeling, to be soothed and disturbed at the same time, and to question familiar paradigms while still acknowledging the emotional value of traditional social formations and identities. Unlike other melodramatic texts, this avant garde melodrama upsets entrenched models of identity and of representation by allowing enough distance to promote questioning. And unlike many postmodern texts, with their ironic disdain for the "real" and for political struggle, this avant garde melodrama insists that personal relationships matter and that the

personal is political. While the emotional engagement is crucial to provoking political identification, the film challenges audiences to rethink traditional modes of understanding gender identity.

### **Gender Identity and “Political Identification”**

Many feminist film theorists have seen identification as a trap for female viewers, a means by which melodramatic texts seduce women into accepting their place in patriarchy. Apparatus film theorists imply that viewers are passive dupes, unconsciously inserting themselves into accepted cultural identities. Because many of these psychoanalytic theories of identification were developed to explain the spectator's relationship to classical film texts that essentialize gender, they are inadequate to address postmodern texts in which identities are explicitly contested rather than assumed. As Jackie Byars has noted, Lacan's ideas are valuable as a description of the status quo, but they can not explain ideological change (“Feminism” 98). While *The Piano* provokes intense identifications as do most melodramas, it also aims to make that process conscious so that it can be politicized. This avant garde melodrama employs identification in the service of feminist goals rather than patriarchal ones. My study of feminists identifying with this film underscores the need to consider identification as more than just an unconscious process that sutures viewers into stereotyped gender roles, but as an active and political process of understanding and constructing oneself and one's ideologies in relation to other choices.

Because much of psychoanalytic identification theory accepts static notions of

identity, both onscreen and among viewers, it cannot be usefully applied to a film like *The Piano*, which underscores that “woman” and “feminist” are identity formations in flux, questioning their very existence as identities. While Ada, Baines, and Stewart contain some characteristics of melodrama’s gendered types, they also destabilize those categories. The European men of the film obviously have the familiar cultural power to control and manipulate women, but they are both feminized at various moments-- Stewart’s impotent gazing upon a woman he cannot truly possess is an ironic reversal of the usually omnipotent male gaze, and Baines needs Ada to the point of being emasculated, stripped of his former menacing edge. Ada’s character, as the battered wife manipulated by men and yet the willful maker of her own destiny, exhibits both feminine passivity and masculine rebellion.

Some of my feminist audience group were such avid consumers of melodrama that they were confused and disturbed by the fact that this film upsets melodrama’s gender dichotomies and its usually uncomplicated portrait of good and evil. Some were dismayed that they were made to sympathize with Stewart’s vulnerabilities, because they wanted to read him as the villain of the piece. One man said the film fell apart for him because it lacked a clear dichotomy of good versus evil: “I found Stewart a confusing character, because some elements of his character were admirable. He wasn’t portrayed as enough of an ogre for me to understand what Campion and Ada were doing.” These viewers’ own expectations about film structure and their desire to inhabit simple identificatory positions were thwarted by *The Piano*’s subtle deconstruction of gender.

On the other hand, other viewers I spoke with were keenly aware of the film’s

attempt to deconstruct simple identity rubrics, and this conscious recognition affected their identification with the characters. Some viewers who defined themselves as anti-essentialist recognized a kindred spirit in Ada. An anthropology graduate student who studies androgyny in her own work said of Ada: “this woman is bucking all the gender categories that she’s got. I think she’d be putting on pants if she had the chance. I’m also interested in taking apart gender as coming from some biological essence. I don’t want to posit some universal category of woman.” This woman strongly identified with Ada, but her connection to the character was based on a recognition of a shared fluidity or androgyny rather than a rigid identity.

While some viewers identified with Ada as a gender-bender, many of the women I interviewed related to her “as a woman,” claiming access to either a shared feminine essence or similar life experience. One graduate student recognized in Ada’s sexual experiences with Baines her own college struggles with fraternity boys, the age-old game of male aggression and female defense. Another woman identified with Ada as a survivor of sexual assault, arguing that “every woman has felt or will feel [Ada’s] emotions at some points in her life.” Some women felt that their gender gave them a special access to the film: “My boyfriend didn’t get it. The three women I had seen it with couldn’t exactly put words to it at times, but just felt like we understood what it was about.” While most understood their similarity to Ada as a function of the socially constructed experience of gender, a few called upon a female essence to explain their connection not only to Ada, but to *Campion* as well: “this film seemed like a woman’s way of telling a story; it felt very intuitive to me.” The notion of female identity, either

biological or socially constructed, was obviously crucial to many viewers' identification process.

What traditional identification theory can not account for, however, is that a significant portion of the female viewers defined themselves as "Ada" and "not-Ada" simultaneously; their ambivalent identification included a reaction against the vision of "woman" they encountered in the film. While Freud and his disciples briefly discuss the ambivalent nature of identification, they see such love/hate relationships as a result of repressed psychic hostility and the violence of incorporating the other into the self.<sup>70</sup> Because they treat identification as unconscious, they do not consider that such ambivalence could be a conscious political choice. Many of the viewers in my audience group were aware of the difference that their own contemporary feminism made to their experience of being a woman, and thus they saw in Ada a less radical (or occasionally even a more radical) 19th-century version of themselves. Most of the negative reactions to Ada were prompted by her sexual choices, her love for Baines, and her impractical silence. While one graduate student was pleased that the film "explores women's erotic desires from their own point of view," she also found Ada's pleasure in her own objectification troubling. Ultimately she reconciled her differences with Ada by standing up for the individuality of desire: "you have to allow her that, her pleasure. . . . Why shut that down because I think it should be some better scenario?" While some found Ada to be a less radical feminist than themselves, a Spanish professor was alienated by Ada's radical gesture of silence, by her refusal to engage with the "real world" as most women must. These viewers' responses, and their ambivalent reactions to Ada, were influenced

by their definitions of themselves as women and by their feminist ideals.

Since being a feminist woman within patriarchy usually entails a conscious struggle over one's relationships with men, the women I interviewed often focused on Ada's relationship with Baines or Stewart as a means of interpreting Ada's feminism, which in turn influenced their identification with her. Not only were the male-female relationships in the film perceived as highly political, but so were the construction of male identities. While some of the female interviewees were able to empathize with the male leads, even Stewart, others simply loathed them. Most of the women who were angered by Ada's choices located the source of their irritation in her love for Baines, whom they saw as just another male oppressor. Although Campion takes pains to locate Stewart and Baines' masculinities as socio-historical formations, and to suggest that they were less oppressive (to varying degrees) than other Victorian men,<sup>71</sup> some of the female viewers lumped Baines and Stewart together as figures of universal oppression. Their essentializing of male identity as "oppressor responsible for patriarchy" prevented these viewers from seeing nuance in Campion's depiction of the men, and thus caused them to reject the love story as anti-feminist. The pattern of their identification was not so simple as that delineated by psychoanalytic theory, which would have predicted that the women identify with Ada but not with Baines, while these few women in fact identified with neither character. They saw themselves as "not-Ada" precisely because of Ada's love for Baines. Psychoanalytic theory often neglects to consider that women's sense of gendered identity may differ widely, in this case as a result of differing feminist ideals about the relationship between women and men. Women in my study group did not simply identify

with female characters, but used the film to actively construct themselves as different kinds of women and feminists than Ada McGrath.

While some female viewers rejected any identification with the male characters or with Ada, many of the male feminists I interviewed crossed gender lines to identify strongly with Ada. Gaylyn Studlar aptly points out that Mulvey and Doane have neglected “the possibilities of male identification with the female” (278). In my group, the male reactions to Ada, ranging from identification to alienation to a desire to see Ada as genderless, were much more complex than Mulvey’s theories imply. Some of these men extended their connection to Ada to the point of feeling her pain; one man noted that the finger-chopping scene nearly made him physically ill. Several of the men used their own identities as racial and sexual minorities to understand Ada’s experiences. A man who defines himself as queer disliked both men for objectifying Ada and did not find any of the sexual scenes erotic as a result. One African-American male student understood Ada’s experience of oppression as parallel to his own: “there will always be sexism, just like there’s always racism that keeps you down at the bottom of the ocean.” These examples are testaments of the potential for coalitions among subordinate groups; male members of marginalized social groups may feel more affinity for women than for white or heterosexual men. Some of the men, on the other hand, had difficulty identifying with Ada or understanding her motivations. A third group tried to downplay Ada’s identity as a woman, to see her as representative of the “universal” experiences of “mankind.” Because of his belief that “gender is just spare parts,” an undergraduate experienced the film as having little to do with gender difference. One could argue that this man has



produced a “resistant reading” of the film, since he ignores major themes of the text; this aberrant response reminds of the fact that not all forms of resistance are necessarily progressive.<sup>72</sup>

Despite these few universalizing humanists who de-emphasized gender, most of the male and female feminists whom I interviewed interpreted this film as being about the difference that gender makes, but their own views about gender difference varied widely and thus influenced their identification with the film. Some used their own gendered experiences or belief in a female essence to empathize with or to define themselves in opposition to the film’s characters, while others were able to cross gender lines to identify with characters of the other sex. Although gender often played a central role in the viewers’ identification with the characters, this process was much more conscious, active, and complex than psychoanalytic theory would have it. How the viewers read the text in relation to recognized feminist narratives and ways of understanding gender was more important to their identifications and disidentifications than the mere fact of their sex.

### **The Feminist Politics of Genre**

While identifying along gender lines was complicated for these viewers because of the redefinition of gender roles at our cultural moment, identifying with the text or the characters as “feminist” was also made difficult due to the multiplicity of feminist discourses in the 1990s. The variety of feminist and non-feminist plots that audiences saw in the film can also be linked to its mixture of avant garde and melodramatic narrative strategies. For example, several in my viewing group noted that avant garde or

“arty” films often close with the death of the heroine, an end which can be viewed as either feminist or misogynist, while melodramas often end with a happy marriage, a destiny that feminism has long tried to de-romanticize. These high and low cultural endings are both evoked by *The Piano*, thereby forcing the viewer to consider which emplotment, or neither, appeals to his or her feminist political sensibilities. The film’s plot elements speak to many opposing versions of feminism at once, and particularly to the individual who is herself struggling to reconcile different feminist viewpoints.

Furthermore, the process of reading a politics into the film is made more difficult because neither an avant garde nor a melodramatic aesthetic necessarily implies a consistent and singular political metanarrative. Although some of my viewers assumed the avant garde or anti-essentialist elements of the film to be categorically subversive, while they deemed the melodramatic plot elements to be anti-feminist, that simple dichotomous reading was rejected by many other viewers with differing notions of feminism.

Despite this confusion of codes, two key elements of the film appealed specifically to postmodern feminists influenced by post-structuralist theory: the film’s deconstruction of gender identity and its suggestion that women are power-desiring sexual subjects rather than innocent victims. Arguing that women are always implicated in the quest for power, postmodern feminists like Donna Haraway hope to dismantle the binary gender system and construct a “post-gender world” (150). Asserting that women can not rightly claim innocence or a privileged victim status, Haraway further argues that “there is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female, itself a highly complex category constructed in . . . social

practices” (155). Postmodern feminists with sympathy for Haraway’s ideas read Ada McGrath as a heroine fighting against her culture’s categorization of “woman,” rejecting the status of victim, and grasping for all the power she can get. They see her as a complicit yet powerful agent in her own right, not as a representative of essential “Womanhood.”

While postmodern feminists can be allied with the avant garde’s rejection of stable identity concepts and Enlightenment depth models, essentialist versions of feminism share several strategies with melodrama as a discursive mode. Psychoanalytic feminism, like melodrama, embraces a depth-model view of the self, evident in the concepts of repression and the unconscious. Difference feminists invested in notions of essential “womanhood” and adherents of standpoint theory, who believe that women have a shared and unique perspective as victims of patriarchal oppression, have used sentimental rhetoric to evoke pity for oppressed women and to idealize femininity. The so-called “victim feminists,” such as anti-porn lawyer Catherine MacKinnon, emphasize gender as *the* defining aspect of a person’s life, and this worldview is invoked by melodramas that prescribe characters’ destinies and functions according to their gender. While post-structuralist feminists aim to move beyond gender as a meaningful category, essentialist feminists remind us that this may not be possible in a patriarchal world, or even desirable, because women have gained much politically by uniting as a special interest group. Some feminists in my group read Ada McGrath’s strange muteness and her intense piano-playing as figures for the precious difference of the “feminine voice.” It was not surprising that viewers in my group who are sympathetic to essentialist or

difference feminism responded most strongly to *The Piano*'s melodramatic explorations of gender difference and of the victimization of women by men.

Although postmodernist feminists often responded politically to the avant garde elements of *The Piano*, and essentialist feminists to the melodramatic strategies, it would be a misrepresentation to draw such a simple response pattern. Individuals' responses to texts rarely follow a rigid ideology. Many respondents expressed several opposing beliefs when asked to describe their feminist ideals and were sometimes conscious of the contradictions. In many cases, I avoided using specific identity-nouns (i.e. "post-structuralist feminist") to refer to particular respondents because their feminist autobiographical narratives borrowed from so many different discourses. While I feel that it is important to avoid reifying and fixing identities that are actually quite fluid, in this chapter I have employed terms like "difference feminist" in several cases: 1) when referring to an individual respondent who used such an identity term to define herself, 2) when referring to groups of respondents who both employed this particular feminist discourse and responded to the film in similar ways, and 3) when discussing an individual whose feminist narrative focused on this discourse exclusively, even if she did not use the term itself. My use of the noun form for a particular feminist is not an attempt to fix identities, but to refer to the predominance of a particular subject position or discourse in an individual's interview narrative or response pattern.

The response patterns of the viewers were thus strongly affected by *The Piano*'s invocation of different feminist positions. Some viewers reacted with anger or confusion because the film seemed conflicted, appealing to some of their beliefs while challenging

others. Others appreciated the hybridity because it reflected their own identity crises as feminists struggling with competing ideologies. The respondents in my group who were the biggest fans of *The Piano* have adapted a practical kind of “strategic essentialism” in their daily lives, working with insights from both postmodernists and essentialists to empower women, and the film’s hybrid feminism struck a chord with them. In the rest of the chapter, I will look more closely at specific audience responses to four issues that were hotspots for feminist interpretation: silence and voice; cinematography and the gaze; heterosexual desire and romance; and the postmodern ending of the film which puts all the feminist themes in play.

### **Silence, voice, and representation**

Ada McGrath’s silence, and her attempts to speak through her piano, have been at the center of feminist debates about the film. Her muteness has been variously interpreted as either feminist or non-feminist, radical or conservative, and as a sign of either strength or powerlessness. Since the gesture of silence offers an implicit commentary on theories of language and representation, it functions differently in melodramas and avant garde texts because of their different investments in the power of representation. In fact, silent characters have frequently appeared in both genres. How, then, do muteness and Ada’s alternative musical voice function in this hybrid text, and how did the viewers assign a feminist politics to it?

Mute heroines have abounded in melodramatic theater and film, and Peter Brooks has read melodramatic silence as an excuse to explore an alternative language of gesture.

Silence, he argues, does not indicate an abandoning of meaning, but rather allows an alternative means of communication, “the language of presence and immediacy, the primal language” of gesture, which conveys emotions that the spoken word can not (67). Jackie Byars notes that melodrama “exploits excessive uses of representational conventions to express that which cannot (yet) be said, that which language alone is incapable of expressing” (*All That Hollywood* 13). The melodramatic project usually entails a belief in a buried essence that can be expressed through non-verbal means of communication, through signs, which “attempt to give material existence to the repressed” (Byars, *All that Hollywood* 17). Thus Ada’s silence should be recognized as a classic trope of melodrama, as her piano and her signing allow her to speak “that which cannot be said in words”--particularly her sexual desire. Although Ada is silent, she has other outlets such as gesture, writing, and music that allow her to communicate meaning and deep feeling. *The Piano*’s treatment of silence is typical of melodramatic films because the film respects meaning itself and suggests that Ada does indeed have something important to “say” that is buried deep within her.

Post-structuralist critics, on the other hand, may read this substitution of a musical voice for a literal one as an endless deferral, exemplifying the impossibility of reaching the signified, of creating meaning in a one-to-one correspondence. Jean-François Lyotard has valued the sublime as a postmodern gesture toward the unrepresentable, beyond language and even meaning itself. Thus, Ada’s silence and her music could be seen as examples of the postmodern sublime at the limits of representation. In their review in *American Anthropologist*, Patricia Sharpe and Frances Mascia-Lees argue that

the film comments upon post-structuralist ideas about writing and speech, since it is “suspicious of the spoken word” and aware of the “inadequacies of language” (765, 767). Ada’s sublime silence is celebrated in the last shot of her underwater dream, and this ending was inexplicable to many viewers, almost beyond meaning. Ada’s subtle gestures throughout the film are not as easy to read as in a typical stylized melodrama full of exaggerated facial expressions; one graduate student remarked that “we never cross the threshold with Ada,” we never quite access her meaning, which may make some people wonder if her actions “mean” anything in the conventional sense. The film offers the avant garde suggestion that meaning is not so transparent, nor so easily transmitted, as melodrama and realism would have it.

The trope of silence, therefore, has roots in both postmodernism and a popular melodramatic aesthetic, and takes on a different valence in each context. The mixture of these two worldviews in *The Piano* enabled some viewers to construct a negotiated reading of Ada’s silence, weighing its many meanings against each other. For example, if one pays attention to the film’s melodramatic use of silence, one would not simply equate Ada’s silence with the postmodern sublime as described by Lyotard, who values it for imparting “no knowledge about reality,” for being beyond representation (78). For *The Piano*’s exploration of the sublime nature of silence seems to coexist with a realistic commitment to signifying and to the serious political import of expression, particularly for women who have long been a silenced group. Despite her attempts to thwart communication through her willful muteness, Ada is greatly invested in her piano as a means of expression and a deeper form of communication, one that will force her

listeners, such as Flora's father and Baines, to work hard to hear her meaning. Ada's struggle with representation--her dilemma over whether to speak legibly or to question the value of communication with her silence--is parallel to the film's conflict over whether to make interpretation easy or difficult for the audience, to make sense (popular culture) or to question sense (avant garde). The film's treatment of representation is avant garde in its desire to stretch representation to the limit, perhaps even of silence, and popular in its acknowledgment of the emotional importance of meaning and communication.

Not only is silence an abstract commentary upon representation, but it also comments upon the power of the word and of the speaker, which clearly relates to gender and the socio-political. The issue of voice is central to Ada's relation to patriarchy. An important context for many of my audience group was the debate sparked by French feminists Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who argue that language is phallogentric and thus silences women, and that women should search for a new female voice, perhaps one more attuned to the female body and its rhythms. Similarly, Julia Kristeva might interpret Ada's piano playing as a return to the "semiotic chora," a rhythmic base beneath language that Kristeva describes as pre-Oedipal, musical, "indifferent to language, enigmatic, and feminine" (*Revolution* 29). Kristeva argues that women are socially "estranged from language" ("Interview" 166). Ada McGrath's silence, and particularly the final shot in which she dreams of her silent, drowned self, could be seen as an example of Kristeva's vision of women who "find refuge in the valorization of a silent underwater body . . . [and] reject everything loaded with meaning" ("Interview" 166).



In opposition to the French feminists who either applaud silence or champion a different female voice, practical-minded equality-feminists counter that speaking conventional language is the only way to get access to power, and they deny that language is necessarily phallogentric. Among my audience group, I saw three poles of response to this debate that relate to the melodramatic and avant garde takes on silence and representation: 1) a post-structuralist feminist view of language, applauding Ada's silence because it confounds a masculine desire for women to be readable and easy to interpret, for them to make sense; 2) a "melodramatic" feminist view, applauding Ada's alternative musical voice as a separate, female language, full of meaning and outside of patriarchy; and 3) an equality feminist view that rejects the previous two in favor of a "realist" aesthetic, arguing that language and speech are practical, transparent and gender-neutral conduits of meaning. To this third group, Ada's muteness is tantamount to insanity, or to a relinquishing of all power. This anti-silence standpoint was taken by all the sociologists of my group, who are annoyed by feminists' obsessive focus on language and direct their feminist impulses towards combating more tangible forms of oppression. On the other hand, the literary critics and anthropologists in the group were more apt to praise a rejection of linguistic communication as a feminist gesture, in part because they are more familiar with French feminist theory and post-structuralism.

Those who felt that Ada's silence was purposive usually saw it as a powerful feminist gesture, but they emphasized either her silence or her alternative voice. Difference feminists tended to stress the positive qualities of Ada's "female voice" of music and gesture, while postmodern feminists were most attracted by her silence, which

one respondent called a “rejection of the whole patriarchal means of communication.”

An English graduate student, who studies 19th-century women novelists’ subversive uses of language, wished that the film had gone even further into exploring an “independent women’s other language.” Many pointed to her music as a beautiful expression of an independent female self that preserved her strangeness and difference from the other women of the town, who spoke only the silly gossip that patriarchy deems appropriate for women. On the other hand, postmodern feminists were concerned not with Ada’s female voice, but with the power that silence could offer women. One self-defined postmodern feminist called Ada’s silence a “statement of power, amazing self-defining power to resist patriarchy” and to “wig out her husband.” An English graduate student interested in post-structuralist theory was impressed by the ironic power of her muteness: “her silence is a subversive enactment of what society already says women should be anyway. I’m supposed to be silent, so I’m silent. It’s not merely a metaphorical stand-in for women’s silence, but a kind of willful or subversive compliance.” While some talked about Ada’s voice in melodramatic ways, as a sign of difference or a search for a female system of meaning, postmodern feminists enjoyed the sublime nature of Ada’s silence and its power to disrupt phallic speech.

Although many felt that Ada’s silence was an effective weapon against patriarchy, others read it negatively as a sign of weakness or an inability to integrate or function normally. An undergraduate with some sympathy for Ada’s independent muteness nonetheless noted that she felt implicated by Ada’s choice: “I think there’s a real desire on the part of the viewer for Ada not to be able to exist in silence, because what does that

say about us and our language?" Many others reacted more strongly, defending "our language." A male professor of sociology called her silence a "psychiatric disorder," and his reading was echoed by most of the sociologists. A self-defined equality feminist complained that "it was really the old idea of hysterical muteness. The hysteria actually reinforces the cultural paradigm of women as weaker." Some of these more practical feminists directly rejected a French feminist reading of Ada's muteness as an ideal feminist gesture; an English graduate student argued: "I react against a French feminist view of phallogentric language, the idea that Ada should reject language because it's male language. Even the most gynocentric cultures use language. Now she's found someone who is actually willing to listen to her, so her speech is a good development."

Ada's movement from silence into speech at the end of the film also provoked a variety of responses, from anger to celebration. This return to communication suggests that Ada's silence has both positive and negative effects and encourages the viewer to construct a negotiated reading that combines both a popular and an avant garde view of communication and representation. However, some were annoyed by the mixture and felt it resulted in a confused politics. A woman who sympathizes most with Marxist feminism argued that "her silence is definitely coded as resistance, not complicity, and that's why I don't like the fact that she's trying to speak at the end. The critique gets lost because she changes her mind." A graduate student (Donna) remarked that "nobody needed her to speak. I don't like that black veil that she wears at the end. It's almost as if she's been shrouded again." Yet Donna feels that although Ada's feminist liberation was "muted" and qualified, Ada's return to speech might be necessary so that she can wage a

form of protest that does not require so much personal risk.

Many others also tried to construct a negotiated reading of the multiple meanings of silence and speech. Even an anthropology graduate student who describes herself as radical saw Ada's first attempts to speak as a necessary development: "the fact that she doesn't speak indicates a kind of power that comes from being on the bottom . . . but it also makes her incredibly dependent on her daughter. I don't see it as a relinquishing of power that she desires to speak at the end, but as a maturing process." A women's studies student also liked her subversive silence, but recognized its limitations: "it's precisely these subversive tactics that might become destructive. Speaking is a good thing. I see her speaking could also be construed as writing herself back into traditional forms of discourse, but I still felt that it was liberating." These viewers who responded positively to the film's ambiguous stance on the politics of silence were already ambivalent about feminist theories of language. They are feminists who have radical, separatist impulses, but who try to temper them with practical concerns. They are angry about a masculine control of language and about the limitations of language for women, but they nevertheless still want to be heard and are willing to work within the system rather than reject it for a "purer" form of subversion. Ada McGrath's oxymoronic "silent voice" echoed these feminists' own ambivalent voices and enabled them to identify with her.

### **The Politics of Cinematography and the Gaze**

While voice and speech have been central concerns of feminists, the "gaze" has

been an even more important concept for feminist film theory about spectator identification. Rather than giving us an uncomplicated “intended spectator position,” *The Piano* seems to play with common identification techniques of classic melodramas, at times adopting them uncritically and at other times challenging them. At different moments in the film, we are given point-of-view shots as if looking through Ada’s eyes (e.g. our first view through her fingers in the opening shot, her peak behind the curtain to discover Baines’ nude body, and her struggle to free herself underwater). At many other points, however, we gaze at her along with Baines and Stewart. The questions I set out to explore were these: Does the film’s cinematography affect audience members (both male and female) to identify with Ada’s look or with that of the male voyeur? Are female spectators forced into a masochistic position by identifying with Ada as an object of the gaze, or do they resist this objectification as Ada does at key moments in the film? I also wanted to investigate whether the film’s experiments with the gaze resulted in an different form of audience identification than in typical melodramas. Did it encourage the viewers in my group to inhabit a subjectivity that resists the psychoanalytic dichotomy of male/active/voyeur and female/passive/looked-at, or did it merely replicate these gendered polarities?

The audience response to the film’s treatment of looking was even more complicated and varied than their readings of Ada’s silence. Because the text itself sets up many characters’ point-of-view shots and many neutrally positioned shots, audience members in my study disagreed about which characters had the power of the look, and they did not necessarily identify with each character whose point-of-view shots were

presented. The striking thing was that even though Ada is objectified by the other characters' looks, most of the viewers nonetheless identified with her, rather than with other lookers in the film. Furthermore, for many in my group, the process of identifying with Ada was not simply masochistic as Mulvey or Doane might predict, because many viewers resisted reading Ada as a victim stripped of subjectivity.<sup>73</sup> I contend that the film does encourage the viewer to look *at* Ada, but not necessarily in the voyeuristic, colonizing, and phallic way that Mulvey claims is inevitable. Traditional scopic cinematic techniques are critiqued here, and looking bears a different relationship to identification and to gender in this film than in typical melodramas.

In a few scenes more typical of avant garde feminist films than melodrama, *The Piano* directly attempts to upset the traditional cinematic relationship between voyeurism and masculine power, as outlined by Laura Mulvey. As I have discussed earlier, several scenes in which Stewart gazes upon Ada--through the lens of a camera as he takes their wedding portrait, and through the floorboards of Baines' hut as Ada and Baines are having sex--suggest that it is Stewart, rather than the female, who is the powerless figure because his look can not control his wife. As Stella Bruzzi argues in *Screen*, Stewart is "emasculated rather than empowered by his possession of (only) the look" (261), and most male and female viewers therefore reject an identification with him. Many of my audience group remarked that it is Ada's look that controls Stewart, as her silent stare prevents him from raping her when she is ill in bed nursing her amputated finger. One woman compared Ada's glare to "Medusa's evil eye." Most of my viewers thus connected strongly to Ada as a person with at least some power to control by her look.

They also talked about another reversal--that the male figure becomes a sexual object for an implicitly female viewer, which is rare in mainstream films; one woman remarked:

“even though originally she was the object of Baines’ gaze, he becomes at least as much an object of the viewer’s gaze, particularly when he is naked, dusting the piano.”

Campion attempts to show that both men and women are simultaneously sexual subjects as well as objects of desire (with vision serving as a metaphor for desire), and that these roles are not gender-bound. Baines’ dual position as both voyeur and naked spectacle makes visible the fact that he both wants Ada and needs to be wanted by her. In an even more curious moment, Ada explores her newfound sexual subjectivity by gazing at and kissing her own image in a mirror; this masturbatory moment ironically collapses the distinction between subject and object of the desiring look, leaving the male out of the chain of vision altogether.

Despite these moments which turn the tables on classic film relationships between gender and viewing, and those moments when we are given point-of-view shots as if from Ada’s eyes, throughout most of the film the viewer gazes upon Ada, as do Stewart and Baines. We even see Ada’s fetishized leg and the hole in her stocking explicitly from Baines’ point of view as he peers under her dress. Critic Suzy Gordon proposes that “*The Piano* achieves a fundamentally masochistic form of looking” (202) for the identifying feminist viewer, because the viewer has to experience the violence against Ada and her willing acceptance of object status in order to manipulate Baines. In a scathing review in the *Boston Globe*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette expressed anger at the film for making her identify masochistically with a “female loser,” while male viewers, she argued, are

identifying with Baines' voyeuristic look and feeling "masterful" (59). Although Gullette's assumptions about male spectator identification were not played out among my sample of male feminists, a few women in my group who are tired of representations of female victims echoed Gullette's disgust at the position in which they felt placed. An undergraduate said, "I remember thinking that I was surprised that a woman wrote it. I don't think it's a good message as far as women's control over their own lives. She's definitely an object of the male gaze through the whole thing." This student's work as a counselor at a rape crisis center, and thus her sensitivity to issues of victimization, might have influenced her to see the film as just another text enabling the male gaze rather than critiquing it, particularly in the scenes in Baines' hut. Because she did not see any resistance to that appropriating male look and felt Ada was reduced to an object, she had difficulty identifying with her and experienced the film as just another instance of misogynist popular culture. Mary Ann Doane might read this woman's response as a positive self-preservation strategy for the female viewer to avoid over-identification with the on-screen, degraded female object found in most melodramas (*Desire* 32-33).

But despite these women who felt manipulated by the film's use of the gaze, the majority of my audience group gladly identified with Ada because they saw her as an active subject fighting valiantly against oppression, rather than as a violated object or a victim. Most felt empathy for Ada and did not experience this solidarity as masochism because they believed that the film liberated her. Anti-essentialist feminists and those interested in feminist avant garde film strategies were more likely to see Ada as resisting the male gaze, and to credit Jane Campion with upsetting these melodramatic gender



dichotomies. Those viewers who used the rhetoric of equality feminism were sometimes annoyed because they felt that the film merely reified women's status as visual object, and they did not see any directorial critique of that process. Whether or not a viewer experienced an identification with Ada as empowering or masochistic depended on interpreting Ada as either a postmodern feminist role model who defies gender stereotypes by assuming the power of the look, or a sad example of woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness" (to borrow Mulvey's term).

One male viewer (Marc) in my group felt that the film's presentation of Ada as an image to be looked at presented an even larger problem than the one of masochism--the problem of not being able to identify with Ada at all. Focusing more specifically on the gaze of the camera rather than the male characters' voyeurism, Marc argued that the cinematography leaves the viewer emotionally alienated from Ada. In his reading, *The Piano* is not a melodrama but is rather an avant garde film that emphasizes the beauty of surfaces, and thus it seduces the gaze of the viewer (perhaps implicitly male in his formulation) by turning Ada into a fetishized object of beauty, an aestheticized body in pain. He thinks that *The Piano*'s avant garde aesthetic puts distance between the audience and the heroine, and therefore gets in the way of its potentially subversive gender politics:

[Its feminist statements] that should be political, that should hit us at an ideological level, are finally subordinated to how beautifully they are staged, how beautiful she looks while in pain . . . . It does seem to me that it is putting itself in a tradition of some of the worst misogynist films, and authors like Robbe-Grillet,

who are so concerned with the surface and with play, . . . and [critics] ignore the fact that every one of his novels is full of pages of bloody, horrific deaths of women.

After studying this audience group, I disagree with Marc's assumption that the film's concern with the beauty of its cinematography, or its gaze upon Ada's beauty, necessarily alienates or distances audiences, objectifies Ada, or results in misogynist politics.<sup>74</sup> His argument relies on a Marxist and masculinist preference for a violent revolutionary "politics with teeth" (as he put it). His commentary is also based on reading the film as an avant garde text, rather than as a melodrama or a hybrid form.<sup>75</sup> As a result, he ignores the important role that beautiful aesthetics, and that gazing upon other women, have always played in popular culture aimed at women, and thus he undervalues both their political import and their role in *enabling*, rather than preventing, identification with the heroine.

The sight of Ada and the lush representation of her world played a crucial role in emotional identification among my group and led many of them to see the film as feminist or female-centered in its aesthetic. Because we can not hear what Ada thinks, it is doubly important to see what she sees, so the film's almost fetishistic attention to the detail and mood of her surroundings is crucial to experiencing her emotions.

Furthermore, the minute detail that melodramas lavish upon all the particulars of *mise en scène* contributes to the genre's appeal for female audiences, since the surface aesthetics of fashion, decorating, and makeup have long been an emotional part of many women's lives. The beauty and intricacy of *The Piano*'s surface in fact created a "deep" emotional

connection--intimacy rather than distance--for many of the people that I interviewed. As one female viewer remarked: "I was struck by all those blues and grays, and I just felt kind of blue and gray along with it. It's just such a beautifully made film, and it was poignant to me. I tend to really get caught up in movies." Many of the participants recall being haunted by particularly beautiful images, such as the last frame of Ada's body floating like a bell above her piano, and such images play no small part in *The Piano's* political power as a text.

My point is that this film's construction of beautifully constructed tableaux for the audience's viewing pleasure did not necessarily trap them in a rigid position and politics, nor did it reduce Ada to the status of fetishized object in their minds. It is important to remember that it is Ada's face rather than her body that the camera directs our attention to most frequently. With her face as the focus, the act of gazing upon Ada created a response of empathy among viewers of both genders, rather than alienation or colonizing control. Especially since she is mute, one viewer remarked that Ada's "face is so important as an expressive force." Looking at her is crucial to the process of "hearing" her meaning. Several particularly focused on her facial expression after her finger has been cut off, and one man remembers the empathetic moment: "I could barely watch. The fact that her face was emotionless, that she just kept a straight face but then she was so pale and the red blood--it was really moving."

To help explain this male viewer's identification with a victimized female subject on display, I turn to Barbara Creed's concept of the "genderization of space" and Modleski's analysis of the effect of closeup shots. When a female figure dominates the

frame throughout a film, Creed argues that the space is gendered female, and that this technique serves as an alternative means--an alternative to the gaze--of constructing a female point of view and of facilitating identification with the heroine (134). In *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski has described a similar phenomenon among female viewers of soap opera, and suggests that the scopic economy of soaps is dominated by empathy. Modleski argues that "soap opera stimulates women's desire for connectedness through the constant, claustrophobic use of close-up shots" (99). The insights of Modleski and Creed are similar to the point made by cognitive film critics that an expressive reaction shot can be more effective than a point-of-view shot in fostering identification and empathy.<sup>76</sup> Even though the gaze of the camera is often either neutral or directed at Ada, the resulting text nonetheless offers a female point of view and encourages viewers to identify with her as a subject. I concur with Murray Smith's argument that the psychoanalytical concept of identification or "suture" is "based on the conflation of sight and subjectivity" (157). The fact that these closeups created sympathy for Ada among both women *and* men (albeit feminist men), rather than a desire for mastery over the female object, serves as an important qualification of Mulvey's reading of cinematic narrative pleasure as derived from an objectifying masculine gaze.

Some film theorists who distrust sentimentality and affective forms, such as Mary Ann Doane, may argue that these moments of pathos work against female agency, but I contend that the sympathy that audiences feel when viewing Ada's story is crucial to the film's feminist impact. Doane argues that "pathos always connotes a loss or fading of individual subjectivity," and that it produces an masochistic overidentification with a

female character which results in a collapse of subject/object; this collapse prevents the female spectator from ever achieving a “well-defined subjectivity” (*Desire* 177). In my view, Doane’s theory exhibits a phallic emphasis on the “rigidity” of identity, neglecting to consider that a more fluid connection between self and other could enable feminist solidarity, a kind of identity through relation with others. The fact that *The Piano* enables identification of male viewers with Ada also aligns it with the aim of some feminists to engage male sympathy for women’s concerns. Rejecting melodrama as degraded, Doane finds more feminist possibilities in avant garde texts that disrupt identification and the gaze and offer distance from the image (*Femmes Fatales* 197-8). However, as the interviewee Marc has suggested, a distanced avant garde aesthetic can often be politically anemic. Jane Gaines has voiced a similar complaint that feminist avant garde film has alienated female viewers by “annihilating the pleasure of identification” (81). Since sympathy and anger are at the root of most political drives for change, affect and identification can be crucial to the political effectivity of a text. Furthermore, Doane’s contention that pathos causes a collapse of the viewer and the image did not hold true in my interview group, most of whom were able to identify with Ada yet also to disagree with her actions and choices. Their sympathetic gaze did not eradicate their subjectivity and difference from the on-screen woman.

In summary, my study of audience response to the film’s complicated treatment of looking and subjectivity revealed several things that challenge psychoanalytic gaze theory. First of all, the male viewers did not respond to the film’s solicitation of their gaze any differently than did the women, and the most common response was to identify

strongly with Ada, even when she was the object of the camera's or a male character's gaze. Despite one viewer's reading of the film as an avant garde text that alienates audiences by creating superficial tableaux of Ada's body, nearly everyone else was able to identify emotionally with the heroine as in other female-oriented melodramas. Those feminists who saw little difference between *The Piano* and more misogynist popular culture experienced that identification as masochistic, while others felt liberated by Ada's challenge to the male gaze and Campion's avant garde disruption of the traditional functions of cinematic gazing. While the film's identificatory strategies were quite successful, my group interpreted the politics of that identification process as either feminist or non-feminist depending on their own ideology, which influenced them to see Ada as either subject or object, or perhaps both. They were also influenced by their preferences for either melodrama or avant garde film, and by their determinations of where *The Piano* "fit" aesthetically and generically. As I have been arguing, the film doesn't exactly fit either polarity, because it allows melodramatic, emotional identification but alters that process by granting Ada and the female viewer at least a few moments of powerful looking, and subsequently, a fully realized subjectivity that has been rare in the history of melodramatic film. For most viewers in my group, the combination resulted in a feminist experience of the relationship between looking, power, and subjectivity that was emotionally felt as well as intellectually perceived.

### **Sexual Agent or Sexual Object?**

Audience disagreement about Ada's silence and how she is positioned by the gaze

also fed into another heated controversy, about the film's treatment of female sexuality. This debate was fueled by contemporaneous feminist controversies about pornography, sexual harassment, domestic violence, date rape, and "victim feminism" versus "power feminism." Citing Ada's silence and her "to-be-looked-at-ness" as fuel for their interpretation, some viewers in my group compared Ada to a victimized object in porn films or domestic violence scenarios, while others saw her subverting the male privileges of speech and the look in order to become a sexual agent. The viewers' readings of Ada's sexuality were strongly influenced by the media-inflamed debate about the categories of "victim feminism" and "power feminism," an argument about whether feminism should focus on women as victims of patriarchy or as complicit but powerful agents in their own right.

While these categories are slippery at best and have been interpreted variously,<sup>77</sup> my audience group identified victim feminism with anti-pornography activist Catharine MacKinnon, Take Back the Night rallies, date rape educators, and other groups who emphasize women's continued oppression under patriarchy and seek female solidarity rather than individual empowerment. Power feminism, which defined itself in opposition to victim feminism, was a term originally coined by Naomi Wolf in her best-seller *Fire with Fire* (1994) and associated with Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe, whose book *The Morning After* (1993) fulminates against the new "puritanism" in the anti-pornography and date rape awareness movements on college campuses. These power feminists, sometimes called "postfeminists," argue that women have a tremendous amount of power at an individual level, which they should use for their own social betterment; when they

extend this argument to the field of sexuality, their thesis (and particularly Roiphe's) might be summed up by the phrase "Just Do It and Enjoy It." Paglia believes that current feminism's "public proponents are in a reactionary phase of hysterical moralism and prudery" and she hopes for "a new kind of feminism, one that stresses personal responsibility and is open to art and sex in all their dark, unconsoling mysteries" (vii).

Power feminism shares a few basic premises with "pro-sex" social constructionism and postmodern feminism, although the tension between popular and academic feminists has obscured their similarities. These groups agree that women are not innocent victims but are embroiled in the values of capitalism and patriarchy, that working within the system may be more effective than radical revolt from a supposedly untainted female space, and that sexuality cannot be essentialized or made "politically correct." A pro-sex feminist influenced by post-structuralist theory, Linda Williams attacks anti-porn activist Andrea Dworkin and applauds some forms of S/M porn for underscoring the "inevitability of power in pleasure" (225). The 90's catchword "power" is not the sole province of popular power feminists, since it has also been a central term in postmodern discourse influenced by Foucault. The crucial difference between these two uses of the term is that postmodernists emphasize the systemic nature of power operating upon people, while power feminism locates it within the individual.

While many in this audience group often employed the rhetoric of empowerment to describe their readings of *The Piano*, their interest in celebrating female sexual power did not completely take the place of concerns about victimization and patriarchy. When I asked them whether they liked Paglia or MacKinnon, many of those interviewed



expressed sympathy for both points of view, but their responses to the film suggest that power feminism and postmodern feminism are the more dominant discourses in their lives. *The Piano*'s treatment of the power or victimhood of Ada bears some similarities to classic melodrama, in which women are sometimes represented as abject and sometimes as powerful. In melodramas, however, female power (especially any sexual power) most often gets contained by the conservative endings of the films. Those viewers who identified with "victim feminists" viewed Ada and *The Piano* as participants in this melodramatic tradition. But the fact that this film focuses more explicitly upon female sexual desire and doesn't fully domesticate that power differentiates it from typical melodramas. This challenge to the sexual roles prescribed by Hollywood cinema allowed many viewers to read the film as feminist and avant garde. The majority of my audience group tended to emphasize empowerment over victimization in their responses to the film, and read Ada McGrath as a sexually liberated, postmodern feminist heroine, rather than a poignant example of the need for domestic violence education or anti-pornography groups.

Although the majority were pro-sex, objecting to the censorship of pornography, many of them were made uncomfortable, at least temporarily, by Baines and Ada's sexual relationship. The early scenes in which Baines proposes an exchange--the piano for the chance to touch Ada's body--made many feminist viewers queasy, since it appeared to be a familiar instance of objectification and prostitution. Ada seems to be uncomfortable in those early scenes, suffering stoically for the sake of her piano as Baines orders her to lift her skirt higher. One sociology graduate student voiced an interpretation representative

of the views of rape-crisis feminists and followers of Catharine MacKinnon: “some people call it a seduction, but I would use the word rape for it. I’m not saying she wasn’t aroused, but that it was exploitation, not a liberating thing. I look at it not as a forced rape, but an emotional rape.” Margaret Gullette of *The Boston Globe* had an even stronger reaction: “I felt sullied by *The Piano*, muted, mutilated, threatened by rape. . . . Men who identify with Baines are going through a soft-porn experience,” while female audiences are forced to re-experience the victimization of women in a masochistic mode. One problem with Gullette’s reading is that she makes assumptions about how gender determines audience responses. Male as well as female viewers in my study were disturbed by the bartering scenes, but a larger group (13 people) experienced them as both erotic and disturbing, often simultaneously. Most importantly, Gullette’s reading can not account for the fact that ten feminists that I interviewed found the sexual power play to be purely erotic and radically feminist.

While some thought that Ada was a powerless victim of Baines’ manipulation, many argued that she freely accepted the bargain and exerted her power in setting the terms--five keys for letting Baines fondle her neck and arms, ten keys for laying down nude. An anthropology professor argued that “she is the one who calls the shots as far as her bartering with Baines is concerned. I don’t see that ‘arrangement’ as demeaning to her, for it seems to be something she chooses.” Gayle Rubin and others have used arguments like this one to defend female sex-workers, who may gain power and/or pleasure from selling their bodies (Rubin 33-34). An undergraduate that I interviewed concurred that Ada does exert some bargaining power, but concluded instead that “it’s so

minimal compared to the male power over her that her resistance seems just sad and ineffectual.” Still others recognized that Ada exerted free will, but were nonetheless disturbed that she made this particular choice, because “it plays into stereotypes that we have been fighting for so long, of women using their bodies to get what they want, that being their ultimate piece of property that they can disperse at will.” For some people, then, the fact that Ada was not truly powerless redeemed the scenes, making it more difficult to view them as rape, but others still resisted calling Ada’s power liberatory or feminist.

While the initial bartering sequence usually struck people as either a critique of or an apology for prostitution, most noted that the film soon shifted, complicating that simple plot of a woman as sexual object controlled by men. The shift occurs, of course, when Ada begins to enjoy the sexual game and eventually falls in love with Baines. The MacKinnon sympathizers found this shift the most difficult to take, and some concluded that the film was anti-feminist for reinforcing the myth that “women really do want to be raped, and that when they say no, they really do mean yes.” Eight of the thirty-one people in my group saw *The Piano* as a retrograde rape fantasy, akin to Gothics and romance novels, and therefore “politically not right.” These respondents thus had a difficult time seeing any positive qualities in Baines that might justify Ada’s love for him. As the *Globe* reviewer Gullette exclaimed, “She may fall in love right on time, by his emotional timetable. But why should we? How can she and we forgive him?” (59). The majority of my interview group, however, did forgive him, or felt that there was nothing to forgive in the first place. I found that the correlation between ideology and interpretation was

most direct for the eight who interpreted the film as perpetuating female victimization. Most of them either volunteered for the rape crisis center on campus, sympathized with lesbian separatism, admired MacKinnon's work, or were sociologists studying victimized female populations. While this group ultimately hopes that women can be freed of victim status, their interests often necessitate some essentializing of the categories of "woman" and "man" as righteous victim vs. oppressor, which influenced them to read Ada as a woman betraying her gender and the feminist cause by loving Baines.

In opposition to those who resented Ada's change of heart, some of the respondents said that the equalization of power between Ada and Baines erased their reservations. Many "equality feminists" felt the film became more erotic and less disturbing once the balance of power is ensured, when Ada takes more control and Baines is somewhat emasculated, like Rochester at the end of *Jane Eyre*. Once Baines returns the piano, he no longer controls Ada, and his new vulnerability is revealed by this stereotypically feminine admission: "I don't eat, I don't sleep. . . . I want you to care for me, but you can't." In her study *The Romance Revolution*, Carol Thurston points out a similar plot development in recent, sexually explicit romance novels that works to equalize men and women--the male hero now must grovel and give ample evidence of his feminine masochism before the woman can find him sexy and worthy of love (25). The intense emotional pain that Baines suffers places him and Ada on more equal terms, and it is crucial to Ada's decision to act on her desire for him. One male undergraduate felt comfortable with the sexual politics when he realized that "Ada was willing to do it. . . . Their relationship seemed more on equal terms." A reviewer from *New York* magazine

defended *The Piano* against MacKinnonites: “this is a feminist version of heterosexuality that also clearly rejects conventional feminist sexual politics. If you believe someone like Catharine MacKinnon, women always receive, so to speak, the short end of the stick, since the power resides in the man. Not so, says Campion. The power resides in equals” (“Piano Foreplay”). Equality feminists were most likely to read the film as a feminist fable implying that love and sex are best when both partners have equal power.

While equality feminists focused on Ada and Baines’ sexual balance of power, other respondents used the language of power feminism to applaud the scenes where Ada fondles Stewart’s nude body but refuses to let him return her touch. One was pleased that “Ada’s definitely in control, dominant and toying around with dominant forces of sexuality,” while another put it more bluntly: “She was acting as a modern male, using him as a sexual toy.” Graham Fuller of *Interview* magazine enjoyed the film for offering “a female usurpation of masculine Byronic will. This Eve, Ada, is almost an Adam.” This group’s pleasure at Ada’s display of masculine power put them in the same discursive field with Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe, who have been derided by difference feminists for their integrationist suggestion that women should act like men in order to get ahead. Laura Mulvey might argue that Ada is just a transvestite assuming the male role of active voyeur, and that this should not be conceived as a feminist move (“Afterthoughts”). Doane might also disagree with these respondents, because she thinks that “it can never be enough simply to reverse sexual roles” (*Desire* 177). The power feminists in my group, however, feel that this reversal *is* enough, at least for now.

Although most respondents saw Ada as a powerful woman, those with anti-

essentialist and postmodern feminist ideas read the sexual politics very differently-- instead of emphasizing either equality or female usurpation of male roles, these viewers saw in the film a Foucaultian message about the relationship between power and desire. For them, the film's most radical statement is that sex is inherently about power, a power that can never be equalized because it is a fluid dynamic, shifting from moment to moment. One self-defined anti-essentialist concurs that "sex is a really interesting situation of reciprocity, but never of equality. It's both mutual and not, because it's asymmetrical between a man and a woman. It could be mutual but not equal." Accepting that sexual desire is often fueled by such a power imbalance, these Foucault-influenced feminists reject the traditional feminist desire for equality in the bedroom, and instead seek to expose the fact that women desire sexual power as much as men do, and that they sometimes find a submissive role to be erotic as well.

While the film emphasizes equality as essential to love, it also suggests that relinquishing power can be important to sexuality. The film implies that Baines' initial objectification of Ada awakens her by enabling her to think of herself in sexual terms, which in turn leads her to become a sexual subject. It is precisely this suggestion--that being seen as an object can be exciting for a woman--that many feminist critics such as MacKinnon either neglect to consider or dismiss as "false consciousness," but that one-third of my interview respondents recognized. As one argued, "as Baines runs his finger along her arm and neck, her chest rises and falls, and although she may be scared, I find it more likely that she is aroused." Unlike those feminists fighting against pornography, these postmodern feminists believe that women's sexual desires can not be essentialized,

and that finding objectification sexy is not necessarily anti-feminist. As one English graduate student put it: “it’s ironic that her pleasure is brought about by this prostitution scenario, but it is her pleasure and you have to allow her that. You can’t judge other people’s sexual desire according to politically correct standards. Women’s sexuality has been so controlled for so long. Then what the heck, if it turns her on, it turns her on.”

Ada’s contractual strip-tease for Baines might be compared to sadomasochistic practices that Linda Williams argues are actually reciprocal agreements in which the submissive, masochistic party exerts a fair amount of power and agency in pursuing pleasure (212).

While it is implied that Ada at first sees their sexual bargain as merely a desire-free economic exchange--her body for the piano--this simple relationship shifts to allow desire on Ada’s part. Thus Ada seems to be both object and subject of desire at the same time, and the film ends up emphasizing “oscillating positions over strict sexual identities”

(Linda Williams 226). Some respondents nonetheless tried to read the film’s sexual politics in terms of rigid gender and sexual identities, and were confused or angered by the oscillation. With its radical suggestion that power is inevitable in all sexual relations and that this power imbalance could result in female pleasure, *The Piano* was understood by some feminists to be speaking the language of postmodern feminism or even power feminism and standing against Andrea Dworkin’s equation of heterosexual sex with rape.

As I have been outlining, there were many strong connections between the respondents’ feminist ideology and their interpretation of the film’s sexual politics, but I should also emphasize that more than a third (13) of the group experienced the sex scenes as *both* erotic and disturbing at the same time, possibly because their own feminism is a

mixture of different ideological positions. One woman whose entry into feminism was through a “touchy-feely” difference-based support group, and who was strongly disturbed that Ada’s “resistance turned into desire for Baines,” nevertheless was pleased that “the movie does not revel in her victimhood at all.” Her response did not seem to fit a prescribed script written by either Roiphe or MacKinnon, and many others echoed her ambivalence about the victim/power debate: “the reality of women’s lives is that they fluctuate between total victim and total self-creator, with most falling in between.” Even those viewers who read the film as a fable about a woman’s individual empowerment also noted that the film critiqued the ways in which patriarchy has historically oppressed women economically and sexually, by forcing them into arranged marriages, by denying them ownership of their property and their bodies, and by justifying male violence as a form of conjugal “rights.” The film appealed to some viewers precisely because it resisted the dichotomy between women-as-victim and woman-as-empowered, poles which they felt did not adequately represent their complex life experiences. They applauded the film’s critique of some essentialist conceptions of female sexuality, yet were also sensitive to Champion’s attention to the circumstances that unite all women who live under patriarchal conditions. In a sense, these viewers were responding as well to the textual hybridity of the film; by mixing melodramatic and feminist avant garde strategies for representing women, the filmic codes combined anti-essentialist and essentialist conceptions of sexuality and gender, and this synthesis or conjunction resonated with their everyday lives.

One of the tensions present in the film that resonated powerfully with my



audience group was the often difficult negotiation between feminist ideals and a desire for love and marriage. Like many other feminists texts since Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Piano* critiques marriage by comparing Ada's love affair with Baines to her violent relationship with Stewart, implying that the marriage is actually the truly prostituting relationship. Despite this critique of power relations in marriage, the film also relies heavily on a sentimental investment in the romance between Ada and Baines, and the majority of my audience group enjoyed this melodramatic plotline and rooted for them to stay together. Several self-proclaimed romantics felt that Ada and Baines's love wiped away all the sexually disturbing aspects of their earlier interactions. One expressed this view, albeit with embarrassment: "But he loved her, and that's what made it good, that they were both in love. . . . Is that cheesy?" For many of these romantics, sexuality is inextricable from the discourse of love; what turned them on was the love affair, not necessarily the sex. As I have noted earlier, however, some women in the group were resistant to Ada's love for Baines precisely *because* of the sexual power-play; this group tended to be more skeptical about marriage and heterosexual romance, arguing that it hinders feminist goals by seducing women into following cultural roles prescribed by patriarchy and reinforced by melodramatic texts. These viewers (almost all female) thus declared the film's happy ending segment to be anti-feminist, while others loved the romance and felt that it was wholly compatible with their feminist ideals.<sup>78</sup>

What is at stake in *The Piano*'s treatment of romance, clearly, is the familiar liberal feminist concern about how to reconcile one's intellectual theories or professional interests with one's sexual and/or romantic desires, in this case heterosexual desires. A

new backdrop to this discussion has been the advent of a “postfeminist” generation influenced by power feminism as well as postmodern feminism.<sup>79</sup> These heterosexual postfeminist women see themselves as equals to men and accept the empowering benefits of feminism, but they also reject feminism’s overemphasis on success in the workplace and its purported connection with militant lesbianism (an image fostered by anti-feminist media personalities such as Rush Limbaugh); they instead want to flaunt their femininity, have kids, and love men without worrying about political correctness, power dynamics or sexual objectification. A lot of the undergraduate women I interviewed sympathize with this popular reaction and are somewhat ambivalent about identifying themselves as feminist because they “like men” and do not feel particularly oppressed by them. *The Piano*’s melodramatic love plot, and particularly the happy ending scene, strongly appealed to their desire for an end to the “battle of the sexes.” The ending of the film, however, deserves more careful attention, since its multi-part, hybrid structure complicated audience responses and affected their interpretation of its feminist or possibly “post-feminist” meanings.

### **Multiple Endings for Multiple Feminisms**

*The Piano* offers not one but three ending sequences, each appealing to different audience tastes for either avant garde or popular cultural plots. This ending sequence also attempts to resolve or address all the feminist-related themes that I have been discussing-- silence, speech, sexuality, romance, empowerment, victimization, resistance to patriarchy, subjectivity and self-determination. The first “ending” depicts Ada leaving the island

with Baines, nearly drowning herself, and choosing life; the second is the sentimental, sun-lit shot of Ada and Baines' newly established home, where she has begun to speak and now teaches piano lessons; and the third presents Ada's dream image of herself dead, at the bottom of the ocean with her piano. The three-part structure causes difficulties for viewer interpretation, since it evokes both the traditional melodramatic happy ending and the dark, often ambiguous endings of many avant-garde films. It ends up doing both, and therefore neither, offering a strange hybrid ending that challenges audience expectations by offering closure and then suspending it. This multi-part ending allows viewers to privilege their own preferred ending and makes the process of interpretation even more politicized and personal.

For the most part, my audience group tried to grapple with the mixed messages of the three endings and constructed a reading that incorporated them all in a symbiosis. This symbiosis seemed to parallel the kind of hybrid identity that many feminists have constructed for themselves out of the various discourses of gender present in contemporary culture--an identity that allows them to indulge their heterosexual love fantasies yet to strive for their feminist ideals, to deconstruct gender yet to function within their gender role every day. Most of my audience group were pleased or at least satisfied with the compromise feminist vision that the endings offered (if read as a whole), while more radical feminists rejected the melodramatic romance ending and used the film as a launching pad for their own concerns about the bourgeois "watering down" of feminism. Regardless of their responses, the film provoked these viewers to take a stand on whether the film was feminist in their own terms, but more importantly it helped to make their

own identification as feminists more conscious, thus enabling that identity to be contested and reshaped.

The film's endings adjudicate between melodramatic closure and postmodern openness and juxtapose the sentimental with the sublime, but it was tempting for viewers to read the melodramatic scene as "the" ending of the film. However, a significant number of my group tried to connect all three endings together in a signifying string and to think about how each new scene changed or qualified the previous segments. While many argue that the film could have ended effectively as Ada rose out of the ocean, having chosen life, I contend that the last two shots profoundly affect the feminist meaning of the film. When we are transported from this emotionally wrenching drowning sequence to a brightly lit shot of Ada reestablishing a domestic life with Baines while Flora turns cartwheels in the yard, we are encouraged to indulge in the comfort of this sentimental closure. We know that Ada is safe in a more civilized town, that Flora is carefree, that Ada can play the piano again via a prosthetic finger, that she is in love, that she is trying to speak--in short, we are transported to the familiar ground of Hollywood domesticity and bourgeois normalcy that usually closes out melodramatic texts, which often wrest a happy ending out of the most dire of circumstances.

But Campion does not let us rest there, and follows up with a coda that destabilizes the preceding endings. The first-person voice-over tells us that this last shot is a recurrent dream of Ada's that serves as her "strange lullaby"--that she went down with her piano and remains silent "in the cold grave, under the deep deep sea." This coda may have been a compromise on the part of Campion, whose first drafts of the screenplay

ended with Ada's death by drowning. Although Ada does choose life in the final version of the script, she still dreams of death, almost mourning the loss of her former silent self. The fact that we are left with a visual image of a drowned Ada unsettles the sentimental closure of the previous ending, making us wonder whether that domestic bliss is wholly fulfilling for her. The audience is suspended along with Ada's body underwater; we cannot know definitively what this last shot means because it evokes the sublime, as opposed to the sentimental. By including Thomas Hood's sonnet about the sublimity of silence ("there is a silence where hath been no sound/ There is a silence where no sound may be"), the coda makes us wonder if silence has more power than speech. The previous sentimental ending suggested that verbal communication is an improvement over Ada's frustrated muteness, but now we are not so sure. The tension between the two endings--one sentimental, the other sublime--attempts to dissuade the viewer from simply enjoying one ending and ignoring the other. It urges you to consider both in conjunction, and it leaves you with questions rather than answers.

This ambiguity disturbed a few viewers, however, who "selected" one ending as the real or most meaningful one. The interview subjects' sense of the film's high or low cultural status and their own taste preferences affected their expectations about how it should end. One woman appreciated the "Cinderella ending like we like in the United States, that you go off and live happily ever after." Many of those who desired the happy ending, even against their feminist "better" judgment, simply repressed the sublime underwater shot from their memories; as one person noted, "I didn't remember the last shot. I thought the happy ending was trite, trying to reach mainstream audiences. But

since I forgot the last ending, maybe I wanted the happy ending that I thought was so trite." Many viewers like this one could not overcome their distaste for the clichéd melodramatic closure, and felt that an avant garde film ought to have ended in death. An English graduate student admitted that "we have this idea that art can't have happy endings." Several of the students of literature that I interviewed, no doubt influenced by postmodern artists' rejection of such tidy endings, desire openness instead of closure and criticized Campion's sentimental ending for catering to a "pathological need for resolution of every issue."

Most of those I interviewed, however, noticed that the film's ending was trying to both open and close--to offer a resolution, but a limited one, and to combine a comforting romance with the disturbance of the sublime. Many tried to work out a complex interpretation that wove the endings together, as one undergraduate did: "I had a warm fuzzy in the scene where he fashioned her a new fingertip. . . . I think that's why it was important to cut to the scene of her floating above the piano. It makes sure that I didn't forget what had just happened prior to the happy ending." A graduate student in literature liked the "postmodern ambiguity" of the double ending, arguing that "the last scene . . . qualifies the liberation which she does achieve." While this film could be seen as doubly coded for different high and low cultural audiences, it is clear that the majority of my audience group was attracted by the mixture of cultural codes, possibly because this mixture spoke to their identities as intellectuals who are also avid consumers of popular culture.

The viewers' responses to the endings' high and low cultural elements were

generally tied up with their feminist ideals--those who prefer avant garde culture were usually those with a more radical feminist agenda, protesting against bourgeois patriarchy in all of its manifestations, while those viewers who allow themselves to enjoy the romance of melodrama were more amenable to a liberal feminist politics, one willing to retain the "feminine" and to work alongside men to make change. Two events in the ending sequence separated my audience group strongly into radical and liberal positions--Ada's suicide attempt and her decision to settle down with Baines--and these two plots of death vs. romance/marriage can easily be connected to avant garde and melodramatic traditions.

Like the death vs. marriage subplots, Ada's choice between silence and speech also seemed to divide viewers into radical and practical feminist camp, although it engendered a much more complex response pattern, as I have discussed earlier. Liberal feminists liked the sentimental ending because they felt that George was worth speaking to precisely because he listened to and understood Ada. While some viewers may think she has lost power and some of her self-determination by speaking, many thought she has gained the wisdom to see that outright revolt may lead to alienation and even annihilation. She decides to learn the master's language, but she will make it speak new and different words because she will remain the "town freak." A few viewers connected Ada's compromise with one that they think feminism is strongly in need of--a means to attract more mainstream women into the fold, to prevent them from fashioning themselves as "postfeminist" and abandoning the feminist work that still desperately needs to be done. Even though Ada is still perceived as a freak at the end of the film, she is certainly less

freakish and more socially integrated than she had been while silent, and this change appealed to many viewers with more mainstream feminist desires.

As Ada abandons a more radical choice of silence, she similarly rejects suicide as the ultimate feminist protest. Those viewers with a more pessimistic view of the possibility for change felt that following through with her suicide attempt would have been a stronger feminist condemnation of patriarchy, as in the film *Thelma and Louise* and Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening*. One self-proclaimed "radical" was disappointed that Ada chose to live under patriarchy, arguing that "at least *Thelma and Louise* offered a clear feminist critique--there is no place for a woman in this environment except death." The Marxist graduate student who prefers his politics "with teeth" wished that the film had ended with Ada's drowning--"that at least would have been a bleak, harrowing ending." It is important to note, however, that these feminists desire more radical feminist politics from representations than they are willing to pursue in their own personal lives--none of them was suicidal, and they were all successful students and professionals, some happily married as well. By pointing this out I do not mean to criticize these viewers for the disjunction between their lives and their demands of texts, since radical feminist representations serve as an important counter-balance to the plethora of misogynist texts in our culture. This desire for representations more radical than one's own politics is clearly a widespread phenomenon, as evidenced by the enormous popularity of *Thelma and Louise*, a film which celebrates feminist suicide, among women who do not define themselves as feminist at all. *The Piano*'s sentimental ending scene strives for a more realistic note than *Thelma and Louise*, because it tries to



refamiliarize Ada's situation, to take it out of the realm of fantasy, and to make audiences recognize in the representation a similarity to their own lives, in which compromises are far more frequent than revolt.

While some desired Ada's suicide as a more radical gesture, others argued that suicide is not necessarily radical or even feminist. As Stella Bruzzi points out in *Screen*, "to die in the mode of a tragic heroine would have been to succumb to another masculine tradition" (266). One male viewer in my group was glad the film stood in opposition to male writers like "Poe, who believed that the most romantic and poetic subject in the world is the death of a beautiful woman." In an astute review, Graham Fuller of *Interview* remarked that "the watery grave she contemplates is a tantalizing Gothic option, akin to Edgar Allan Poe's Annabel Lee 'in her sepulcher there by the sea'," but Fuller ultimately applauds Ada's refusal of the fate that misogynist (and some feminist) writers have reserved for their heroines. Many thus interpreted Ada's decision to rise to the surface as a more progressive feminist message than any death wish; one remarked of the moment when Ada's will chooses life: "it was basically her only conscious choice in the whole movie; she took charge of her life then." More than two-thirds of my audience group felt that "choosing life" was one of the more important feminist statements of the film.

While the options of suicide or life divided responses, many viewers felt that the coda or last ending, in which Ada dreams of herself dead, offered an important mediation between these two poles. The coda suggests that Ada has achieved a hybrid position--she accepts life under patriarchal conditions but fantasizes about the peace of death as the

ultimate freedom. One student remarked that the coda “restored my faith that she didn’t get completely changed; she still has that silent, morbid side to her.” Even a self-proclaimed radical feminist, who had strongly desired the suicide ending, was moved by this suggestion of a sort of “death-in-life” and read it as subversive, although in a more muted way. Campion’s decision to end the film with this dream of death, rather than Ada’s actual death, seems to have succeeded in appealing to a much wider feminist audience than either of the endings alone might have done.

Although the coda was perceived positively by most feminists, the previous “happily-ever-after” shot produced much more controversy in the press and among audiences. Ada’s choice to live, of course, is also a choice to make a life with Baines, and some perceived this arrangement as a loss for Ada, a reinscription into bourgeois patriarchy. African-American feminist writer bell hooks was the most outspoken critic of Ada’s decision to live with Baines. Hooks argued that the film’s ending is misogynist, akin to gangsta rap: “[Ada] lets go her longing to display passion through artistic expression. A nuclear family now, Baines, Ada, and Flora resettle and live happily ever after. Suddenly, patriarchal order is restored. Ada becomes a modest wife. . . . Baines is in charge” (“Gangsta” 120). Furthermore, she believes that the film “advances the sexist assumption that heterosexual women will give up artistic practice to find ‘true love’” (“Gangsta” 121). Several among my audience group agreed with hooks; an anthropology professor found it problematic that Ada gets “tamed and domesticated,” while a student similarly mourned what she saw as the loss of Ada’s art: “she’s not going to be the same person or have the same music, now that she’s taken the boat back to society.” Many of

these viewers argued that a life with Baines would put her “back to the same oppressive situation that’s not qualitatively different than what she had before.” One man felt the happy ending tries too hard to “redeem Baines as the better choice,” as somehow outside of patriarchy, when actually the two men are both really “stand-ins for a patriarchal order, which made all of Ada’s problems possible in the first place.”

While many strongly criticized the film’s redemption of Baines as Mr. Right, just as many viewers felt that Ada’s decision to live with Baines should not be seen as a capitulation to patriarchy. Many argued that choosing a more sensitive man, who may occasionally lapse back into macho habits, is in fact what most feminist heterosexual women do in their own lives. Furthermore, Kathy Maio of *Ms.* magazine emphasizes the radical nature of Ada’s choice in its 19th-century context: “by choosing whom to love, Ada brings down the wrath of patriarchy.” Since opting out of the marriage market altogether is nearly impossible for a Victorian woman with no means of financial sustenance, her choice of George could be seen as a subversive one, since he is decidedly unconventional and is sensitive to her sexual desires and artistic passion, unlike her husband Stewart. Beyond applauding Ada’s choice of Baines, many felt that romantic bliss should not be seen as incompatible with feminism, as one woman said: “I don’t see falling in love or finding happiness as falling into the hands of patriarchy.” Most of these pro-romance viewers define themselves as liberal feminists because they see joining society and getting married as a positive thing.” Even one feminist with affinity for radical separatist theory acknowledged a split between her theory and her everyday desires: “if you are a feminist, you aren’t supposed to want the heroine to get married, but

in real life, sometimes you do want to get married.” I think it is important to see that Campion’s film opposes the popular backlash discourse that asserts that feminists are frigid, selfish, career-minded zealots who don’t need anyone, least of all men. This film also questions hooks’ implication that art is a more worthwhile pursuit for a feminist than love.

As I have been arguing, the film clearly tries to adjudicate between two plotlines traditionally associated with female characters--self-righteous death or marriage--and this compromise offers important political messages for our contemporary moment. Nancy Miller was among the first of feminist literary critics to note that women’s fiction has repeated the plots deemed plausible for women--either love or be an independent self, but not both. Discussing George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* as a prototypical text, Miller argues that “Maggie Tulliver, too, would be herself and love, but the price for that unscriptable wish proves again to be the deferral of conventional erotic longings, what Maggie calls ‘earthly happiness’” (353). I would argue that *The Piano* attempts to allow Ada that feminist “unscriptable wish” to be herself *and* love, but the film also recognizes that love and marriage can entail some muting of self-definition, although not necessarily a loss of self. Ada is happy in the end, but she also dreams of her former glorious stand of silence. While some experienced the romance plot as a loss for Ada, many others recognized its importance against a backdrop of either/or plots for women. One graduate student preferred Campion’s film to the ending of another famous text about an adulteress, *The Scarlet Letter*, because “Ada doesn’t have to choose between living on the outskirts of town in this liminal position, or being totally boringly integrated. She’s

allowed to have a whole family, she's allowed to have her lover, unlike Hester Prynne."

The final shot of the film also serves to remind us that Ada's choice of a monogamous coupling with Baines was not made without some regret that keeps resurfacing in her dreams. I would argue that Ada does not simply become co-opted by patriarchy, because she creates a personal space in which she continues to question her relationship to men and to life. As she says of her death dream: "it is a weird lullaby and so it is; it is *mine*." The use of the word mine echoes the earlier scene in which she claimed the piano as her own, despite the lack of women's property rights, and this lexical repetition suggests that Ada has not given up her desire for self-determination. Instead of wholly giving in to the patriarchal romance script, *The Piano*'s coda seems to draw back from the film's investment in romantic heterosexual fantasies.<sup>80</sup>

*The Piano*'s treatment of romance thus gains an added significance if it is read against a backdrop of contemporary feminist concerns. The myth that feminists are man-hating angry lesbians still disturbs the heterosexual women in my audience group, most of whom desire to interact with and love men and to succeed in the world without feeling oppressed all the time. Many of the male feminists I interviewed also felt beleaguered by some feminists' righteous equation of all men with patriarchy, and desired peace with women. Most of the audience responses indicated a tension between feminism and a sentimental desire for the genders to coexist happily, and the film plays precisely upon this ambivalence. Some critics were angry at the film's ending for watering down its message by attempting to "have it both ways," to offer a feminist tale of a powerful, sexually desiring woman resisting patriarchy but also to appease those melodramatic

tastes for a romantic happy ending where the girl gets the guy. I agree that the film attempts to have it both ways, but so do many of the people that I know. Feminists *do* read romance novels and watch soap operas, but not always for the purpose of critiquing their ideology. As one graduate student put it, “I don’t feel like it’s selling out if Ada and Baines do get married at the end. One of my projects as a feminist is that you can be married, somewhat normalized, and still have even a radical feminist agenda. I want to be a practical feminist and still live in my world with my house and my husband, and the ending [of the film] is just a relief.” I think that *The Piano* has power as a cultural text precisely because it allows many possibilities to be in play at the same time, without cancelling each other out, and thus recognizes the multiplicity of women’s (and men’s) desires. Its power is amplified by its ability to provoke so many strong responses, in so many different directions. This film is political in a very basic sense in that it moves people to think critically about themselves and their ideal feminist world.

Some may argue that *The Piano*’s compromise politics are nothing new and may dismiss the film as just another liberal feminist text. But I think that liberal feminism, or at least its attempt to reach a wider, more diverse audience, needs to be revalued as a powerful and emotionally potent weapon against both an anti-feminist backlash and the apathy and waning of affect that accompanies postmodern sensibilities. Furthermore, *The Piano* can not simply be explained by the vague and outdated political designation “liberal feminist,” because its particular combination of ideologies situate it in relation to newer feminist discourses present in the early 1990s, particularly the popularity of postmodern feminism, power feminism, and post-feminism. While the film returns to

some stable narratives of old, with its romance thread and its invocation of gender difference, it also juxtaposes them with new discourses of anti-essentialism and politically incorrect sexuality. The result is a hybrid text whose politics can be called neither radical nor liberal, but involves a reconsideration of both strategies.

The film's particular mixture of the aesthetic strategies of avant garde film and popular melodrama could be seen as a textual reflection of the concatenation of different worldviews and identities present in postmodern culture. *The Piano*'s textual hybridity works to bring these identity conflicts to the surface, so that audiences are able to become conscious of them and react emotionally and intellectually to the versions of gender and feminist identity presented there.<sup>7</sup> Not only did this hybrid feminist text reflect current discursive conflicts, but it also spoke to and appealed most directly to a kind of female viewer who is hybrid herself—one with sympathy for both victim and power feminists, who uses gender essentialist concepts but also hopes to move beyond them, who desires romance but fights against patriarchy, who is wary of objectification yet can also be turned on by it, who desires to be both feminine and feminist.<sup>7</sup>

Feminist theorist Susan Bordo hopes that a combination of postmodern anti-essentialism with a continued attention to gender difference will offer a feminist theory and practice most in tune with the realities of our lives, in which "our deepest desire may be to 'transcend gender dualities'. . . . But like it or not, in our present culture, our activities are coded as 'male' or 'female' and will function as such within the prevailing system of gender-power relations" (Bordo 152). *The Piano* attempts to depict such a realistic struggle between surface and depth constructions of gender, and suggests the

value of political compromises in an era where feminism is losing popular support. The film's compromise vision soothes while still upsetting, invoking familiar old paradigms and simultaneously challenging viewers to rethink them. Viewing *The Piano* is a political experience, because it implicates each viewer in the postmodern struggle between competing "melodramatic" and "avant garde" versions of gender and feminist identity and offers a precarious balance that both comforts and destabilizes, just like real life.



### Chapter Three

#### *Northern Exposure* and its Internet Fancub: Postmodern Utopian Communities

Once one of the most popular programs on television and winner of an Emmy for Best Drama in 1991-92<sup>81</sup>, *Northern Exposure* was distinctly different television fare, and its uniqueness was the primary source of its popularity. As one reviewer noted, *Exposure's* Cicely, Alaska is a fictional space where "weird things happen. . . . where Joel could be swallowed by a whale--and meet his rabbi inside. Where Chris could hurl a piano through the air and call it art . . . . Where the radio airwaves brought ruminations about science, philosophy and the nature of humankind, democracy, and *The Call of the Wild*" (Margulies F9). Many television critics have commented that *Exposure's* demise after six seasons (1990-1995) was less surprising than the fact that this quirky, intellectual show ever commanded such a large following (Nielsen top-15 for three seasons), and that it spawned several fan clubs, including an Internet newsgroup. While "quality"<sup>82</sup> television programs aimed at affluent and educated consumers (shows such as *St. Elsewhere*, *Hill Street Blues*, and *thirtysomething*) had found a niche on the tube in the '80s, few of those shows were as committed to modernist and postmodern aesthetics and themes as was *Northern Exposure*. But it would be wrong to label *Exposure* a high cultural product, for although it has often been dubbed highbrow or postmodern because of its irony, parody, intertextuality and self-reflexivity, it also contains sentimental and romantic strategies common to popular soap operas and melodramas--a strong investment in heart and soul and the moral value of community. The ambiguous positioning of this

text requires a rethinking of existing frameworks for analyzing television and its audiences.

Studying this hybrid program gives me the chance to redress biases and blind spots in several critical traditions. Television critics tend to focus on the pleasures and politics of distinct genres (such as the soap opera, sitcom, sci-fi drama, and talk show) rather than investigating the more ambiguous politics of hybrid forms and texts such as *Exposure*. Cultural studies television critics in particular have slighted highbrow texts, preferring to analyze mass-produced lowbrow genres and their consumption by viewers with low cultural capital.<sup>83</sup> In his book *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske states that “popular culture is the culture of the subordinate and the disempowered” (5). This marked preference for studying mass-produced culture consumed by subordinate groups is a result of the Marxist (or neo-Gramscian) influence upon British cultural studies. Although these studies are extremely important, an exclusive focus on lowbrow texts and disempowered groups minimizes the diversity of television texts and viewers instead of emphasizing the full range of class groups or taste cultures to which television appeals.

While many cultural studies practitioners like John Fiske ignore texts with high cultural aesthetics in their study of television and popular culture, the majority of postmodern theorists similarly perpetuate a false dichotomy between the postmodern and the popular and end up either ignoring the television medium altogether or treating individual television texts as unworthy of notice simply because they are popular. Linda Hutcheon, for example, focuses only on high cultural texts, and dismisses television as

“tangential” to postmodernism: “most television, in its unproblematized reliance on realist narrative and transparent representational conventions, is pure commodified complicity, without the critique needed to define the postmodern paradox [of complicitous critique]” (10). I will be arguing, counter to Hutcheon, that *Northern Exposure* and sentimental postmodernism in general offer precisely that--a form of complicitous critique. The existence of programs like *Northern Exposure* also suggests that Fredric Jameson should rethink his dismissal of affective, depth-model texts as merely “residual” products of realism or melodrama, outside of the sphere of postmodernism. As Lawrence Grossberg and Angela McRobbie argue, we must take up the challenge of addressing how postmodern aesthetics and sensibilities have been explored and transformed by popular culture.<sup>84</sup> In contrast to Jameson who ignores television as a throwback to historically anterior aesthetic practices, Jean Baudrillard focuses on the postmodern qualities of the medium as a whole--its flow and fragmentation, and its creation of a “hyperreal,” image-saturated space. However, because Baudrillard-influenced critics emphasize the “medium over the message” (Seiter et al, 9), they rarely treat individual television programs as postmodern texts in their own right, as I aim to do.<sup>85</sup>

This lack of attention to the narrative and aesthetic strategies of particular television texts is a central problem in television research. Jackie Stacey notes that “television studies have tended to privilege the context over the text” (35) and have been dominated by audience research in the fields of communications and cultural studies. The fact that few critics study the formal strategies of television programs perpetuates an

elitist belief that television texts are not worthy of intellectual scrutiny.<sup>86</sup> Audience studies like Dorothy Hobson's analysis of viewers of the British soap opera *Crossroads* are now being criticized for ignoring the text's role in setting up interpretive possibilities and for overemphasizing the individuality of each viewer's response (Stacey 38-39). The field of television studies clearly needs more critical work that combines an attention to both text and audience. My goal is to explicate the text's role in delimiting meaning, but also to show how viewers negotiate, and not merely "decode," those textual strategies as they actively construct political readings and weave the text into their own lives.

Important questions about the processes of consumption are raised by *Exposure's* textual bricolage of high and low cultural strategies and themes, of postmodernist aesthetics and romance, and of irony and sentimentality. I attempted to understand how viewers respond to these competing discourses and identify with the text by conducting a study with members of the Internet fan club, alt.tv.northern-exp. My research consisted of reading all the newsgroup posts for a one-year period from 1994-95 (and intermittently after the show's cancellation), and analyzing the responses of forty-four newsgroup readers who completed my detailed questionnaire. My first impulse was to consider that the show might be doubly or multiply coded for different taste cultures--for the librarians as well as the soap opera fans--and that each group might be ignoring major strands of the program. But my survey indicated that these individual fans belong to several seemingly distinct taste cultures at once and thus can not be neatly classified. This finding challenges Pierre Bourdieu's schematic connections between taste and class, and his reduction of individuals to a single class, taste, or mode of identification with texts

(distance vs. engagement).<sup>87</sup> My group's taste "identities" were hybrid (tv-junkie librarians), and their response to the program was a complex combination of intellectual appreciation and intensely emotional engagement. While I found that my group was homogeneous in class terms--almost all were middle class with high cultural capital, thus fitting the demographics for "quality" television--they were not merely attracted to the show for its arty aesthetics and thought-provoking writing, but rather for its particular blend of elitism and populism, and for its ability to make them feel as well as think. Alt.tv.northern-exp offered me an excellent opportunity to study a group whose existence is often ignored by audience researchers--well-educated viewers with high cultural capital who are nonetheless devoted to popular culture and accept many of its sentimental, depth-model values.

Not only did my audience research suggest the need to rethink a class-stratified theory of taste cultures, but it also showed that a narrow sense of identity politics would not work to explain this group's identifications. Their responses challenged the common conflation of identity with identification, since the majority of them did not identify primarily with those characters who shared their subject positions. The identification process was also influenced by the fact that gender, religious, and racial difference are major themes on *Northern Exposure*. The text's treatment of these issues vacillates between an assertion of group difference common both to identity politics and melodramatic popular texts, and a postmodern deconstruction of such categories by aggressively and humorously overturning stereotypes. This program's ambivalent treatment of subjectivity encouraged viewers to respect difference, but not to reify it.

Although the program often focuses on narratives about identity, it is even more intensely concerned with the issue of community, of uniting disparate individuals into a harmonious democratic unit. This issue also marks a crisis point for postmodern political theorists, who are concerned about the lack of utopian desire and communitarian feeling in postmodern societies. While the program's treatment of identity invokes both the sentimental pleasures of recognition (identity politics) as well as a postmodern critique of essentialism, *Northern Exposure*'s presentation of an ideal multicultural community also encompasses seemingly opposed desires and ideologies--both the emotional comfort of humanist and Enlightenment utopian myths as well as a rigorous deconstruction of the universalism of modernist communitarianism. By uniting a sentimental, humanist faith in community with a criticism of the traditional means of achieving such modernist utopias, the program offers viewers a postmodern political vision of democracy that rejects the nihilistic strands of post-structuralism. *Northern Exposure*'s neo-liberal political vision is what attracted many of these viewers to the text. Instead of identifying with this popular text primarily because they recognized their own identities on display (as many critics of mass culture would have us believe), they in fact identified much more consciously with its progressive utopian politics and postmodern pluralist ideology. Their identification process was thus consciously ideological, a mode of involvement usually attributed only to elite consumers of high cultural texts. My study of this audience group threw into question the dichotomy between popular culture/emotion/engagement and high culture/reason/critical distance, because these fans' ideological connection to *Northern Exposure* was not only cerebral, but also thoroughly

sentimental; one viewer experienced “warm fuzzy feelings inside” as she contemplated the liberal political message of this postmodern utopian community. Ultimately I hope that my study of this television program and its fans will help to complicate the typical equation of postmodern high culture with subversion and sentimental popular culture with regression.

### **The Television Medium: Production and Consumption Contexts**

While I am grouping this television text along with films, a novel, and a musical as examples of “sentimental postmodernism,” I want to underscore the difference that the medium of television has made in my investigation of *Northern Exposure* and its viewers. First of all, this study differs from those on *The Piano* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* both in the type of audience group I have chosen and in my methodology for investigating their responses. Because television texts, unlike most novels and films, encourage the creation of fan clubs, I felt it was important to study an already existing fan group that could be called a “subculture” since its members influence each other’s interpretations. While my other audience groups were united solely by locality and in most cases did not know each other, alt.tv.northern-exp is an on-line community whose members meet regularly in virtual space although they live in many different states and foreign countries (including England, Croatia, Finland, and Australia). Because of the geographic dispersal of the newsgroup members, surveying their responses by questionnaire, rather than by personal interview as I did for the other groups, seemed to be the most practical and appropriate technique.

Although I chose the questionnaire method, I have attempted to heed the concerns about empiricism raised by proponents of more qualitative, ethnographic research methods. The general argument against quantitative sociological research is that multiple-choice questionnaires do not tell the whole story; they constrict the respondents by setting up leading questions and a limited range of terms and answers, they ignore viewing context, and they reduce responses to numbers, ignoring the complexity of each individual and each viewing situation.<sup>88</sup> To address some of these claims, I combined qualitative and quantitative analysis and employed both multiple-choice and open-ended questions. In response to the concern that multiple-choice surveys reveal more about the researcher's own use of discourse than that of the respondents, I followed up the more directed questions with broader ones about a similar theme, asking the respondents to answer at length in their own words. Discrepancies between my constructed choices and the respondents' own explanations were often revealing because they highlighted the way that cultural discourses affect interpretation. In her study of the influence of capitalism upon cultural discourses about romance, Eva Illouz defends the questionnaire on the grounds that the discourses it reveals are a main channel of access to hidden states: "rather than giving us insight into meaning in context and action, it gives us insight . . . into discourse about meanings" (21). My goal in using this questionnaire was not to establish empirical facts but to gain access to discursive structures and taste preferences, just as most ethnographers use interviews. In analyzing the surveys, I hoped to pay attention not only to patterns of response along social group axes, the predominant goal of quantitative sociological audience research, but also to point out any disruption of pattern



or contradiction in individual responses, as in the best kind of qualitative, ethnographic analyses.

The most frequent objection to using questionnaires has been that it does not give a researcher any access to how the text is consumed, usually in the home.<sup>89</sup> But since I was concerned with a fan culture that took place outside the home on the Internet, and whose members rarely met in person, observing viewers in their domestic arrangement would have detracted from my focus. I decided to meet them on-line as they meet each other to talk about this program, through disembodied words. Nonetheless, I did try to get some access to their viewing context by asking them questions that helped me to determine the following: their attitudes toward television; their cultural tastes; which parts of the whole series (six seasons) they had watched, since this could influence their generalizations about the show; whether their typical relationship to the show was casual or marked by intense involvement; and whether they treated it as an ephemeral text or one to be taped, saved, and treasured. I also asked questions about their participation in the newsgroup, to determine if they were peripheral or centrally involved members in this fan subculture. All of these contextual issues were directly or indirectly related to my discussion of taste cultures and identification. In addition, I have attempted to keep in mind the wider context of the television medium and its differences from film and literature, differences that influence audience identification with and interpretation of television texts.

When studying culture industries such as television, attention must be given to their specific conditions of production. No television program has a single author, and

authors of individual episodes must work in tandem with network producers. Shifts in the program content may be directly affected by network marketing strategies or fears. This diffused control makes it more difficult to attribute a politics to a whole television program, since single episodes may subtly contradict the messages of other episodes, and a program's themes or aesthetics may change over time due to market concerns. This diachronic factor is the most challenging aspect of studying television texts, for one has to decide what constitutes the text--is it the whole series, particular seasons, or individual episodes?<sup>90</sup>

I have constructed the *Northern Exposure* "text" as the sum of its parts, by focusing on a few key episodes, referring to textual moments from all six seasons, and noting the shifts in focus, politics, and aesthetics that have occurred over time.<sup>91</sup> I have tried to move back and forth from the part to the whole, remaining aware that any sense of the "whole" text is filtered through an individual viewer's perspective, including my own. Since each one of my audience members had seen different episodes (out of a total of 110), I could not ask them to interpret the same episode; instead I asked them for readings of their three favorite episodes and one they had seen recently.<sup>92</sup> Some critics may argue that the fact that each viewer is responding to a different text or texts might put into question any generalizations one could make about audience response. But it would be impossible to study audience response to serialized forms, or any television series for that matter, without accepting the fluid parameters of the text as a basic and unavoidable principle. Furthermore, my analysis focused precisely on the ways in which the viewers constructed narratives of the whole out of their partial knowledge of specific episodes;

what parts they emphasized revealed a great deal about their priorities and tastes. My focus was not so much on the whole as on the negotiation between the many contradictory or antagonistic parts.

In addition to the fluid and multiple nature of television texts, their diachronic nature--their daily or weekly appearance over a period of years--also offers a sharp contrast to film texts, influencing and perhaps intensifying audience identification with TV shows and their characters. Jane Feuer has pointed out crucial differences in the viewing conditions for television and film that affect their "metapsychology." Whereas the public and silent viewing of film leads to immobilized immersion akin to a dream state, television invites interaction and erases the boundary between the on-screen world and the home (Feuer, "Narrative Form" 104).<sup>93</sup> While television commercials disrupt the psychic fantasy that one experiences watching film and thus interfere with unconscious immersion, a viewer's identification with TV characters is enhanced by their entry into the living room on a regular basis, as they are woven into the fabric of one's private routines and experiences. *Northern Exposure* has been on the air for almost eight years (currently in syndication on the Arts & Entertainment channel<sup>94</sup>), and most of the fans grieved deeply after the CBS cancellation. One respondent summed up the group sentiment when he wrote, "I felt as if I had lost touch with an old friend that I would never hear from again." In contrast, film viewing might be described as a "one-night stand," a two-hour interaction even if viewed repeatedly, versus 110 different exposures of *Northern Exposure*. This factor seems to influence fans to discuss television characters as if they are real people, perhaps more so than they do with cinematic or

literary characters. A prominent type of audience involvement among my Internet group is one that Tamar Liebes has categorized as the “Real,” “in which characters and situations [from television] are incorporated uncritically into viewers’ lives and vice versa” (179). As Liebes notes, this type of referential engagement can coexist in individual viewers with more distanced or critical modes of involvement, which Liebes characterizes as “Ideological” and “Aesthetic,” and I also saw those kinds of identification in my group. But the intense engagement in the “Real” mode was nearly universal among this fan group, and this strikes me as not only common to the reception of popular culture, but more particularly of serial televisual forms.

One drawback of the intense engagement elicited by television is that it sometimes engenders a negative reaction among culturally literate viewers who fear being perceived as dupes glued to the tube. Ellen Seiter has noted that television watching, unlike watching films or reading books, “can be a touchy subject, precisely because of its association with a lack of education, with idleness and unemployment, and its identification as an ‘addiction’ of women and children” (“Making Distinctions” 388). Given the amounts of cultural capital among the people in my group, I wondered if some members might be harboring elitist biases against television that could influence their responses to this particular text, so I asked them to compare *Northern Exposure* to other TV shows and to list all the programs that they watch regularly. While a few denigrated TV as a whole for offering merely “ratings-generated entertainment” rather than “art,” all saw *Northern Exposure* as superior to and more original than other television programs because it encourages active and thoughtful viewing.<sup>95</sup> For example, a self-proclaimed

“diehard elitist” in the fanclub remarked on the irony of his investment in a piece of pop culture: “I put a higher value on my *Northern Exposure* video library than all the movies I’ve ever seen put together. Whoda thunk it?” The debased nature of the television medium was an important backdrop to the pride that this man and others have in being fans of *Northern Exposure*--here is a program that they are not embarrassed to watch. The elite nature of the program seems to make it safe for some fans to be emotionally moved, a type of involvement common to the experience of popular culture that might be considered threatening to highbrow viewers. What is most interesting to me about this group was that their elitism about television did not prevent them from indulging in sentimental responses and rhetoric, nor did it preclude an investment in the program’s populist themes.<sup>96</sup>

The fact that this program attracted viewers with both elite and popular tastes and ideologies is no accident, as a brief look at the production history and the program’s plot concept should suggest. *Northern Exposure* focuses on the interactions between Dr. Joel Fleischman, a native of Brooklyn, and the inhabitants of the frontier town of Cicely, Alaska, who have paid his medical school tuition in exchange for five years of his services. Conflicts ensue between East and West, male and female, city and country, and rationalism and spiritualism, but the town manages to unify its very different individuals in the spirit of cultural relativism. The other main characters include Maggie O’Connell, a feminist “bush pilot” and Joel’s sparring partner/love interest; Ed Chigliak, an innocent, Native American teenage genius who dreams of becoming the next Steven Spielberg; Maurice Minnifield, a bigoted millionaire and former-astronaut with a sensitive side;

Holling Vincoeur, rugged outdoorsman and owner of the local pub; his girlfriend/wife Shelly Tambo-Vincoeur, a former beauty queen forty years younger than Holling; Ruth-Anne Miller, the no-nonsense elderly owner of the grocery store; Marilyn Whirlwind, Joel's Native American receptionist-of-few-words who serves as a quiet oracle; and Chris Stevens, the radio station's disc jockey and an ex-con who became an artist, New-Age style preacher, and eclectic intellectual. This is not exactly a typical television ensemble cast, and nothing is television-typical about the writers' ruminations on such themes as performance art, the subjective nature of truth, the played-out possibilities of frontier, the value of literature, the nature of democracy, and the wisdom of Native American and Jewish spirituality.

At first glance the show appears to be unambiguously aimed at a "better" rather than a wider audience, an example of "narrowcasting" rather than broadcasting.<sup>97</sup> The creators of *Northern Exposure*, Joshua Brand and John Falsey, were veterans of the MTM television studio, the pioneer in "quality programming," and they had previously created *St. Elsewhere* in this vein. The creators' status as *auteurs* paved the way for reviewers to confer a similarly high status on their new program. Drawing upon their academic training for many of *Northern Exposure*'s literary references (Brand has an M.A. in English from Columbia and Falsey an M.F.A. from the Iowa Writer's Workshop<sup>98</sup>), they boasted that the show was not conceived for a "mass audience" (Kenneth Clark 3). In *Seeing through the Eighties*, Jane Feuer argues that *St. Elsewhere* should be read as a yuppie program because it "tries to interpellate an elite subject" (101) with its use of "modernist art discourse" (62), and the same could be said of *Exposure*, which targets

well-educated viewers by frequently alluding to luminaries of intellectual and literary history such as Jung, Freud, T. S. Eliot, Kierkegaard, Kant, Tocqueville, Nietzsche, Proust, Picasso, Homer, Dante, and Goethe.

However, what makes *Northern Exposure* different from '80s shows that were narrowly aimed at yuppies (e.g. *thirtysomething*) is that it aims for a more inclusionary, populist kind of address. Betsy Williams has called the program "narrowly targeted [at the affluent and educated middle class] but polyvocal" in its attempt to offer narrative elements that will attract a larger number and wider variety of consumers (152). Jim Collins has argued that other early '90s programs like *Twin Peaks* widened their net and strove for "coalition audiences" ("Television" 342). For example, *Exposure's* writers may have been trying to attract a more diverse coalition audience by including marginalized people such as Native Americans and gays and lesbians as characters, and also by extending a hand to fans of mass-market culture. Accompanying the intertextual high cultural allusions are numerous references to popular icons such as Mr. Rogers, Vanna White, Winnie the Pooh, Nancy Drew, Jimi Hendrix, Oprah, and Monty Python. And despite the creators' assertion that the show was not directed at the masses, they took care to create a premise and structure that evoked many popular mass-market formulas and genres. In structural terms, the three intertwining plot lines, which usually converge at forty minutes past the hour and are neatly resolved at the end, are akin to the structures of sitcoms and formulaic fiction and screenplays. The New-York-Jewish-doctor-in-Alaska is the familiar fish-out-of-water plot from *Green Acres* and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, combined with a nod to the medical drama. Maggie and Joel's frustrated,

opposites-attract romance is clearly a television and film cliché, recalling such familiar pairs as Sam and Diane of *Cheers*, Maddy and David of *Moonlighting*, or Hepburn and Bogart in *The African Queen* (Thompson 162). Even the frequent dream sequences and fantasy elements can be traced to soap operas and “magicoms” such as *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*. It’s unclear if this polyvocal combination of narrative strategies serves to attract a wider audience as Betsy Williams argues; it may just speak primarily to a different or newly emerging kind of middle-class postmodern consumer, one with a taste for both high and low.

The popular references noted above signal a deeper connection to the ideologies of mass-produced culture than some of this audience group would like to acknowledge, although others admitted an attraction to precisely those elements. A self-proclaimed “snob” argued that “If *Northern Exposure* had been one of those shows that mixes high quality elements with cornball material for the masses, resulting in an amiable compromise, I probably would never have bothered with it. By some divine fluke, *Northern Exposure* managed to combine all the right elements and to show one masterpiece after another.” While I agree that the program does more than merely include kitschy elements to appease lowbrow taste, I disagree with his suggestion that the result is a high-cultural product, a “masterpiece” that quotes popular culture ironically as did the modernists. I want to interrogate the effect of the mixture more closely, and to propose that there is indeed a sort of amiable compromise at work, but one that has progressive rather than merely conservative politics.



### ***Northern Exposure* as Bricolage: Romanticism Meets Postmodernism**

The program's hybridity has been remarked upon by many reviewers, but they often have in mind a narrow sense of generic bricolage.<sup>99</sup> For instance, *Northern Exposure* is both a comedy (without a laugh track) and a drama (although light). It also includes elements of the "series" structure, in that each episode operates as a tightly knit narrative unit with intertwining subplots and a strong note of closure, while it also shares elements with serials, in that the relationships among the characters develop over time, and the characters acknowledge their history by referring to earlier episodes and "backstory." Although the program's hybridity in terms of television genres is important, I propose that it offers a much more complex mixture of aesthetics, generic forms, ideologies, and larger cultural sensibilities, a bricolage eliciting various types of viewer identification that cannot simply be predicted by a comedy/drama or series/serial bifurcation. *Exposure* employs many cultural strategies that would seem to be at odds, such as sentimentality and irony/parody, low and high cultural narrative patterns and aesthetics, depth and surface models of representation, essentialism and anti-essentialism. The opposition could roughly be described as a popular/anti-popular split, or "romantic humanist" versus "high cultural postmodernist," and this hybridity applies to content and form, thematics and aesthetics, and to the way that each pole constructs the text/viewer relationship.

*Northern Exposure* has been both heralded and criticized by reviewers for its status as a "quirky" text, a vague term that merely gestures towards its adoption of postmodern tropes and its difference from a "realist" aesthetic.<sup>100</sup> In order to talk about

the postmodern quality of this television narrative, it must first be acknowledged that television bears a different relationship to the cultural trajectory of realism-modernism-postmodernism found in literature and art circles. For as Jim Collins and Jane Feuer have pointed out, “postmodern television is almost an oxymoron, because there was no modernist television” since the commodified medium was often deemed the “great other of [high cultural] modernism” (Feuer, *Seeing* 6). Modernist aesthetic discourse arose for the first time in ‘80s television shows such as *thirtysomething*, but these programs were also keenly aware of their own commodification, which the presence of commercials makes plain. Having skipped over a high modernist phase in which the “goals of art and commerce are opposed ideologically” (Feuer, *Seeing* 95), network television employs modernist aesthetics with a postmodern twist, accepting complicity with the commercial imperative to appeal to popular desires and pocketbooks. For example, despite the high art discourse that *Northern Exposure* invokes, it also spawned a successful commercial market of books, videos, CD’s and memorabilia.<sup>101</sup>

One of *Exposure*’s most visible “high art” characteristics is its use of ironic juxtapositions and incongruities, a common feature of both modernist and postmodernist literature. In one episode’s opening shot, Maurice and his caddy Ed are playing golf in an apparently isolated, rugged landscape, but the camera cuts away to reveal that they are merely steps away from a lavish country club that would make Palm Springs proud. Hayden, a loafer and a petty thief in town, surprises us at the local cotillion ball with his mastery of the rules of etiquette. The episode “The Graduate,” in which Chris attempts to pass his M.A. oral exam in English literature and defend his deconstructionist thesis,

drips with irony that only an academic could fully appreciate. Troubled by Roland Barthes' classic post-structuralist essay "The Death of the Author," Chris dreams of a trench warfare sequence in which Shakespeare is slaughtered while uttering the last words of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. All of this irony requires a viewer to think actively about the juxtapositions in order to appreciate the humor or social critique of the scene. By encouraging a feeling of superiority among those who "get" the subtle message, irony also serves an anti-populist function. Communicating through the medium of irony also works to separate the viewer from the on-screen world, to allow an identification with the clever writers rather than merely the characters, and to make a viewer aware of the text as a fictional construct.

A tactic even more disruptive of popular immersion in a text is the Brechtian alienation effect, which has been watered down to a postmodern kind of clever self-reflexivity in many recent television shows. In "War and Peace," Maurice and a visiting Russian are engaged in a duel when Joel breaks the frame and flatters the audience for being too savvy to accept this implausible plot. The actors start over with the "fifth version of the script," thus calling attention to its fictionality. Although frame-breaking moments like this disappeared after the show's more experimental early seasons, a more subtle self-reflexivity remained. Jim Collins argues that postmodern televisual self-reflexivity "does not revolve around the problems of self-expression experienced by the anguished creative artist so ubiquitous in modernism" but instead focuses on the ways television circulates and is valued or devalued in our culture ("Television" 335). One episode of *Northern Exposure*, in which Shelly becomes addicted to her satellite dish,

comments ironically on the stupefying properties of television. After a spending spree on the Home Shopping channel, Shelly finally kicks the habit and turns off her tube, rejecting the global village for her own locality, and at that moment the viewer's screen also cuts to black, implying ironically that *Northern Exposure* itself might be sucking us into the marketplace and drawing us too far away from our own local worlds. A risky move for a network television program to make, this self-reflexive moment simultaneously admits the show's complicity with commercialism while also offering a critique of the technologies of postmodern capitalism. Although Linda Hutcheon dismisses television, here is a perfect example of her theory of postmodernism as "complicitous critique."

While *Exposure* occasionally employs the inward self-reflexive glance, another postmodern characteristic is its obsession with intertextuality. Gestures to the cultural world beyond this text occur in every episode and are usually made by philosopher-artist Chris Stevens, acting as a kind of narrator or Greek chorus who speaks to Cicely and to us on his radio show. Like Warhol's Pop Art and postmodern novels by DeLillo and Pynchon, the *Exposure* scripts draw on intertexts from both high art and media culture. While many television programs refer to popular television and film icons, very few allude to T.S. Eliot in the same breath as *Leave It to Beaver* and therefore require such wide ranging cultural literacy of their audience. One of the fanclub's favorite episodes, in which Chris flings a piano as performance art, perfectly illustrates the program's intertextual spirit and its relationship to postmodern parody and pastiche. Entitled "Burning down the House,"<sup>102</sup> the episode is catalyzed by a visit from Maggie's mother,

who informs Maggie that she is divorcing her father and accidentally burns down Maggie's house, a symbol of the nuclear family. In a veiled reference to the *Wizard of Oz* and Dorothy's familial conflict with Auntie Em at home in Kansas (Taylor and Upchurch 83), the only things that survive the blaze unscorched are the green (not red) pumps belonging to Maggie's mother, a figurative wicked witch.

Meanwhile, Chris has decided to create, in the vein of a religious sacrifice, a piece of performance art using a giant catapult, but is distressed to learn that his idea of flinging a cow has already been carried out in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, itself a parody of the Arthurian legends. This moment also recalls Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* in a humorous way but shows our distance from the modernist belief in the pursuit of pure originality. At first Chris cries in modernist angst that "repetition is the death of art," but he realizes that in our postmodern media world, everything has already been done and said, so he must search for creativity through recycling as did Andy Warhol. Chris decides to reenact Monty Python's fling but with a twist--he flings a piece of Maggie's charred piano instead and pays homage to the past while also moving on into the future. As he builds anew out of the ashes, Chris plays one last song on the piano, "As Time Goes By" from *Casablanca*, a song that furthers calls attention to history and temporal layering. The sublime moment of the fling is accompanied by the traditional waltz "The Blue Danube" but includes match cuts that recall the opening sequence of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Crawford 21), thus implicitly merging the past and future together in a postmodern bricolage.

This episode thus explicitly addresses the production of art in a postmodern

world, with Chris' postmodern art serving as a mirror for the recycling of past culture that the writers themselves enact with their wide-ranging allusions. By calling attention to the cultural plots that we have inherited, the series both critiques and respects those traditions; Hutcheon calls this doubleness and ambivalence a constitutive feature of postmodern parody which "uses the reappropriated forms of the past to speak to a society from within the values and history of that society, while still questioning it" (12).<sup>103</sup> However, critics such as Betsy Williams and Iain Crawford have noted that *Exposure* reveres its historical antecedents, and they argue that its intertextuality lacks the critical edge of postmodern parody, because it works "precisely *not* to question, disrupt and destabilize. . . [but] to find answers, restore order" (Crawford 15).<sup>104</sup> While Crawford's analysis rightly highlights the program's empathy for past traditions, he seems to underestimate the importance of the distance created by irony, which allows audiences the space to reevaluate the past. Empathy and irony work hand in hand in this sentimental postmodernist text.

While most of the intertextual moments on the program show respect for past traditions and thus might not even be considered parodic, some moments of barbed and critical parody are visible. The fifth episode included a spoof of *Twin Peaks*, complete with references to coffee and cherry pie and a nonsensical visit to Snoqualmie Falls with eerie music playing in the background. Since *Exposure* was often compared to *Peaks*, Falsey and Brand strove to emphasize their differences, portraying the David Lynch drama as too self-absorbed. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, the writers also parodied typical romance conventions, possibly to thwart the growing public desire for a

romance between Maggie and Joel. In season four they allowed the couple to have sex by literally “rolling in the hay” of a barn, but de-romanticized the encounter by emphasizing lust over love and making Joel’s nose, which Maggie had broken, appear hideously unattractive. The scene parodies old movies in which violence creates desire and then love, revealing this plot to be ludicrously unrealistic.

Despite these more direct parodies of both old and new media forms, *Northern Exposure* tends to offer a gentler merging of tradition and the modernist desire for the new that is more consistent with its “New Age” spirit, its reworking of Native American earth-worship for use in a late-capitalist postmodern society. Chris’ artistic practices strive for a similar old/new synthesis and could be seen as examples of the postmodern art that Charles Jencks defines as both “a continuation of Modernism and its transcendence” (65), a recombination of tradition and the shock of the new. For example, at the same time that Chris is a performance artist, flinging pianos and trying to “get inside of electricity” by making himself a human magnet, he also holds dear the lessons learned from earlier artistic traditions, as do the show’s writers. He values the modernist artist’s creed of “process over product” and pays homage to Brancusi’s abstract “Bird in Space” with his “minimalist portrait” of a woman as a dustmite. Yet he reacts against the high modernist divorce between art and life by reenacting the catapult experiment, but this time flinging the body of his dead friend into a lake in lieu of burial. Chris’ art works transcend modernism while respecting abstraction, and transcend realism while retaining an interest in “reality” and in the metaphysical meanings of life, since he sees his art as an extension of his spiritual calling as a man of the cloth.

Chris' ambivalent response to realism--his desire to respect as well as question or widen a traditional sense of reality--is shared by the show's writers in their use of conventions of magic realism made famous by Latin American novelists. The program urges us to entertain the possibility that Maggie might indeed be cursed, because five of her boyfriends have died from both mundane and bizarre causes, the most recent a victim of a satellite crashing to earth. When Rick the satellite victim gets reincarnated as a dog, the writers tweak a viewer's sense of the rational and the real even more aggressively. Plotlines such as Ed's sleep flying and Maggie's romance with Arthur the bear/man explore a Native American sense of the mystical nature of reality and urge us to expand our horizons to admit the possibility of ghosts and reincarnation. Although fantasy sequences have been common in soap operas, the writers instead cite postmodern writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez as their inspirational models; in an episode called "Mister Sandman" in which the aurora borealis causes the townspeople to swap dreams, Chris Stevens acknowledges that the plot was stolen from *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. These moments of magical realism are very different from fantasies and dream sequences (also frequent on the program) because they are accepted as real happenings by the show's characters, and thus more thoroughly challenge a viewer's notions of reality as grounded in the empirical world.

The "Mister Sandman" episode is also significant because it exemplifies the program's attempt to loosen up rigid identities in favor of a more fluid postmodern sense of subjectivity; if dreams are no longer imprisoned in a single psyche, the boundary between self and other is blurred. In that episode, gay B&B owners Ron and Erick



experience the foot-fetish dreams of the homophobic Maurice, and the swap enables Maurice to accept his own “perversions” and extend a peace offering to the gay couple. The writers frequently use the character of Maurice to deconstruct rigid identities because he embodies seemingly incompatible stereotypes at once. This homophobic, macho astronaut and former marine is also an aesthete and a sentimental fan of opera and show tunes, causing Ron and Erick to mistake him for “one of us.” An additional irony is that his first name recalls E. M. Forster’s novel about gay sexuality. *Northern Exposure* frequently juxtaposes ironic incongruities in its characterizations to shatter our expectations that identity will be unitary and fixed. Perhaps the most original character on the program is Adam, a fascinating amalgam of backwoods hermit (mistaken for Big Foot), gourmet chef, delusional former POW, urbane misanthrope, and loving husband and father. Although Adam’s wife Eve professes to be a Christian Scientist, she is nonetheless an extreme hypochondriac who attempts to kidnap Dr. Fleishman to be her personal physician. The fact that the writers chose to name these two incongruous oddballs after the original Biblical couple makes plain their project to shatter archetypes often found in melodrama and other low cultural television forms.

Despite *Northern Exposure*’s alliance with postmodern techniques of parody, self-reflexivity and deconstruction, one can also trace its strong connections to depth-model popular cultural tropes, and to romantic, sentimental, melodramatic, and humanist values. For example, the issue of identity is not always given a post-structuralist treatment, for gender and racial differences are explored, respected, and occasionally essentialized, even though it is usually assumed that these identities are cultural rather than biologically

ordained. Native American and feminine difference is celebrated in the episode “Survival of the Species.” In this episode, Maggie finds Indian women’s artifacts buried in her yard, fends off an aggressive attempt by the men of the town to use the archeological dig for their own profit, and ends up rallying other women to rebury the artifacts and prevent them from being tainted by white male greed. This episode appears to sentimentalize a 1970s conception of female difference, as does the one depicting Shelly’s baby shower, which asserts that women’s maternal urges are biological and rejects Chris’ attempt to “become a woman” in spirit after being inspired by Simone de Beauvoir’s constructionist dictum “a woman is made, not born.”

While the show is only occasionally essentialist in its presentation of gender identity, its writers almost always espouse a depth-model belief that identity is linked to an inner psyche, that the unconscious serves as a key to our subjectivities and even our souls. Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic concepts, such as the depth models of repression and the unconscious, often serve as touchstones on the program and thus contribute to a notion of deep and immutable identity often found in melodramas. Numerous episodes include dream sequences that reveal repressed thoughts and inner conflicts, a common element of soap operas. This continued emphasis on emotional psychic states encourages viewers to consider the self as more than just an intelligent rational mind, but also a feeling heart and a believing soul. Not only does the program interpellate an elite, cerebral subject, but it also speaks to the emotions of the “common man,” the implied audience of popular culture.

A traditional belief in the essence of the soul pervades the show, which many

praised for its respectful and moving treatment of many spiritual traditions (Judaism, Catholicism, Native American myths, and Asiatic religions). The heightened moral register of *Northern Exposure* is similar to the genre of melodrama, which seeks plenitude and presence (Gledhill "Melodramatic" 30) and "refuse[s] to allow that the world has been completely drained of transcendence" (Brooks 22). One of the main conflicts of the program is the one between Joel's "faith" in the rational powers of medicine and science and a more irrational, emotional, and intuitive religious faith, one that Joel learns from the Native Americans to respect over time, spiritualizing his own practice of Judaism beyond a more limited sense of Jewishness as a cultural or racial identity. The moment when Joel breaks his Yom Kippur fast while eating an orange alone on a mountaintop is a perfect example of the romantic sense of the sublime as a transcendent experience. At the end of the last season, this once urbane and cynical New Yorker ends up retreating to a primitive Tlingit village, practicing native healing arts, and living a monk-like existence that recalls Thoreau on Walden Pond. On *Northern Exposure*, the heart and soul definitely win out over an Enlightenment faith in the mind, but this strike against Enlightenment rationalism is not made solely from a postmodern philosophical perspective, but also from an earlier romantic transcendentalist perspective which still retained a belief in metaphysical truths.

The program's faith in God evokes a romantic, pre-postmodern spirit that also carries with it a pastoral sensibility, the belief that humans and the natural world should be seen as one. In one episode, the townspeople rally against cutting down an ancient tree because of the Native American belief that all living beings have souls (and Chris throws

in a reference to Heidegger's sense of "Being" as another form of essence to be respected). In addition to this "tree hugging" episode, the program's romantic, ecological organicism even extends to embracing dust mites which feed on human skin as evidence that we are all part of a giant, pulsating ecosystem. A common theme of the program, harkening back to the Romantic poets, is the treatment of nature as the locus of the sublime, offering a refuge from the industrialized city and the hubris and disconnectedness of city dwellers represented by Joel. The setting of the program in the frontier town of Cicely, Alaska is therefore absolutely essential to the spirit of the program. One *Commonweal* reviewer even compared *Northern Exposure*'s pastoral sensibility to that of Shakespeare: "Cicely, in other words, like all great pastoral, is a myth that knows it's a myth . . . reminding us that this ideal little place can't be real; and, by the same token, must be real, because we all dream it so desperately" (McConnell 19). Despite McConnell's desire to elevate the program to the level of Shakespeare, the fact that the show offers idealistic, pastoral myths links it to popular culture as well (e.g. Westerns).

The connection to Shakespeare is also apt because *Northern Exposure* often embraces a humanist value system. Unlike many moments of postmodern culture, which seek to expose the pettiness and violence of humanity, *Exposure* seeks to dignify and ennoble people in humanist fashion even though its multiculturalism also works to overturn the universalist model of "mankind." On *Northern Exposure*, there is goodness in all Cicelians, even bigoted capitalists such as Maurice Minnifield, and as one newsgroup member noted, "violence is rarely a part of Cicelian life, unlike [the similarly

postmodern programs] *Twin Peaks* and *Picket Fences*.” The program is essentially traditional in its emphasis on basic humanist values such as love, charity, good will, honesty, faith, pacifism, patriotism, self-reliance, and respect for tradition. Another traditional humanist value that the program embraces is the importance of community, which it weds to a romantic investment in the individual. Even though the show is set on the frontier and Cicely is full of free spirits who have escaped the shackles of their original communities, in Cicely they are able to remake a utopian community that allows individual difference. There is no modernist alienation here. Almost every episode offers an example of the communitarian spirit, as we witness feasts, dances, dinner parties, town meetings, and everyone hanging out at the Brick pub. Many episodes end on a note of communal harmony, such as when the townspeople gather to “experience” many of Chris’ sculptures. My questionnaire respondents cited the sense of community as one of their favorite aspects of the program, and one said that the show made him feel “excited, happy and secure” like a kid going to his grandparents’ house for Christmas. In many ways, *Exposure* shares the life-affirming warmth of *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie*, both set in simpler, idyllic rural communities of the past.

*Northern Exposure* also connects its humanist mythology of community harmony to another sentimental myth of popular culture--that of the monogamous, loving couple as the bedrock of society. Although the writers initially mocked romantic television dialogue, romance came to play an increasingly central role in the series, and the heterosexual relationships (Shelly and Holling, Ruth Anne and Walt, Joel and Maggie, and later Chris and Maggie) were presented with an even greater degree of sentimentality

in the last few seasons. One episode from season five closed with a muted shot of Holling caressing his pregnant wife's abdomen, and another ended with Maggie's discovery that Joel fit comfortably in her new chair, both literally and figuratively. We even learn that the town was founded by a romantic monogamous couple, albeit a lesbian one (Cicely and Roslyn). The final montage of the series' finale offered shots of all the residents happily coupled up, and some newsgroup members complained about this seemingly conservative closure in a show that often strove to defy convention. I would argue that *Northern Exposure* was always both conventional and transgressive at once, just like the figure of the lesbian "married" couple (the town's founders).

As in Hollywood melodramas, *Northern Exposure*'s poignant happy endings usually resolve any tensions raised during the hour, and this kind of narrative closure is often regarded as ideologically conservative. The program clearly satisfies a desire for sentimentality and comforting resolutions among some of its newsgroup fans, who often post messages about their emotional responses, which include many tears of joy, peace, contentment and optimism. As one respondent put it, "I feel a peaceful sense of the world being integrated and holding together." In her article "Narrative Form in American Network Television," Jane Feuer has argued that the neat closure of sitcoms marks them as conservative structures, while melodramatic serials allow disintegration and an ambiguous non-resolution of problems that she deems a progressive strategy. Tania Modleski, in *Loving with a Vengeance*, has also praised the open-endedness of soap operas for being a truer reflection of the real lives of women. *Northern Exposure*'s neat resolutions to antagonism between the characters are similar to those of situation comedy

or film melodramas, but the program also allows that antagonism to resurface and be reexamined in subsequent episodes (like a serial) in a way that destabilizes facile order. Employing the popular forms of both the serial and the series may result in a kind of ideological balancing act in *Exposure*, but I would prefer to avoid correlating a particular form or mixture of forms with an ideology as Feuer does. Just as not all popular texts are retrograde, neither does sentimental closure always serve a conservative function. For example, I will be arguing later in the chapter that the program's happy endings offer utopian visions of harmony that may have subversive potential.

As I have been suggesting, *Northern Exposure* is a rigorously hybrid fictional universe, with allegiances to avant garde and postmodern forms, as well as to melodrama, humanism, and transcendental romanticism. More importantly, the writers rarely underscore potential conflict between these seemingly opposed value systems and instead let them rest side by side, for the viewers to negotiate on their own. A frequent strategy is an ironic rendering of traditional, humanist themes through a non-traditional, postmodern aesthetic lens. For example, in the episode "Fish Story," the writers seem to applaud Holling when he rejects Chris' postmodern artistic values (process over product) and embraces the "realism" of kitschy painting-by-numbers. Yet at the same time the whole episode offers a meta-critique of the connect-the-dots plotlines of realistic television programs, by including a magical plot in which Joel (as Jonah) finds himself conversing with his rabbi in the belly of a large fish. In "The Graduate" episode about Chris' M.A. orals, Chris renounces his thesis, which deconstructed the poem "Casey at the Bat," and chooses instead to enact the poem, to pay homage to the metaphysical meaning and

“feeling” of literature as traditional humanists do. In Chris’ reenactment, it is the deconstructionist examiner who “strikes out.”<sup>105</sup> Even though this episode appears to champion essences and sentimentality at the expense of deconstruction, it nonetheless uses irony and intertextual parody (via the “death of the author” dream) in order to make its point, thus supporting postmodern aesthetic values even as it appears to denounce them in the diegesis.

This layered strategy allows the viewer to be emotionally engaged and empathetic to the character’s lives while also being critically distanced from the narrative due to the parody and irony. *Northern Exposure* promotes viewer involvement at both of these levels, which have been described by Tamar Liebes as referential versus constructional forms of viewing. As I noted earlier, Liebes defines the “Real” as a type of referential engagement, common to the experience of popular culture, in which viewers identify with the characters and incorporate them into their own lives. Two constructional modes of involvement are the Ideological and the Aesthetic, which indicate a critically distanced viewpoint and sophisticated understanding of the writers’ political, artistic, and meta-critical goals (Liebes 179). In “Television and Postmodernism,” Jim Collins has argued that ground-breaking postmodern shows such as *Twin Peaks* and *Northern Exposure* have encouraged an oscillation on the part of the viewer between the emotional, referential involvement of popular culture and the ironic detachment promoted by the avant garde, but he also points out that soap operas have also begun to encourage such an oscillation, although to a lesser extent. Collins proposes that the television medium’s bricolage of signs and styles, and the rapid changes in viewing posture made possible by surfing



through cable channels, have helped to break down boundaries within individual texts, leading to the development that “viewing perspectives are no longer mutually exclusive, but set in perpetual alternation” (“Television” 348). A new juxtaposition of modes of viewing that were once rigidly separated may be a byproduct of postmodern culture’s relaxing of the boundaries between high and low, but it also may be encouraged by or reflect new understandings of postmodern subjectivity as fluid.

*Northern Exposure*’s oscillation between high and low, romanticism and postmodernism, and empathy and irony was clearly a crucial reason that many of the newsgroup members became fans of the show. When one newsgroup member dubbed the program a “magical realism soap opera” and a thinking person’s weepie, little controversy was sparked. The fans’ attachment to a mixture of equal parts became even clearer in the last season, when they loudly complained that the program seemed to be abandoning its high cultural frame of reference and lapsing into a clichéd melodrama or soap opera, a sort of “*thirtysomething* lite.” Many were particularly saddened that Chris was no longer being employed as a narrator of the intellectual themes of the program, and thus the intertextual references to philosophers, writers, and artists were considerably lessened. Although many factors contributed to *Northern Exposure*’s cancellation, in particular the departure of Rob Morrow (Joel), the fact that the program appeared to be “plummeting from its High Mountain” in the eyes of a former die-hard fan could have led to a decline in its ratings. One man summed up the general newsgroup sentiment about season six when he wrote (with an implied sigh), “back to reading books.” What is most interesting to me about this program is that it succeeded, for most of its run, in breaking

down the perceived cultural dichotomy between books and television, between avid highbrow readers and lowbrow tv-junkies. Studying *Northern Exposure* and its viewers enables me to question many preconceived assumptions about television viewers and the taste cultures to which they belong.

### **The Influence of Class and Gender upon Taste Cultures**

I would now like to turn to an investigation of the audience group (the newsgroup posters and the forty-four questionnaire respondents), to examine how these individuals negotiated this mixture of cultural codes and how demographic factors, such as class and gender, might have contributed to their taste preferences. For example, I initially hypothesized that: a) women might be more strongly attracted to the show's romantic elements, and b) that people of a higher class bracket and with the most formal education would be more elite in their tastes (as Pierre Bourdieu has supposed), watching the show for its intertextuality or postmodern aesthetics rather than for its populist, melodramatic, and humanist values. Neither of these assumptions turned out to be unequivocally true. The majority of the group members appeared to have no preference for either the high or low cultural aspects of the program, and were involved in the program on the levels of the Real, Ideological, and Aesthetic in relatively equal degrees.

Almost all of my questionnaire respondents were middle class (3 upper-middle, 30 middle, 10 lower-middle class) and very well educated (56% had done graduate work), but they were much less critical of mass cultural strategies than their demographics would suggest.<sup>106</sup> Only a small percentage of the group (18%) watched the show solely for its

high cultural references and tropes and described their engagement mainly in terms of Aesthetic or Ideological involvement, while 14% were attracted mainly by the depth culture and sentimental elements common to melodramas and traditional realist texts, and responded to the text primarily at the referential level of the “Real” rather than to its ideology or aesthetics. The majority (68%) cited a balanced mixture of high and low, constructional and referential types of response, postmodern irony and humanist or depth-cultural themes such as community, spirituality, and romance. Clearly, the existence of deconstructionist irony did not undermine the audience’s emotional investments in identity and humanism, as postmodern theorists would have us believe. One fan whose own tastes are more highbrow aptly described the hybrid forms of investment that he observed on the newsgroup: “fans are very conscious of the writers and whether or not they do a good job with a particular script or character development. But in the next paragraph of a post, almost as if in the same breath, a fan will talk about a character as if he/she was real, and as if the story was real life unfolding. To be that conscious of the hands of the puppet master and also able to suspend disbelief, and all so quickly, is surprising to me.”

Among the smaller percentage of fans who did fall into distinct highbrow or lowbrow taste categories, there did seem to be some correlation between their class status and their taste preferences. All eight viewers who expressed predominantly highbrow tastes and disdained the sentimental aspects of the show were middle to upper-middle class (professional-managerial), and had earned advanced degrees or were graduate/professional students. The high cultural capital and status indicated by many of

their actual and prospective professions (professors, doctors, ministers, consultants, and lawyers), and the influence of their academic training in critical and textual analysis, might have led to their elitist cultural tastes and their rationalist reactions against sentimentality and romance. For example, an Episcopalian priest who is well schooled in philosophy was annoyed by the newsgroup's "investment in the romantic/erotic relationships" of the characters, and found this form of "Real" involvement to be "a bit immature." However, since the majority of the forty-four respondents also were middle class and had gone to graduate school, it is difficult to conclude that educational level or a general middle-class income are the primary causes of their anti-popular tastes. A more significant difference is that their professions were of a slightly higher intellectual status than the rest of the group. Among these fans, cultural capital and status of one's profession appear to have at least some impact upon taste (although the correlation is not as clear-cut as Bourdieu implies) and might be better predictors of one's tastes than a Marxist economic form of class designation or even educational level would be, since some degrees obviously confer more cultural capital and prestige.

A similar correlation between cultural capital and taste could be found among the six viewers in my group with primarily lowbrow taste, who expressed interest only in the program's humanist values and its sentimental and romantic content, treating it much like a soap opera. They discussed the characters as if they were real (e.g., "the cast are my friends"), related the program to their own lives (e.g., "Shelly is just like me when I was her age"), and rarely commented upon its ideology or aesthetic construction, except to praise the comforting happy endings. Five of these six viewers were lower-middle class,

only one had received a B.A., and four of them were undergraduates (the only undergraduates in the survey) at non-prestigious universities, and had not yet acquired a significant amount of cultural capital. The other television programs that they watched were quite different from those listed by the highbrow group, and included *The Jerry Springer Show*, *America's Funniest Home Videos*, *Home Improvement*, *Married with Children*, and many different soap operas. However, in order to avoid an overly hasty equation between a lack of advanced education and lowbrow taste, I should emphasize that four out of the ten lower-middle-class people in the survey were in fact attracted to the intellectual elements of the program, as was the only working-class member of the group, who noted that he enjoyed the philosophical references, irony, and postmodern themes.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, while educational background and professional status appeared to influence the tastes of these two extreme groups (highbrow and lowbrow), a large number of the individuals in my group who exhibited these particular class characteristics did not necessarily conform to such narrow and predictable tastes.

I propose that there is a larger cultural significance to the fact that the majority (68%) of the viewers expressed allegiance not to a distinct camp, but to many taste communities at once. These highly educated cultural elites did not conform to the expectation, reinforced by Pierre Bourdieu, that their tastes would be predominantly highbrow, favoring critical distance and intellectual appreciation. For example, one fan who is a doctoral student in physics at Stanford professes elitist tastes ("most TV is stupid, really stupid") and responds to the program in a constructional "Aesthetic" way, by appreciating allegory and metaphor and transcribing insightful bits of dialogue to think

about more critically. On the other hand, he is also intensely emotional about the program's communitarian values and desires sentimental closure, enjoying the way that *Northern Exposure* makes everything "come out OK in the end." Even more disruptive of simplistic categories of audience taste were the responses of one 72-year-old female textbook editor with an M.S. in Educational Philosophy. While her educational background fits in with the fact that she watches "lots of PBS," she also tunes in to *All My Children*, *General Hospital*, and was a fan of the original *Star Trek*. Although she is emotionally drawn by the romance plots and the spiritual themes, she also finds Chris' intellectual monologues and the magical disruptions of traditional realism to be highlights of the program. She commented that she loved Chris for his "lack of cynicism despite his knowledge," and this phrase aptly describes the larger audience that this program attracts—people whose critical edge does not negate sentimental attachments, and whose education does not alienate them from popular pleasures. Unlike middlebrow taste, which often avoids both the extremes of high and lowbrow culture in favor of a diluted middle ground, these viewers' tastes encompass both extremes simultaneously and do not reflect much anxiety about the mixing.

The fact that they are much less hostile to the popular and depth-model elements of the program than their cultural capital and educational backgrounds would predict is an important development which may have been influenced by multiple factors, including television's erosion of many cultural boundaries that were once entrenched. Three-quarters of the survey group are less than forty years old, and 50% are under 30, and thus grew up in a culture saturated by television, a major democratizing force that has made

information and culture of all kinds, from opera to soap opera, accessible and available to all classes.<sup>108</sup> Charles Jencks has argued that the explosion of choices in our postmodern media culture has led to the pluralization and “fragmentation of taste cultures” and to a taste for heterogeneity itself (49). In this pluralized culture, professing a taste for popular culture no longer stains one as lower class or uncultured; rather it is a sign of “hipness” that has even infiltrated the ivory towers of the academy, where professors of popular culture are now routinely granted tenure. The academic popularity of cultural studies may have further reduced the intellectual disdain for popular taste and lessened the belief in television’s “downward pull.”

I found it telling that even though the respondents knew their questionnaires would be read by an academic, they made surprisingly few attempts to impress me with their knowledge of high culture or to denigrate the practice of watching television, a defensive strategy that Ellen Seiter has observed among viewers from lower-class backgrounds.<sup>109</sup> Perhaps my respondents freely admitted a taste for sentimentality and did not feel the need to show off because I had also asked them to list their educational degrees, which served as proof of their cultural capital. Having already acquired status through education, they could afford to go slumming culturally and did not need to rehearse their knowledge to prove their status. Unlike the middlebrow readers that Janice Radway describes as class-climbers eschewing mass culture in the hopes of improving themselves, these mixed-taste fans of *Northern Exposure* do not fear contamination by the “bad taste” associated with the working or lower-middle classes.<sup>110</sup> Although class stratification is still an important part of the American social fabric, I hypothesize that

class may now bear less relationship to taste cultures than it did in the France described by Bourdieu, or the mid-20th-century America that Radway has studied, possibly because a larger percentage of American adults now receive college educations,<sup>111</sup> and many barriers to cultural capital have been lifted by television and middlebrow cultural institutions.<sup>112</sup> It seems significant that the only person who admitted any shame about his engagement in popular culture and *Northern Exposure* was not American, but a Finnish student who tried to repress his emotions after he “found out how stupid it is to be so keen on something that comes out of TV.”

This male respondent’s shame about his emotional investment in a television text could be linked not only to class concerns but also to a fear of the feminizing effects of mass culture. Ellen Seiter has examined such a “denigration of women as an ego-defense” (“Making” 396) in an interview she conducted with two male soap opera fans. Because these men associate passive television viewing with women, they worked extremely hard to assert that their own viewing of soap operas is intelligent and active. Since not only television viewing in general but also the particular genre of melodrama have long been associated with women, I expected some of the men to be critical of the melodramatic elements of *Northern Exposure* and to gender them feminine. However, I found surprisingly little negative reaction among the male respondents to the emotional, romantic aspects of the program and encountered almost no language linking anti-sentimentality to masculinity. Ironically, the one person on the newsgroup who complained about an episode in which Ed cries over losing his girlfriend was in fact a woman. After bemoaning that “this once fine show has fallen from its High Mountain



down into a blubbering soap opera,” she complained that Ed “couldn’t swallow hard like a brave instead of crying on big strong Maurice’s shoulder.” Her sexist newsgroup post was immediately challenged by many men who asserted that “real men do cry as well as eat quiche.” Most of the male survey respondents cited the show’s ability to move them emotionally as crucial to their viewing pleasure. I was pleasantly surprised to find that none of the members of my survey group disdained melodrama because of its associations with femininity.

While it might be tempting to attribute this non-sexist response solely to gains won by feminism, a more conservative explanation might be the fact that *Northern Exposure* masks its connection to “feminine” melodrama by including elements strongly appealing to masculine tastes. Cicely, Alaska could never be mistaken for the glamorous locales of melodramatic films and programs aimed at women. *Exposure*’s setting on the rugged Alaskan frontier, and its focus on traditional “men’s men” such as Maurice and Holling (although they also exhibit feminine characteristics), helped to make the program the most popular series among male baby boomers in its first two seasons (Annette Taylor 27). CBS even added more commercials geared to men in its third season (Stuart Miller 23). Lynne Joyrich has noted a hypermasculine quality in many otherwise melodramatic programs, which “attempt to evade TV’s ‘unmanly’ connotations” by “creating ‘proper’ spectator distance by mimicking cinematic conventions, or obsessively re-marking the masculinity of their thematics” (79). Although only *some* of *Exposure*’s thematics are marked as masculine, and the program oscillates between spectator distance and intense connection, there appear to be enough “manly” qualities to appease macho viewers.

While *Northern Exposure* manages to present an emotional viewing experience that men find unthreatening, the program has been even more popular with women. In the middle of the third season, as the program was reaching the height of its popularity, it drew an average of 23 million total viewers, of which 8 million were women aged 18-49, and 6.1 million were men of the same age group (Stuart Miller 23). This female to male ratio (57% to 43%) nearly matches the ratio of my audience group--59% women and 41% men. Although the overall pattern of the responses may have been affected because of the larger number of women in the study, the tastes of the women involved appeared to be more diverse than those of the men. Women made up the majority of both the lowbrow (5 out of 6) and the highbrow groups (5 out of 8). While the lowbrow (mostly undergraduate) women focused on the program's emotional elements and the Joel-Maggie romance, there were just as many women with predominantly elitist tastes, and in fact, the women as a whole group were more educated than the men (60% of the women had done graduate work as opposed to 50% of the men). This data suggests that *Northern Exposure* may appeal to women across a wide range of class groups or taste communities but primarily to well-educated men with an even mixture of high and low cultural tastes.

Furthermore, my hypothesis that the women as a whole would be more attracted by the romantic, sentimental elements than the men did not hold true, despite the five women who did read the program as a soap opera. When I asked everyone to rank their ten favorite elements of the show, the women and the men placed equal emphasis on Maggie and Joel's romance (fourth place) and the program's sentimentalizing of community (third and second). In addition, 60% of both gender groups said they

preferred the romantic to the anti-romantic episodes in which the couples do not end up in harmony. In this study, gender differences in taste turned out to be minimal, except for the greater diversity among the female participants, stretching to both highbrow and lowbrow extremes. Their questionnaires revealed two important patterns of response that upset gender stereotypes: the male fans of *Northern Exposure* appear to be less hostile to “feminine” melodrama and sentimentality than one might expect, and the tastes of the female fans were not ruled by their emotions any more than the men’s were. For this audience group, class--and cultural capital in particular--impacted their response to *Northern Exposure* more so than did gender.

### **Identities and Identification: Subjects in Flux**

In addition to offering insight about how social identities affect viewers’ identifications with particular taste formations, my study of *Northern Exposure* fans also gave me the opportunity to explore the contested relationship between identities of viewers and the process of identifying with on-screen characters. The construction of subjectivity and identity is clearly a central concern of the program, whose characters include Native Americans, Jews, gays and lesbians, Catholics, whites, blacks, and men and women of all ages and class backgrounds. Was *Northern Exposure* successful merely because its characters resembled a rainbow coalition, and therefore all viewers could recognize themselves somewhere in the program? This overly simple expectation is immediately put into question by the fact that *Northern Exposure* directly addresses current debates about identity politics and multiculturalism and encourages its viewers to

think critically about identifying oneself according to received categories of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. By invoking both the romantic, melodramatic construction of identity as unitary, essential, and deep, and a postmodern treatment of identity as a mutable discursive surface, *Northern Exposure* perfectly exemplifies Linda Hutcheon's observation that "the postmodern involves a paradoxical installing as well as subverting of conventions--including conventions of the representation of the subject" (13-14). To explore how this dual treatment of identity affected viewers, I address the following questions: Did the viewers identify primarily with the characters most like themselves, as some psychoanalytic theorists contend, or did the program's deconstruction of traditional identity categories complicate their identification process? How did the viewers respond to the program's political narratives about identity (fostering feminism, religious tolerance, and cultural pluralism)? Did this text shift or reinforce their thoughts about subjectivity or their own self-constructions?

As one might expect from a program with such a multicultural cast of characters, many plotlines respect and celebrate group differences, as in the episode concerning the buried Indian women's artifacts. However, a post-structuralist critique of identity politics can be glimpsed just as frequently. The episode "Crime and Punishment," in which Chris faces trial for violating parole many years earlier, explicitly questions a belief in the stability of identity. Chris' defense, based on the idea that he is a "new man," invokes a broader interpretation of the self as mutable rather than fixed. He ends the episode on his radio show by musing "who are we?"--a question that resonates throughout the series--and suggests that maybe the answer must always be elusive. Usually this dual treatment

of the subject--simultaneously deconstructing and respecting identities--occurs within each episode, and the differing representations speak to and reflect upon one another. A few episodes, however, offered a more essentialist treatment of the subject, installing rather than subverting conventional differences, and this was more likely to happen when *gender* identities were the specific focus. *Northern Exposure* both shares and rejects our culture's continued attachment to stereotypical gender divisions.

While the great majority of my survey group believe that *Northern Exposure* expresses a feminist sensibility, their responses revealed the diversity of feminist discourse and highlighted the writers' conflicted treatment of gender identity. The episode detailing the founding of the town by two lesbians--who turn the male-dominated, violent saloon into a *salon* and rhapsodize about female difference as non-materialist, spiritual, and pacifist--caused one female fan to argue that *Northern Exposure* is a "powerfully *feminine* series, one in which success is based less on competition and power, and more on the interrelatedness of people." While some found this feminist, at other moments the writers rhapsodies about female difference became problematic and regressive. The episode about Shelly's baby shower ended with a sentimental montage of female animals caring for their young--a not-so-subtle suggestion that mothering is a natural female instinct, and thus that Maggie's aversion to babies is an unnatural whim rather than a rational life-choice.

A few episodes in the last season presented gender stereotypes so uncritically that a few fans called them anti-feminist; in "Horns," contaminated drinking water causes the men and women to exhibit seemingly gender-aberrant behavior (men crying and women

demanding sex all the time), until the “correct” behaviors are restored in the end. The writers occasionally presented Maggie’s feminist outbursts as hypocritical and irrational; in one ironic scene, while complaining that men objectify women, Maggie simultaneously contributes to the problem by obsessing about her own appearance. The show’s treatment of feminism was sometimes respectful and sometimes mocking, and the viewers with more developed feminist sensibilities recognized this conflict and were able to take a more critical and distanced view when the text’s ideologies didn’t match their own. It’s also interesting that the two most critical viewers, who argued that the show “fell short of giving women or feminism a fair portrayal,” were both men, thus underscoring the possibility of fluid identifications that cross gender lines and are based on ideological affinity rather than essential identity.

At the same time that *Northern Exposure* offers both difference-feminist narratives and anti-feminist ones, it more frequently overturns stereotypes and presents gender as culturally constructed. The writers promote androgyny and question gender identity by underscoring each male character’s stereotypically feminine qualities and each woman’s masculine ones. Since the majority of the survey group defined a feminist text as one that fosters equality and offers non-stereotypical roles for women (and men), they applauded the program’s anti-essentialist strategies. A few examples of this “androgyny effect” are Joel’s general state of hysteria and his natural ability to knit baby booties, Holling’s admission that he dislikes watching sports, Maggie’s mechanical skills and her bravery in flying planes, and Ruth-Anne’s shrewd, unsentimental business sense. Ed is virtually genderless, and Chris (the artist/minister who is also an ex-con and a “ladies

man”) embodies both yin and yang. Because the program deconstructs stereotypes of masculinity as well as femininity, several respondents called the program “humanist” because it promotes equality for all rather than favoring women over men, which they believed to be the goal of feminism.

Because its treatment of gender issues stretches from anti-feminism to difference-based feminism to equality feminism to an ideal world where feminism is no longer necessary, *Northern Exposure* speaks to a wide range of viewpoints. While the program’s feminist politics may seem merely conflicted or confused, I would argue that this tension leads to a more pluralist understanding of gender identity that registers with a viewer’s experience of encountering these multiple views of gender and feminism in daily life. *Exposure* allows sentimental connections and identifications on the basis of gender, yet also urges viewers to step back and be critical of the limitations that can result from those identities.

*Northern Exposure*’s varied representations of gender complicated the identification process for these viewers, thereby undermining the psychoanalytic assumption that gender identity largely determines how and with whom people identify. I asked the respondents to explain why they were attracted to their two “favorite characters,” and I intentionally avoided the word “identification” to see if they would use that concept to explain their preferences without prompting. More than half of them did use the term, and ten out of the total forty-four identified with characters on the basis of shared gender. Sometimes the gender connection was subtle (identifying with Joel’s rationalism as a “man of science” or with Maggie’s “need to be loved”) and other times

more blatant (“from my male perspective, I identified more with the male characters”).

However, their identifications with characters of the same sex sometimes had the effect of *challenging* rather than solidifying gender identity, because of the androgyny of many of the characters. For example, one young man identified with a male character, but on the basis of his *feminized* position: “Ed’s character appeals to me because I can identify with his position of being subservient to just about everyone else on the program.” Ed’s age and class status, which position him as powerless, mattered more to this viewer than the authority conferred by masculinity. Many women likened themselves to Maggie and Ruth-Anne because they were strong and independent (traditionally masculine characteristics). One person’s statement even redefined the ideal “complete man” as androgynous: “if I could be any character it would be Chris--both Yin and Yang, a fighter and a philosopher/healer.” While gender was sometimes cited as the reason for strong identification, it is clear that both the audience and the text stretch and subvert traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity.

In fact, while ten people cited shared gender as the basis for their identifications, even more (eleven) claimed to identify with characters of the other sex on the basis of shared personality traits, such as Maggie’s stubbornness, Joel’s “reluctant tolerance,” or Chris’ introspection. Women in the group, however, were more likely to choose male characters as their favorites than the male fans were to choose female characters.<sup>113</sup> This pattern might be influenced by many factors: that feminism has allowed women more access to “masculine” behavior, that women have always been more “bisexual” according to theorists such as Hélène Cixous,<sup>114</sup> or that feminine characteristics are still less valued



than masculine ones in our aggressive capitalist culture. Mulvey's "transvestite" theory, with its treatment of the oppression of women as inevitable and ubiquitous, seems too negative and self-pitying to explain this cross-group identification phenomenon, because both the viewers and the program itself express feminist sensibilities.

The male viewers' resistance to identification with women suggests that many men in our culture still perceive women as inhabitants of another planet. However, even though few men expressed an identification with Maggie or Ruth-Anne (and none with the hyperfeminine Shelly), I still find it progressive that the male viewers identified with the more *androgynous* male characters (Ed and Chris). Although seeing themselves in a former beauty queen (Shelly) is out of the realm of possibility for them, the fact that these men liken themselves to a sensitive artist and subservient teenager may still represent liberatory change. In her study of slasher horror films, Carol Clover discusses the progressive consequences of male fans identifying with androgynous characters, in this case tomboy victim/heroines. She argues that such gender displacement may encourage viewers to conceive of gender as an ambiguous "permeable membrane" (46) rather than a fixed entity, and the same could be said of *Northern Exposure*.<sup>115</sup>

As with gender, *Exposure* occasionally depicts race and religion as essential identities but usually presents them as culturally constructed and therefore mutable subject positions. Even though Native American traditions are generally revered on the program, the fact that all the minor Native American characters are similarly wise, peaceful, earth-worshipping, and non-materialistic recalls the noble savage stereotype typical in melodramas. The only fully individualized Indian character is Ed, but the

writers tempt the viewer to attribute Ed's difference from the other Native Americans, primarily his infatuation with the "white culture" of film, to the fact that he is of mixed race (his mother is white). Despite these few intimations that Native American identity is determined by biological racial difference, *Northern Exposure* often suggests that this identity is cultural and can therefore be shared not only by the racially mixed Ed, who becomes a shaman for the tribe, but by some whites as well. The flexible nature of racial identity is asserted in the "Thanksgiving" episode, which focuses on the local Indian tradition of throwing tomatoes at whites to express residual anger at losing their homeland. Most of the white Cicelians cheerfully accept these unorthodox "seasons greetings," but Joel protests that his Jewish heritage marks him as a victim of oppression and therefore a "person of color." The Native American Marilyn at first doubts Joel's argument, but when the state of Alaska decides that he has to serve as the town doctor for an extra year due to inflation, Marilyn accepts Joel as an "honorary Indian," not because of his religion or race but because he is a powerless indentured servant. When the Native Americans ask Joel to march in their parade because he "isn't white anymore," the writers endorse an expansive concept of racial identity as a situational affinity or as a metaphor for an oppressed or marginalized position.

Joel's feeling of otherness and his belief that Jewishness is a racial as well as a religious identity, are treated with sensitivity by the show's writers. The episode in which he searches through Alaskan phone books to find other Jews, and ends up calling a man in Israel who shares his name, poignantly affirms the emotional benefits of a politics of recognition, of uniting with others who share your particular sense of difference. On the

other hand, the program also reminds us that not all Jews are alike. When Joel's temporary replacement Dave (another Jew) lacks any stereotypical markers of his supposed Jewishness, Joel's views about ethnicity are called into question. The writers also imply that Joel's intense identification with others of his "tribe" can result in xenophobia. "Kaddish for Uncle Manny" focuses on the difficult search for a minion of ten Jews to recite the traditional mourning prayer for Joel's uncle, and the whole town seems to overlook non-Jews as possible participants. In "Fish Story" Joel worries about letting Maggie help him prepare Seder for Passover. But at the end of both episodes, the writers present Joel embracing his local community as "honorary Jews" who can share his religious practices. The religious (and possibly racial) identity of Jewishness is relaxed by the writers, who suggest that fluid alliances might be better than traditional identity politics. A final testament to the show's aim of loosening rigid boundaries between self and other is Joel's miraculous transformation in the last season from a once uptight and hyper-rational Jewish New Yorker to a virtual Native American, living a spartan existence in a rural village and embracing holistic healing and tribal spirituality.

Even more powerful than Joel's sudden transformation are the writers' more realistic depictions of Maurice's vacillation between bigotry and tolerance. Although he is sometimes homophobic and racist, Maurice's integrity, fairness, and repressed sensitivity allow him to forge a reluctant friendship with the gay couple Ron and Erick, and also to accept a North Korean woman as his daughter-in-law despite his own identity as a Korean War veteran and enemy of her people. Astounded that the African-American Bernard (Chris' half-brother) doesn't "sound black," Maurice and the prejudiced viewer

learn that speech patterns are cultural rather than a result of “superior racial breeding.”

The program’s sympathetic treatment of Maurice’s conflict between self and other has the potential to move similar viewers towards tolerance and even respect for marginalized people.

The text’s attempt to foster empathy for various others seems to have resonated with these viewers, for they expressed the capacity to identify with many characters who differ from themselves in race, religion, age, temperament, politics, and gender. As one respondent put it, “each character is unique, and I can relate to certain aspects of each one.” For this group, identification was aspectual and multiple rather than whole and singular. Exhibiting a fluid identification process, one woman noted: “Although I was raised Methodist and am now agnostic/atheistic, I liked the Jewish aspect of the show. I’ve dated Jews and hold as much or more respect for Judaism as I hold for Christianity.” She also chose two Native Americans (Marilyn and Ed) as her favorite characters. One Asian-American, Catholic woman who shares few social identities with Joel nonetheless found that “Joel and I are similar in some ways. I find myself nodding in agreement when he’s talking.” Most of the people with majority identities (white, Christian) and even some of the minorities (such as this Asian-American woman) experienced a cross-over identification with characters quite different from themselves. The fact that most of the people from dominant groups were able to empathize with minorities, and to recognize elements of sameness as well as difference, strikes me as a positive development. Here I part company with critics such as Doris Sommer, who view such identifications as forms of colonization.

I also found it significant that a few of the minorities in the group *did not* identify primarily with their counterparts on screen, and I do not read this phenomenon simply as an example of conservative assimilationism. A Jewish person in my survey group at first appeared to echo Joel's narrow identity politics and his belief that he is "non-white," since she wrote in "Russian/Eastern European Jewish" rather than checking "white" as her racial identity. She also admitted to looking in phone books for other Jews when she travels, just as Joel does. However, she was drawn not to Joel but to the characters of Ruth Ann and Maurice. Despite her feminist liberal beliefs, she found Maurice endearing because "he was sincere about his dislike for other lifestyles." Even though she expressed a strongly defined ethnic identity, her fluid identification pattern indicated that she was able to avoid the essentialism and separatism that Joel and Maurice sometimes espouse.

While this Jewish woman was able to see beyond religious/ethnic, gender, and political differences to respect Maurice, the minority viewers were more likely than the viewers from the white, Protestant, heterosexual mainstream to identify with characters of their own race or culture, possibly because such positive identificatory possibilities are rarer for minority viewers of mainstream media. Minorities who posted on the newsgroup tended to value the program primarily because it speaks to their constituency; one Native American man wrote that he watches the show "because I actually learn things about my own cultural heritage from it." A Jewish man poignantly lamented that "much of the show's soul dissolved when Joel left. No more Seders, no more klezmerim, no more rabbi-in-a-dream. It's a loss to Cicely, to *Northern Exposure*, and to me." A

Catholic woman in my survey group shared Shelly's feelings of confusion about baptism and confession and admired the way the program explored "the inherent contradictions which Catholics must face." In *Outweek* magazine, Scott Sherman expressed the pleasure that the gay community found in the program's positive representation of gays and lesbians and encouraged the writers "to bring back the gay couple as ongoing characters" (22). *Northern Exposure* allows an affirmation of group identities that many marginalized people found liberating, while simultaneously encouraging those in the majority (and minority) to rethink a narrow sense of identity that could prevent cross-cultural communication and understanding.

While many melodramas have been accused of provoking emotional identification merely to shore up existing, conservatively defined identities, this television program provokes sentimental engagement in the service of a more radical breakdown of social boundaries and hierarchies. Although it allows a politics of recognition for marginalized viewers, the program's ambitions are much more complex because it aims to address viewers from both dominant and subordinate social groups. While many sentimental texts speak primarily to dominant groups and treat the marginalized other as an object of pity, *Northern Exposure* instead promotes a sympathetic audience identification with various social others that avoids condescending overtones. This program also works to engage a minority or leftist viewer's sympathy for misunderstood dominant groups (represented by Maurice) rather than demonizing them as prejudiced oppressors. Typical mass-market melodramas have treated the other as an exotic amusement (*Amos n' Andy*) or a threat which must be contained or expunged (e.g. blacks in *Birth of a Nation* and

Native Americans in Westerns), or they have more recently tried to domesticate and reduce difference (*The Cosby Show*). *Northern Exposure* instead fosters metonymic alliances between self and other, dominant and subordinate identities, without either erasing or reifying difference.

While the *Northern Exposure* writers occasionally treat traditional forms of identity with sentimental reverence, they spend much more energy sentimentalizing the union of self and other in a multicultural community, a focus wholly in tune with the ethos of the early 1990s Clinton era. The show's emotional evocation of an idyllic community composed of very different individuals had an incredibly powerful effect on the members of my audience group. As one person remarked of the show: "Real life issues of race, gender, and religion are worked out within the context of ultimate (and seemingly unattainable) community. I feel a profoundly sad realization that this sort of unity of varied individuals does not exist in my world, and the longing for such a community in my own life brings tears to my eyes." Rather than identifying with the characters on the basis of specific identities, these viewers identified primarily with the *political ideology* of *Northern Exposure*, its multiculturalism and liberal democratic spirit. While most theories of identification propose that engaging with characters is an emotional, unconscious process and that responding to the ideology involves a conscious intellectual distance, I found that these viewers were both intellectually stimulated and emotionally engaged by the left-leaning ideology. For example, in response to the episode about the founding of the town by lesbians, one of the more leftist members of the group said: "I almost cried for joy when Roslyn went off to fight the Fascists in

Spain.” Comments like these reveal that intellect and emotion are not so easy to separate in the process of identification, and that the most successful political narratives are those that construct “mattering maps” to engage audiences affectively as well as intellectually (Grossberg, *We Gotta* 82).<sup>116</sup>

It is also revealing that while the questionnaire respondents were fairly homogeneous in many identity categories, they were the most homogeneous in terms of political affiliation--only five out of forty-four people identified themselves as Republicans or conservatives, and of those five, four were women with some feminist sensibilities. Even these few Republicans were respectful of difference and viewed the program as moderate or even progressive. As a whole, the thirty-nine left-oriented viewers were more liberal than they were radical (only a few expressed anti-capitalist feelings or dissatisfaction with Clinton’s moderate politics). *Northern Exposure* offers not only a confirmation of their political views but a more thoroughly utopian vision of them; Clinton’s “bridge to the twenty-first century” is nowhere near as radically utopian as the one envisioned by *Exposure*. It is clear that a conscious ideological affinity strongly influenced these viewers’ identification with the text, a possibility which psychoanalytic theory largely ignores. Their political identities as liberals unified this audience group more than any biological or essentialist cultural identity could. Because *Northern Exposure*’s liberal politics seems to have been one of the most important factors in drawing viewers to the program, its attempt to mobilize affect in the service of a utopian, communitarian politics warrants further investigation.



### Cicely, Alaska as Postmodern Utopia?

Many postmodern philosophers have pronounced the death of utopian thinking in Western society and its replacement by pessimism, nihilism, and a skeptical view of progressive grand narratives such as Marxism. On the other hand, contemporary social movements, such as feminism or gay activism, and leftist cultural studies academics refuse to give up on the utopian, progressive impulse.<sup>117</sup> Amidst this debate about the possibility of utopia in postmodern culture came *Northern Exposure*, hailed for its dream of a peaceful multicultural community. Iain Crawford suggests that the program's "belief in human goodness and fellowship" makes it a "fitting analog to the new mythos of Clintonian change in America, a perfect response to the call never to stop thinking and hoping about tomorrow" (21). Rather than deeming it "of the moment," pessimistic postmodernists might argue that *Northern Exposure*'s utopia is merely a throwback to a modernist sensibility, or a replay of Enlightenment, humanist liberalism (as Crawford's reference to Clinton implies). In opposition to this skeptical view, I propose that *Exposure* offers a "heterotopic utopia,"<sup>118</sup> a version of Chantal Mouffe's "radical, plural democracy" that unites modernist goals with a postmodern critique to offer a potent political alternative to nihilism.

The traditional model of utopia as a blueprint for a rational society, espoused by thinkers such as Sir Thomas More and Jeremy Bentham, rested on the principles of a "common good" and universally accepted Truth and drew its ideological grounding from Enlightenment and humanist philosophies. Traditional utopian philosophers believed in the innate goodness of human beings and thought the exercise of reason could lead to the

perfection of human society. Utopianists were driven by a faith (often blind) in the unlimited possibility of reform and progress, before such concepts were debunked by the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment. *Northern Exposure* explicitly evoked such a utopian blueprint in its “flashback” episode detailing the origin of Cicely as an egalitarian community founded by two lesbians, Cicely and Roslyn, who turned this formerly violent, Old West saloon town into a pacifist modernist *salon*. By far the favorite episode of this fanclub, “Cicely” served as an ur-text for the utopian values of the series. As one fan wrote, this “pioneering community combines considerable individual freedom with . . . a set of values shared by all,” values such as artistic creativity, sexual freedom, egalitarianism, spirituality, feminism, harmony with nature, and a deep respect for all humans. The humanist message of the episode, that all people can reach great heights despite origins as an illiterate beggar or a prostitute, previews the humanism of the contemporary Cicelian society, where even an ex-con such as Chris can become a minister and the voice of the community.

Because the fans claim that they lack such a harmonious and humane community in their own lives, they became intensely involved in and sentimental about this utopic television society. One respondent compared Cicely to the idyllic Camelot, “a place that is our best dreams realized and then externalized and shared.” This return to the traditional value of community, I argue, is not merely a conservative regression, but rather a necessary emotional defense against the experiences of fragmentation, dislocation, and loss of meaning in a postmodern society. While humanism as a philosophy has been criticized by post-structuralist thinkers for its complacency, false optimism, erasure of

difference, and conservative political tendencies, in some ways the humanism expressed here takes on a decidedly subversive tone in our violent postindustrial society, in which a lack of autonomy causes individuals to abnegate civic responsibility and to doubt their ability to make a difference. *Northern Exposure* strives to reinvest power in the individual and in relationships on a local scale. Cicely's frequent town meetings, held to arbitrate disputes and enact necessary reforms, offer a return to a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" rather than an uncontrollable behemoth, an omnipotent "Big Brother." One quotation from the "Cicely" episode flies in the face of Foucault's argument about the postmodern diffusion of power and the absence of individual autonomy in our panoptic society: "One person can have a profound effect on another. And two people can change a whole town. They can change the world." While this statement may seem naive and nostalgic, this creed aims to revivify faith in the political power of the individual, and in the democratic goals of freedom and equality.

While these basic democratic-utopian goals are lauded by the show's writers, they do criticize the means by which Enlightenment philosophers hoped to achieve these goals--through unwavering faith in Reason. Joel and Maurice, exemplars of masculinist rationalism, are often treated as whipping boys who must learn that reason can not explain all the happenings of the world, nor can it solve all of its problems. In *The Transparent Society*, Gianni Vattimo points out that after World War II and the failure of Soviet communism, dystopias took the place of the utopias of modernity, because of the "discovery that the rationalization of the world turns against reason and its ends of perfection and emancipation" (78), instead leading to Fascism and genocide. On

*Northern Exposure*, Joel is forced to make the discovery that his medical knowledge cannot save a dying old woman and that life cannot always be rationally “optimized.” He and Maurice are often confounded by the magical events that occur in the town, and the writers usually support the Native Americans’ mystical explanations of the phenomena. The program’s critique of the Enlightenment is made from a post-structuralist perspective as well as an earlier transcendentalist one, which first posed emotion, intuition and spirituality as alternatives to the cult of Reason. Although the town of Cicely may appear to be a utopia, it does not worship at the altar of reason; the town’s namesake Cicely performs mystical dances to evoke the spirit of Gaia, and any talk of Bentham’s concept of the “greatest good for the greatest number” would be anathema to her.

While Cicely’s spiritualism is valued, this episode also lampoons her modernist literary tastes and reverence for “the new.” In some ways, *Northern Exposure*’s utopian project could be seen as a descendent of modernity’s masternarratives of progress, but this generally modernist episode also subtly ironizes its own presentation of this community. While the town seems to embody some modern values--a reformist overturning of tradition and a desire for the new, a belief in evolutionary progress, the “manifest destiny” narrative of civilizing the frontier, and a mythologizing of individual power--the writers also mock and demystify the products of high modernist literature. In this flashback, the supposed “genius” Franz Kafka finds his way to Cicely, and is portrayed as a nervous and rather ordinary thinker who gets all his ideas for “The Metamorphosis” and “The Castle” from a woman. This plot demystifies the originality of Modernist writers and underscores their exploitation of women. Under the influence of

his teacher Cicely, Ned writes an absurdly minimalist poem nonsensically titled “Between Antigone” that contains lines such as “blue jays on a log, agog.” This mockery of the word-salad style of another lesbian modernist, Gertrude Stein (in *Tender Buttons*), deflates the strongly sentimental presentation of Cicely by suggesting that her Modernist literary values are somewhat ridiculous. *Northern Exposure*’s sentimental humanist utopia, tempered by doses of distancing irony, combines the Modernist hope for political reform with a recognition of the naiveté and overzealousness of this desire to be at the “cutting-edge” of culture.

Instead of stomping out the past in a blind desire for the New, the series takes up traditional and modernist paradigms and reworks them to offer a postmodern vision that is nostalgic as well as ironic. As I have noted earlier, the writers use intertextuality to keep the past alive as well as to revise and problematize it. In his essay “Memories of Utopia,” Andreas Huyssen has argued (against Jameson) that postmodern culture does indeed allow utopian impulses, but that they are now characterized by a nostalgic mode rather than the futuristic gaze of modernism. Rather than lamenting this nostalgic turn as does Jameson or falsely considering it to be the opposite of utopia, Huyssen suggests that postmodern culture’s “obsessions with memory and history . . . are not regressive or simply escapist. . . . They occupy a utopian position vis-à-vis a chic and cynical postmodern nihilism on the one hand and a neo-conservative worldview on the other that desires what cannot be had: stable histories, a stable canon, a stable reality” (101). Gianni Vattimo agrees that the only possible postmodern utopia is one of “inventory, nostalgia, revival,” but one that also entails some ironic distance from the past (86).

*Northern Exposure*'s treatment of the town's mythic origins is a case in point, as it both sentimentalizes and ironizes modernist myths at the same time. Rather than a mindless escape, this return to the past is productive of new meanings that are also contingent upon past histories.

Another way in which the 1990s Cicely differs from the original utopian Cicely is that the Romantic myth of the individual communing with nature, to ward off the alienation caused by commercialism, no longer appears viable in our post-industrial capitalist world. The once pure pastoral space of Alaska is now home to computers and the Sharper Image catalog. Although the program still invokes the frontier spirit, particularly through the characters of Holling and Maurice (Holling once wrestled with a bear and Maurice tamed the wilds of outer space), this formerly virgin frontier landscape of Alaska is now "contaminated" by commercialism. One humorously ironic subplot of the episode "Fish Story" suggests that the frontier has been nearly played out, even though the transplanted inhabitants still hope that Alaska will renew and purify them. In the spirit of the Beats, Ruth Ann decides to flee the burden of her responsibilities as manager of the grocery store by journeying "on the road" with a biker gang, the Diablos. After renouncing her commercial world, she is disappointed to learn that the Diablos are actually middle-aged yuppies, complete with cellphones, who experience similarly pedestrian or unromantic worries (one of their former members has colon cancer). Even the supposedly untainted romantic rebels are fully imbricated in capitalism and its dangerously excessive consumption, figured by cancer of the colon. The turn-of-the-century romantic-modernist *salon* has now become a postmodern marketplace, where the

inhabitants even buy stocks over the web.

*Northern Exposure*'s complicity with postmodern capitalism clearly differentiates it from another traditionally modernist form of utopia--the Marxist commune--and thus Marxist critics may object to my designation of this program, or perhaps *any* network television program, as utopic. This community's biggest difference from a Marxist utopia is that class is a particularly blurred social category in Cicely, and thus class conflict does not define these inhabitants' lives or politics. For example, Joel's social position is deliberately ambiguous in that he is both a yuppie doctor and an indentured servant, controlled by his overseers, Maurice and the state of Alaska. When he does try to go on strike, he fails to gain any sympathy for his plight, perhaps because he can not rightfully claim the status of "oppressed" since he also claims the privileges of the ruling elite. Class conflict is also blunted by the fact that friendships often cross traditional class boundaries--the millionaire aesthete Maurice and the petit bourgeois bar-owner Holling are the best of friends, and Maurice's elegant dinner parties bring together friends from all classes. In fact, few of the inhabitants seem to embrace class as a meaningful identity. This indifference to a Marxist worldview was echoed by my audience group, very few of whom expressed anti-capitalist feelings, perhaps because nearly half of them were employed by private industries, particularly computer technology businesses.

But while the series seems to point to the outdated nature of Marxist utopias based on proletarian revolt, it also offers at least some critique of another modernist utopia--that of the capitalist free market--albeit from within its own borders. Maurice's schemes to turn Cicely into a vacation mecca (by marketing the mystical powers of the Northern

Lights and the “high” caused by perpetual daylight) always fail, as if nature still has the power to resist its own commodification. In addition, Ruth Anne’s triumphant, self-righteous speech when she pays off Maurice to claim ownership of her store may also imply a Marxist critique of the oppressive loan system, even though it still glorifies capitalist proprietorship. But while Maurice’s *hauteur* as capitalist boss is criticized, he is depicted as mildly annoying rather than malevolent. Instead of demonizing him as an individual, the inhabitants (and the writers of the program) seem to blithely accept the idea that everyone is complicit with power structures. The series thus supports the post-Marxist notion that it is nearly impossible to occupy a pure space of resistance to capitalism, even in the wildest parts of the United States. And this message seems to resonate with this audience group, one of whom was “annoyed with Chris when he went on and on about the woes of capitalism and individualism just because Maggie bought a washer and dryer set.” *Northern Exposure* shows sympathy for, but does not wholly endorse either a Marxist or a capitalist idea of progress, instead exposing the hubris and limitations of both. This fictional town represents an impure rather than a naive utopia because it accepts that it can never be wholly separated from the world outside of its borders.

The most important way in which *Northern Exposure*’s ideal community differs from modernist and humanist utopias is through its criticism of the universalist concepts of the “common good” and singular Truth. *Exposure*’s optimistic humanism is tempered by the writers’ rejection of a whitewashed and masculinized view of what is human. Cicely’s welcoming reception of the flying man and his carnival of costumed friends who



looked more like drainpipes than people was perhaps the most humorous yet strident statement of the show's commitment to difference. Multiculturalism has often been deemed "postmodern" by the popular press, and despite their often lazy usage of the term, the principle of heterogeneity can be linked to a post-structuralist refusal of center and order. In the introduction to the essay collection *Heterotopia: Postmodern Utopia and the Body Politic*, Tobin Siebers argues that unlike the modernist desire for homogeneity and wholeness, "the desire for heterogeneity . . . characterizes the aesthetic and political ambitions of postmodernism" (4). Despite this rejection of homogeneity, the postmodern is still attracted to the "romance of community" (Siebers 8), but instead envisions a "dream about wholeness in which various parts are allowed their autonomy" (Siebers 7). *Exposure's* weaving together of many cultural stories and myths gestures toward a pluralistic utopia that would allow differences of opinion rather than striving for a totalitarian sense of the "common good." The postmodern belief in the multiplicity of truth is explicitly voiced by Chris Stevens. When he is on trial for parole violation, Chris refuses to take the oath "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" because he believes that truth is relative and plural and thus cannot be reduced to a singular "whole." In another episode, the town echoes Chris's stance when they solve the dispute between two sparring Native American families with different interpretations of past events by allowing them to erect, side by side, two different totem poles to depict their opposed stories. This exercise in revisionist historiography presents the possibility of multiple, and even conflicting, truths.

The pluralistic society of Cicely bears some similarities to the "radical, plural

democracy” envisioned by political theorist Chantal Mouffe, as an attempt to unite both modernist and postmodernist political goals. Mouffe aims to retain the democratic, pluralistic goals of “individual freedom and personal autonomy” (*Return of the Political* 7) that were the foundation of modernity’s liberal tradition, while using postmodern theory to critique the universalism and unitary identities of Enlightenment ideologies (such as Marxist notions of class). Mouffe also rejects the essentialist idea of a social totality implied by the term “common good,” a concept inherited from communitarianism and traditional utopian theory. Instead, she proposes “a new kind of articulation between the universal and the particular” (13) that will allow for coalition building among people of diverse interests, united not by identity or a sense of the common good but by a chain of “democratic equivalence” (19), by a politicized sense of themselves as equal citizens in a democracy. While she uses postmodern theory to discredit some of the projects of modernity, she argues quite convincingly that postmodernists need not reject the democratic, “progressive” legacy of modernity as Lyotard does. In short, Mouffe outlines the possibility for a postmodern utopia, an egalitarian and plural community that fosters liberty and relaxes identity boundaries, an oasis such as the one that the writers of *Northern Exposure* have envisioned.<sup>119</sup> Of course, it is important to acknowledge that Mouffe is talking about a political project and not a text. However, there has always been a strong connection between utopian political theory and fictional texts (e.g. Thomas More’s *Utopia*), since both involve the creation of alternative spaces and practices.

Instead of a falsely universalist common good, Mouffe posits that a radical plural democracy would enable and even encourage civil forms of antagonism. *Exposure*

recognizes the “permanence of conflict and antagonism” (Mouffe 8) by depicting recurring struggles between Joel and Maggie and between Maurice and nearly everyone. By depicting a mayoral election in the “Democracy in America” episode, *Northern Exposure* similarly rejects facile consensus and embraces Mouffe’s principle of dissent, which is usually repressed in fictional utopias. Because of an argument over the need for a stop sign, former friends Holling and Edna compete for the job of mayor, engaging in debates that draw the whole town. Speaking through Chris as a patriotic mouthpiece, the writers wax poetic about the importance of dissent to the democratic process. As usual, Maggie and Joel (as election commissioners) spar over what party is best and how an election should be run. After Edna wins the election, the antagonism appears to die down and friendships are restored, and Chris quotes Abraham Lincoln’s speech to a divided union: “we are not enemies but friends. . . . passions must not break the bonds of our affection.” By allowing passionate differences but controlling them before they lead to disorder and violence, the town of Cicely accomplishes what Lincoln could not.

While this ending does rest on a note of resolution, this moment of closure is not facile, because it does not seek to erase all dissent; we are left with Maurice’s libertarian despair that his oasis of freedom is being bureaucratized out of existence. Regretting his own efforts to civilize the wilderness, Maurice poignantly laments that the liberty he craves will be curtailed by law and government, the inevitable baggage of civilization: “one day two trappers are arguing about beaver pelts . . . the next day there is busing in Boston. It all starts with one single stop sign.” While the episode and the program as a whole praise democratic government as a utopian process, Maurice’s skeptical voice

remains, urging us to consider the negative consequences of governmental arbitration: the restriction of liberty. I would argue that this program's attempts at peaceful resolution, in which some people agree to disagree, should not be equated with a forced consensus. Here the postmodern values of dissent and difference coexist, rather than clash, with an emotional commitment to the traditional value of civic involvement. Furthermore, the program's sentimental, harmonious endings should not be so quickly dismissed as conservative structures. The ideological goal of these sentimental endings--to provoke an emotional investment in a (relatively) harmonious democratic community--still carries subversive potential in an increasingly violent world in which a truly pluralist democratic ideology is by no means pervasive.

Critics might argue that this liberal utopian community masks a colonizing appropriation of the other or a domestication of difference, and there is indeed some evidence of this problem in the show's narratives. In the fictional universe of Cicely, Alaska, violence and hatred are simply willed out of existence, and difference never leads to blows. There are few reminders of the hierarchical and oppressive world from which Cicely offers an escape, almost as if it can be simply willed out of existence. Gays are not bashed here (they only have to endure Maurice's repressed hostility); a black man who rides in on a motorcycle is treated with the utmost of courtesy; no one ever utters an anti-semitic joke. By eliminating all the oppressive structures that make difference an often painful reality for marginalized people, the program occasionally lapses into a problematic "feel good" sameness. The plotline in which Chris and the African American Bernard discover that they are twins in spirit, and quite literally brothers (who

share a white father), may be a refreshing example of “race-blindness,” but it also elides important differences created by racism and underestimates the tenacity of prejudice in any human society. Because the program occasionally flies the “we are all brothers” banner, it risks domesticating the other. The writers domesticate the gay male characters and the lesbian co-founders by placing them in monogamous relationships and avoiding mention of their different sexual desires. Even the depiction of Ron and Erick’s gay wedding contained nary a kiss.<sup>120</sup> Because it avoids any direct representation of how and why certain people have been persecuted for being “other,” *Northern Exposure* misses the chance to offer a more subversive social critique. By simply allowing mainstream viewers to identify with marginalized people without feeling their pain, this kind of identification risks becoming an appropriation or a substitution of self for other rather than a more radically empathetic experience. Focusing on white readers of minority texts, Doris Sommer is suspicious of whites’ identification with minorities, deeming it an “appropriation in the guise of an embrace” (“Resistant” 543) and arguing that such facile connections last “hardly longer than the reading of a novel” (529).

On the other hand, Larry Grossberg suggests that this refamiliarization of the strange aids the project of democracy by wiping away the concept of othering. He convincingly argues that “television empowers its fans by celebrating the ordinariness of the exotic” (“Putting the Pop” 187), and that “celebration, however much it ignores relations of domination, can be enabling” (170). Despite the caveats I noted above, *Northern Exposure*’s attempt to eradicate the concept of “othering” was highly desirable to this liberal audience. Since these viewers were already all too aware, rather than

ignorant, of the violence directed at marginalized others in our society, they were ready to move beyond realism to revel in a fantastic alternative. In my view, more danger could come from overemphasizing difference than from pointing out similarities. The kind of cross-group identification promoted by *Northern Exposure*, in which differences are respected but not ossified, could have very real consequences in the face of an increasingly balkanized world, where violence against ethnic and sexual minorities permeates the landscape from rural America to Kosovo. As the Serbian crisis reminds, multicultural communities are fragile constructions indeed, and utopian cultural products that depict harmonious democratic communities can provide crucial emotional nourishment. As one fan put it, "I like the way conflicts are resolved. Disparate personalities usually wind up at least being tolerant in the end. That's the kind of society I'd like to live in, instead of the one I've got. It's a great escape."

Some who decry the escapist qualities of television might argue that such representations, however utopic, do nothing to foster the value of community in the "real world." One of the questionnaire respondents offered such a self-reflexive comment on the demise of the show: "It was the loss of a community I loved, which may be even more sad . . . because a good argument could be made that television has destroyed real community, thus making vicarious experiences of community (like *Northern Exposure*) viable." His argument echoes Baudrillard's fatalistic vision of our culture as a state of the "hyperreal," in which reality and referents are no longer accessible because our media-saturated world is completely defined by simulations, images, and surfaces. We can no longer distinguish between virtual and real community because the signs are the same,

and therefore the real is collapsed onto the representation.

I object to Baudrillard's totalizing and pessimistic theory of the effect of the media upon audiences, and instead align myself with cultural studies practitioners like Richard Dyer and Lawrence Grossberg. Not only was my audience group keenly aware of the difference between the uplifting sign and an often-depressing reality, but this "escapist" representation could possibly move them to change the "real" world that they inhabit. In opposition to Baudrillard stands Richard Dyer, whose essay on the positive utopian sensibilities of popular musicals was an early example of cultural studies. While musicals are not utopian in the sense of proposing an organized social blueprint, Dyer argues that popular entertainment provokes utopian feelings and desires for change, for "temporary answers to the inadequacies of the society which is being escaped" ("Entertainment" 277). Fantasies of community thus respond to and form an antidote to the social fragmentation of (post)modern life. While *Northern Exposure* does present a sort of utopian social blueprint, its power comes from its ability to tap into a rich well of general utopian *desires*, as musicals do. Lawrence Grossberg also points out the power of a "functional positivity" in popular culture that is ignored by postmodern theorists who emphasize the negative: "Opposition may be constituted by living, even momentarily, within alternative practices, structures, and spaces, even though they may take no notice of their relationship to existing systems of power" ("Putting the Pop" 170). Because this optimism can remain long after turning off the tube, television can inspire agency and action among viewers with previously undernourished utopian imaginations. As one fan wrote, watching *Northern Exposure* causes her to experience "a sort of high, like all

things in life are possible.”

Because some of my questionnaire respondents discussed the show as a kind of drug, a welcome escape from their own less-than-idyllic lives, I wondered whether this program’s “quick fix” could be preventing them from getting off their couches to fulfill their desires in the real world. In her study of romance readers, Janice Radway hypothesizes that because these books satisfy women’s fantasies for utopian gender relations, they may promote inertia and stasis (*Reading* 50). However, I hesitate to accept such a conclusion about either the Smithton romance readers or these *Northern Exposure* fans, precisely because they have made one significant and lasting change in their lives--they have created and joined a fan club in hopes of meeting others who share their value systems. This process of building solidarity through identification should not be undervalued, because it can shore up faith in the possibility of realizing a utopian alternative. As one *Exposure* fan wrote, “the program made me want to live there, and to make that kind of society and culture come about.” “There” could be anywhere they choose to make it, and these fans in fact created a friendly cyber-community (alt.tv.northern-exp) as just such a utopian space, where empathy and respect are primary values. For example, when one man posted an emotional note about the parallels between one episode and an event in his own life in which he had damaged a friendship, many readers offered sensitive advice and continued their encouragement for several months. When an occasional flame takes place, others gently remind the flammers to avoid such “unCicilian” behavior. Although I saw evidence of some vitriol on the newsgroup in 1995, in 1998 it seemed like a much kinder and gentler place, complete with a



welcoming committee to greet first-time posters, and a yearly group pilgrimage to Roslyn, Washington where the program was filmed. This pilgrimage involves important group bonding to reinforce their shared political ideology.

Media critics might still contend that such virtual communities on television and the Internet nevertheless end up eroding real communities. For instance, David Morris posits that information technology has “achieved instant communication along with a vanishing sense of community” (151), although he ignores the creation of thousands of newsgroup communities such as alt.tv.northern-exp. In *No Sense of Place*, Joshua Meyrowitz contends that television is destroying our sense of locality, and *Exposure*’s episode about Shelly’s satellite dish endorses this attitude by reclaiming Shelly from the “global village” back to her local community. I turn to David Morley for an important corrective to arguments such as these. Morley suggests that electronic media have *transformed* rather than destroyed the idea of community, by expanding it beyond local boundaries and therefore helping to widen and relativize individuals’ perspectives (“Geography” 337). Because alt.tv.northern-exp draws participants from many countries around the globe, it has become an even more plural communal space than its inspirational model of Cicely, Alaska. I would argue that this Internet group satisfies some of the most basic elements of any “real” community--a sharing of support, feelings, values, and attitudes through language. We need to consider that utopian representations can have the power to improve the real by offering people hope and alternative possibilities.

Increasing the number of alternative representations, in film and television, has

long been the goal of feminists, racial minorities, and gay activists, who believe that media could have a positive rather than a negative effect on the way we perceive and construct our own realities. I propose that Maurice's gradual recognition of his similarity to gay men Ron and Erick could serve a radical political function, educating viewers to reconsider homophobia. As Elihu Katz reminds us, those who view television as an escape mistakenly suppose that the "vacationing" viewers "do not bring anything back" with them (15). In fact, they usually return with new and perhaps improved strategies for dealing with real-life situations. The viewers who responded to my questionnaire should not be categorized as escaping from reality, since many expressed explicit concerns about democracy and the political climate, and only four of them indicated that they have no party affiliation and do not vote. Rather than a flight from reality that reinforces stasis, a viewer's enjoyment of *Northern Exposure* should be viewed as an effective "way of countering despair" (Radway, *Reading* 222). The comment of one man, "I get both envious and sad that I am not a part of such a community," takes on more significance when one learns that he is Croatian and lives in war-torn Zagreb. The postmodern utopian communities of *Northern Exposure* and its Internet fanclub offer a much-needed respite for viewers disgusted and disheartened by a violent world.

Although the value of community has often been sentimentalized in popular culture, I have been arguing that *Northern Exposure*'s postmodern version of a humanist utopia takes on a new and perhaps more subversive significance in the 1990s. Rather than fostering a troubling and naive consensus, this program's utopian sensibility allows for differences of opinion and of identity formation, but does not allow these differences

to lead to violence, anarchy, or stasis. I hope that my reading of this sentimental postmodernist text and its fan club will have broader implications, because it complicates received and simplistic dichotomies between “subversive” postmodernism and the “conservative” sentimentality of popular culture. I have argued that the sentimental emotional connection fostered by this popular program counters the experiences of fragmentation, alienation, and powerlessness endemic to postmodern society. Instead of merely supporting conservatively defined identities and social formations, as psychoanalytic theorists of identification and critics of media culture usually argue, this text promotes the liberal multicultural hope for a communion between self and other and a dissolution of unitary identities. The cultural hybrid of sentimental postmodernism is a politically potent development, because it introduces post-structuralist and postmodernist ideas to a wider public, thus aiding audiences to rethink conservative paradigms and identity formations, but also links these ideas with an emotional investment in humanity that may result in a progressive commitment to improve real communities. This hybrid cultural product suggests that postmodern ideas can be used to help build utopian communities, rather than to shatter them.

My study of the cross-group identification patterns of these fans also indicates that *Northern Exposure*’s lessons about deconstructing identity and forming political coalitions of “democratic equivalence” were well-heard, or simply that the text drew viewers who already perceived of themselves as postmodern fluid subjects. While some of these fans identified with characters in the program who mirrored their own subject positions, the majority did not. I propose that the series both reinforces an already

shifting cultural perception of subjectivity and helps to spread these ideas to a wider audience. The audience group's hybrid taste for both high and low culture also indicates another important cultural shift--a breaking down of the "aristocratic" hierarchies of taste that Pierre Bourdieu observed to be strongly aligned to class distinctions. *Northern Exposure* helps to foster the breakdown of many cultural hierarchies and barriers to identification between individuals with differing social identities. The program makes it necessary to reconsider the usual dichotomies employed by reception theorists--such as critical distance vs. emotional identification, reason vs. emotion, referential (Real) vs. constructional (Ideological, Aesthetic) involvement, lowbrow vs. highbrow taste--because these viewers experienced all these things simultaneously and thus blurred the distinctions between them. Further, the program implies that ideology--in this case a liberal belief in democracy and multiculturalism--can play a larger role in identification than psychoanalytic theorists admit. My study of *Northern Exposure* and its fans underscores the need to think about identification as more than just an unconscious response linked to identities that devolve from the body.

## Chapter Four

### *Kiss of the Spider Woman and the Politics of Camp*

Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is centrally concerned with the politics of mass culture and of homosexuality, and as such, the text bears some relationship to the critical practice called "camp." Although many critics have analyzed *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a work of "gay fiction," none has attempted to situate Puig's text or its film or musical adaptations in relation to camp as a gay or queer critique of heterosexual mass culture and its value systems.<sup>121</sup> Any academic discussion of camp bears the burden of definition, since the term has been variously defined as a "depoliticized" form of send-up that converts the "serious into the frivolous" (Sontag), an "aestheticized sensibility" (Babuscio, Sontag), an "operation of taste" (Ross), and a radical form of "queer parody" (Meyer).<sup>122</sup> I will be relying on Richard Dyer's sense of camp as a gay sensibility that involves a dialectical movement between "theatricality and authenticity" (*Heavenly* 154), between ironic critique and a sentimental immersion in mass culture. Defined in this way, camp bears a resemblance to my concept of sentimental postmodernism as a hybrid genre invoking both irony and sentimentality, both critical distance and emotional engagement, and both essentialism and anti-essentialism. I argue that *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, as an exemplary text of sentimental postmodernism, exudes a camp sensibility in its aesthetics and in its treatment of the politics of sexuality, gender, and mass culture. The concept of camp is particularly useful for my study because it offers a bridge between aesthetics and the politics of identity--between the textual and the sexual.<sup>7</sup>

Crucial to the camp positioning of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is its merging of the aesthetics and narrative strategies of high cultural postmodernism and of popular culture. The popular sensibility of *Kiss* is evident in its treatment of melodramatic film as a positive vehicle for intimacy between two prison cellmates (Molina and Valentin) and as a means to revivify Valentin's battered spirit. The novel could be described as a tragic love story that tugs at the heart strings, not unlike the B-movies that Molina cherishes and retells to Valentin. Another sign of the text's popularity is that it has been adapted into both a film and Broadway musical.<sup>123</sup> Despite these attributes of a popular sensibility, *Kiss* has most often been received as a high-cultural postmodern text. In the tradition of literary postmodernism and high modernism, *Kiss* challenges the reader with its difficult mixture of narrative elements, including footnotes and stream of consciousness style. *Kiss* directly criticizes the banality of popular culture, upsets narrative expectations, and deconstructs such accepted cultural dichotomies as male/female, rational/emotional, and homosexual/heterosexual.<sup>1</sup>

Although many critics regard *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a high cultural, critical meditation on popular culture, rather than as a participant in popular culture, I contend that the text establishes a symbiotic relationship between the popular and the postmodern that is crucial to its political impact upon audiences. In *The Necessary Dream*, Pamela Bacarisse argues that Puig's novels have drawn two distinct reading publics--serious critical readers with cultural capital, and a mass audience desiring sentimentality, illusion, and comfort (4).<sup>124</sup> Rather than assuming that the text speaks only to discrete audiences with tastes for high or low, I propose that many audience members are attracted by

precisely this “campy” conjunction of opposing aesthetics and worldviews, as the sentimental and the postmodern, the emotional and the critical, speak to one another dialogically in the text. In order to explore how viewers and readers negotiate the dialogic stylistics of this text, I interviewed thirty fans of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (all residing in the Washington, D.C. area) about their responses to the novel, musical, and film versions. While these fans do not view *Kiss* as an example of camp (their definitions being limited to John Waters films or drag spoofs like *Vegas in Space*), I see evidence of a camp sensibility in their readings of this novel, film, and musical, particularly in the way that they embrace ambivalence, viewing it as a productive political strategy rather than a sign of paralyzing indecision.

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

his own oppression (or that of gays as a group) and uses kitschy film as a crutch to escape societal problems. As their dialogue progresses, the two men begin to see through each other's perspective, and their eventual union, both sexual and emotional, represents this larger merging of viewpoints.

Although some of my interview group missed this compromise fusion of extremes and read the text as unambivalently Marxist, most felt that the novel and its adaptations criticize the tendency of Marxist thinkers to deny the human need for fantasy, aesthetic beauty, and emotional connection. I read *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and sentimental postmodernism in general, as a counterpoint to Marxist theorists of the Frankfurt School, such as Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, who rejected sentimental popular culture as tainted tools of fascism. Instead, *Kiss* suggests that a desire for love and aesthetic beauty should not be immediately dismissed as retrograde, because affect is crucial to sustaining political conviction on the Left as well as the Right, and personal desires and dissatisfactions fostered by popular culture could lead to positive change in both the private and public spheres. The text further asserts that the micropolitics of human relationships is just as important as the macropolitics of Marxist revolution.

Reappraising the role of popular culture in the political sphere, *Kiss* suggests that mass culture, and not merely the avant garde, can provoke critical thought.<sup>7</sup> The fact that this novel, film, and musical stir up intense emotions among its audiences works against fascism rather than for it, by fostering respect and sympathy for both leftist revolutionaries and sexual "others."

As part of its project to underscore the micropolitics of the personal sphere, *Kiss*



provokes readers to re-evaluate various categories of identity that have served both to enable and limit freedom. I argue that *Kiss*, in all three of its media forms, has resonated so strongly with contemporary audiences because it reflects, and offers people a means of reflecting upon, their own ambivalent or shifting feelings about gender and sexual identities. Since the voices of anti-essentialist feminists and queer theorists have spread from academia to the mass media, many people are beginning to question their once secure belief in stable identities or to react against the new anti-essentialism. By offering us two main characters who appear to be opposites, *Kiss* invokes a dichotomizing view of identity familiar to fans of melodramatic popular culture. However, while the text seems to condone polarized and essentialist constructions of sexuality and gender in its initial characterization of Molina and Valentin, these binary rubrics blur, shift, and are subverted as the relationship between the two men progresses and eventually becomes sexual. Molina himself is an odd mixture of essentialist conceptions of subjectivity (transsexual, gay, feminine) and anti-essentialist ones (transgender, drag, queer). *Kiss* thus offers its readers the comfort of traditional unitary identities but also urges us to reconsider them without totally undermining their usefulness and emotional pull. This tension between authenticity and anti-essentialist performativity also characterizes the practice of camp.

Since both the popular melodramatic and the postmodern senses of subjectivity are given full play in *Kiss*, the reader is encouraged to consider their competing merits and to think about the political implications of their own self-constructions. This sentimental postmodernist text thus finds a receptive audience among ambivalent people

who appreciate queer theory's attempt to allow broader coalitions but who still feel innately "gay" or "straight," and among people who accept the anti-essentialist position on gender but still cling to comfort zones of gendered behavior. Despite the fact that most of the interviewees appreciated the text's attempt to represent sexuality and gender as fluid, many of the gay and bisexual people in particular also expressed intense feelings of biological and essential otherness and an affinity with identity politics. *Kiss* and the viewers' responses to it suggest both the political promise and the limitations of queer politics, with its emphasis on performativity and surfaces over depth and rootedness.

Because *Kiss* represents its characters' identities so multiply and ambiguously, borrowing from both traditionalist identities and postmodern anti-identitarianism, the viewer or reader is left with a great deal of interpretive freedom. A few of the interpretive choices audiences face are: Is Molina gay, transgender, or transsexual? Is Valentin straight, bisexual, or gay? Do the two men become less polarized in their gender roles, or remain static? Is this a story about the fluidity of gender and sexuality, or about the essential fixity of those characteristics? The multiple interpretations fostered by such mixed textual coding provide an excellent opportunity to study audience response and identification patterns. In the interviews, I set out to examine how people's own identities and abstract thoughts about gender and sexuality might affect or even determine their interpretations of the text's characters and its narratives concerning identity. These individuals--13 gay men, 2 lesbians, 4 bisexual women, 1 bisexual man, 6 heterosexual women, and 4 heterosexual men--did not usually respond in neat patterns according to their sexual and gender self-identifications; I often found that particular interpretations

cut across many of the groups. A naive expectation, based on a vulgar understanding of identity politics, that all gay men or straight women would read the text in a similar way was thwarted by this group.

I do not mean to imply, however, that the self-professed identities of the interviewees had no influence upon their interpretations, but rather to show that such identities are fractured, multiply determined, and layered. Interpretations were clearly affected by how each person conceives of identity in the abstract, and those understandings turned out to be highly individual, politicized, and sometimes contradictory. For example, what sexual identity means to these thirty individuals is hugely variable, influenced by the following beliefs: whether sexual identity is politically chosen or preordained; ostracizing or empowering; based on sexual desires, sexual behavior, or affiliation with a group culture or politics; socially constructed or biologically influenced; fluid or static; essentialist or anti-essentialist; based on a continuum or an either/or binary; or whether it is imbricated with intersecting vectors such as race, gender, class, and age.

Despite these numerous complicating factors that serve to individuate identity, I did find among this audience group that a few types of textual interpretations usually accompanied particular ways of thinking about identity. There was a strong correlation, for example, between a belief in biological essentialism or polarized schemas and a reading of the text as a representation of the fixed and biologically determined nature of identity. Those who embraced fluidity and rejected either/or polarities of sexuality and gender tended to read the text as an exemplar of ambiguity and felt that Valentin and

Molina transcended categories. Yet a significant number of people echoed the mixture of discourses already present in the text by using language that indicated both a popular, melodramatic view of identity as fixed and a postmodern sense of identity as fluid. These diverse audience responses to *Kiss of the Spider Woman* suggest that identity is no longer, or perhaps never was, a static given that overdetermines audience interpretations and response.

While my interviews revealed an astonishing diversity of identity within supposedly homogeneous groups, they also revealed a complex pattern of cross-group identification that has important political implications. In *Identification Papers*, Diana Fuss acknowledges that if identification allows crossing of gender/race/sexual boundaries, it can encourage coalitions and foster empathy for oppressed groups (8).<sup>125</sup> The text of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* enacts such a crossing, as Valentin and Molina slowly retreat from their polar positions and mutual distrust to the point of identification and intimacy with the other. This textual model encouraged my audience group to loosen their own self-conceptions and to discover affinities for the other within the self. The individuals I interviewed revealed a strong capacity for identifying with characters who did not share their own identity affiliations; women and gay men identified with Valentin while heterosexuals and people with masculine personalities identified with Molina. This finding challenges identification theories which reduce identification to a simple process of self-recognition, of finding resemblance and solidifying one's identity. I also found that many people identified with both men at once, or they identified as well as disidentified with the same character, and these ambivalent forms of identification, which

have often been underemphasized in theoretical work on identification, further attest to the complexity of identity.<sup>126</sup> In short, my ethnographic study of responses to *Kiss of the Spider Woman* underscores that identification is a politically charged, emotionally powerful process that can promote self-criticism, a loosening of identity, and progressive coalitions that re-envision the concept of human solidarity.

### **Reception and Production Contexts**

Before I begin analyzing the text of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and its audiences, I would like to outline various contexts of relevance to the study--my audience research methodology, the influence of media context upon my analysis of each version (film, musical, novel), and the historical and cultural contexts influencing the reception of these texts. In order to solicit participants for my study, I placed notices in the volunteer sections of two free newspapers in Washington, DC--*The City Paper* (a liberal weekly covering politics, arts, and events) and *The Washington Blade* (a weekly concerning issues of interest to the gay community). I also placed flyers in coffeeshops and video and book stores in Dupont Circle, a middle-class urban neighborhood with a large percentage of gay residents.<sup>127</sup> These choices were based on some assumptions about the likely American audience for *Kiss*--that they would be culturally literate and possibly well-educated, generally liberal (given the political and sexual themes of the text), and either homosexual, bisexual, or "gay-friendly" heterosexuals.

Although my choice of venues for solicitation may have limited the participants, I nonetheless found quite a diverse group in terms of age, race, ethnicity, religious

background, and sexual identity.<sup>128</sup> However, my solicitation venues or the marketing or appeal of the text itself could have contributed to the group's homogeneity in terms of class (mostly middle class, with a few lower-middle and upper-middle), education (80% had at least a B.A.), and political affiliation (73% were Democrats, socialists, or leftists). The demographic categories of the greatest relevance to my study were those of gender and sexual identity; I interviewed eighteen men and twelve women, ten heterosexuals, fourteen gay or bisexual men, and six lesbian or bisexual women. The skew towards a larger number of gay men was not surprising since *Kiss* is often marketed as a text addressing issues of male homosexuality; in Dupont Circle, one video store displayed the film in a section on gay themes, and Manuel Puig once spoke at the area's gay bookstore, Lambda Rising.

The group of thirty could also be subdivided according to which media version of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* that they read or saw, and it could be argued that my audience group is not in fact responding to the same text, but to three different texts. I decided to examine audience responses to all three versions of *Kiss*, rather than merely the novel (as master text), because the popularity of the film and musical in the United States created a resurgence of interest in the novel. Many of my interviewees had in fact encountered one of the adaptations before the original. Twenty-five people had seen the film, sixteen had read the novel, eight had seen the musical, and eighteen had consumed more than one media version of *Kiss*. While some may question any generalizations one could make about response because of this multi-text factor, I consider it a rich opportunity to address the effect of media context upon reception. For example, each of the three versions is

positioned differently on the high art/popular culture continuum, which may result in different kinds of identifications and audience response. Each version may even attract slightly different audience populations. These differences may be caused in part by the status of the medium in question and by how each text is positioned as a genre within its medium.

For example, even though I see all three versions as blending elements of both high and popular culture, I would position the novel as more highbrow than the film or musical, since novels carry more cultural prestige and since Puig's postmodern text was received largely as a serious, high cultural novel. While Hector Babenco's film contains arty aesthetics and an unconventional plot and thus was marketed to art-house theaters, many of the people I interviewed echoed the popular belief that the medium of film should be classified as entertainment rather than art. Just as the film of *Kiss* is an arty example within a popular medium, the Broadway musical version occupies a similar position as an award-winning, serious-themed show with a difficult score, within a medium that is often perceived as lowbrow and escapist. The slightly different cultural positioning of these textual versions results in different emotional registers and audience expectations. With its use of music and dance, the musical aims to tug directly at the heart strings, and the fans I interviewed cited the emotional catharsis as their favorite aspect of the show. Although many people were emotionally moved by the novel as well, it often provoked a more intellectual response from those I interviewed, who praised the author's narrative technique and ideological message.

It is not surprising that the people in my audience group who had read the novel

and those who had seen the musical differed the most in terms of cultural tastes, and in fact only two people had consumed both novel and musical versions of *Kiss*. The novel-readers tended to be college-educated with somewhat highbrow tastes, favoring canonical and postmodern artists and expressing disdain for musical theater and television. On the other hand, the fans of the musical were more likely to have lowbrow tastes, and their responses were often emotional and visceral rather than analytical or intellectual. As one musical devotee remarked, "I'm a literal person and I don't try to figure out what the hidden messages are. . . . To me, a show is more of a treat to the senses, a fantastic escape." Despite some evidence of polarity in the musical and novel audiences, it is also significant that many individuals did not fit into such neatly separable taste cultures. Those who had seen the film version of *Kiss* enjoyed a wider variety of cultural products, from low-budget indies to Hollywood blockbusters, from James Joyce to television sitcoms. The two people who had both read the novel and seen the musical were college-educated gay men who felt equal affinity for two seemingly opposed taste cultures. And of course, the fact that fourteen people had encountered both the novel and the film suggests a substantial overlap in the audience appeal of these media versions. Because so many individuals belong to multiple taste communities, it is important to avoid overgeneralizing about the relationship between audience tastes and media context; however, I still find it significant that the novel drew more highbrow individuals who responded intellectually while the musical tended to attract more viewers with popular tastes and emotional response patterns.

Although the individuals that I interviewed did not always exhibit such



predictable tastes, the fact that the producers and writers of the film and musical significantly altered the “parent text” of the novel suggests that they aimed their texts at distinct taste communities. In this way, assumptions about reception--about which kinds of people are drawn to a particular medium and genre--can be said to have influenced textual production, resulting in versions with different politics and thematic emphases. I would argue that both the film and the musical are considerably less radical than the novel in their treatment of homosexuality and of Marxist and fascist politics, and I attribute this difference in part to the media context.

The ending of Puig’s novel, which depicts Valentin’s morphine-induced dream after he has been tortured, implies that the “straight” Valentin has indeed fallen in love with Molina, because he fantasizes about a composite lover who is both Molina and his girlfriend Marta.<sup>129</sup> The film’s ending significantly alters the sexual politics of this dream by depicting Valentin rowing away in a boat with Marta only; Molina is nowhere to be seen. Perhaps an expectation that an international film audience would be somewhat uncomfortable with a homosexual “love story” influenced the screenwriter Leonard Schrader and director Hector Babenco to mute the romantic gesture of the novel’s close. The musical moves even further away from a homosexual romance narrative by implying that Valentin has sex with Molina mainly to induce him to carry messages to the Marxist revolutionaries; their relationship is reduced to friendship and Valentin’s motives are primarily political.<sup>130</sup> By appeasing viewers who can not fathom the idea that Valentin might sexually desire and even love Molina, the musical offers the weakest challenge to heterosexist norms. Although musical theater is often considered a gay genre, the white,

middle-class mainstream (in terms of sheer numbers) may still make up the greater part of the audience for expensive Broadway musicals. Thus the musical writers and producers may have altered the narrative on the basis of assumptions about the attitudes and politics of the heterosexual members of their target audience.<sup>131</sup> Since musicals often rely on typed and easily readable characters, perhaps writer Terrence McNally and lyricist Fred Ebb were concerned about allowing Valentin to deviate too far from the heterosexual type that would be recognizable to mainstream audiences. The writers of the two adaptations of *Kiss* were clearly hesitant to take the same political risks that Manuel Puig did in writing his novel, perhaps because they faced larger financial risks. Since films and musicals are expensive media to produce, their production is often more strongly influenced by market projections and anxieties about audience reception.

The different imagined or intended audiences for each media version--Spanish-speaking leftist intellectual novel-readers, English-speaking art-house film-goers in an international market, and U.S./Canadian/British fans of musical theater--also may have affected the writers' differing treatments of Marxist and Fascist politics. Puig imagined an audience of Latin American intellectuals and rebels critical of government oppression, so he assumed the reader's basic sympathy for Marxist causes and the knowledge that more moderate resistance often proves ineffectual against a totalitarian state. By assuming that his readers will sympathize with Valentin, Puig is able to criticize some of Valentin's methods without implying a rejection of his basic ideology. Because the film was made for an international audience with limited knowledge of the oppressive Argentinean political situation, the screenwriters watered down Valentin's politics and

made his “crimes” less threatening--rather than a perpetrator of violent revolt, he is merely a journalist who gives his passport to an old man trying to escape the country.<sup>132</sup> This move strikes me as an attempt to garner more sympathy for Valentin among a world-wide audience fearful of Marxist revolution, who might equate dissidents with terrorists (in fact, some of my audience group used the word “terrorist” to describe Valentin, which suggests that the film wasn’t watered down enough for them).

The musical version of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, geared to an American and British audience generally accepting of capitalism and fearful of violent revolt, softens Valentin’s Marxism even further in an attempt to build sympathy for him. Whereas in the novel and film Valentin’s bourgeois background provokes intense guilt which complicates his political stance, the musical rewrites his origins, depicting him as a starving orphaned beggar who dreamed of a better future. By locating the roots of his Marxism in his poverty, the musical makes Valentin more benignly sympathetic to liberal democratic or even centrist theater-goers. While the writers of the Broadway show tried to distance the text from radical Marxism for an American audience, they also edited out the complicated treatment of fascism in the novel and film. Although the two preceding versions confronted audiences with Molina’s fondness for the aesthetics and romance of Nazi films, and thus blurred the line between good and evil, the musical avoids any mention of Nazi cinema and describes Molina’s favorite film as a melodrama about a woman in love with a Bolshevik student revolutionary (rather than a Nazi officer), a plot which simply mirrors Molina’s love for Valentin. This textual shift absolves the audience from trying to understand how Molina’s love for beautiful aesthetics led him to be

seduced by Nazi propaganda, and from thinking about the larger problem of divorcing aesthetics from politics and morality. In the musical, Marxist revolutionaries are also stripped of any menace or even of an articulate political agenda; they function only as romanticized signs. The show's writers may have assumed that moderate American audiences desire types of good and evil rather than ambiguity, and thus they simplified the musical's politics and stripped its characters of some of their complexity. While the musical offers a camp treatment of Molina's favorite movies, particularly the over-the-top Bolshevik tale, the version of camp employed here has less of a critical edge than it does in the other two media versions.

Although these textual differences in plot and politics seem significant, it is striking that many of those I interviewed were unable to distinguish between the three versions and felt they all expressed the same basic "message" (although this was interpreted variously). Of the eighteen people who had consumed more than one media version, their experience of one medium often bled over into their interpretation of another, to the point of creating a sort of conglomerate text. A few gay viewers even wishfully projected a romance narrative upon the musical because they had glimpsed some of it in the film and/or novel. Reading the novel was generally the most dominant experience among my audience group, coloring how they viewed the other two versions. Even if they read the novel *after* encountering the film or musical, they tended to attribute Puig's work "master text" status. The in-depth character development of the novel, and its extended treatment of Marxism, Fascism, and homosexuality, led some people to use that fuller understanding to interpret, re-interpret, or even to misread the other versions.

Although I did find some differences in interpretation and response that could be attributed to the particular media text in question, these differences were often mitigated by the conglomerate text effect.

It is important to note how the three media versions of *Kiss* target slightly different populations, but I am more interested in how my U.S. audience sample imposed their own cultural values upon a novel that was not written primarily for them. The national context of this group clearly had an effect on their reception of *Kiss*. For example, the understanding of sexual identity among urban Washingtonians, particularly those who adopt a gay identity, varies greatly from a Latin American cultural construction of homosexuality, and most of my audience sample either disregarded the text's original context or were ignorant of the differences. In an interview, Manuel Puig noted that his novel was directed at Spanish-speaking readers, most of whom have been denied information about the origins of homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> In order to educate people, he included footnotes summarizing the history of theoretical discourse about homosexuality and intended them to be taken seriously (Christ 28). The fact that many of my interviewees read the footnotes as ironic send-ups of "out-dated" Freudian theories indicates their distance from the intended audience of Latin Americans in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Most importantly, social constructions of homosexuality in the U.S. are quite different than in Latin America, where only the receptor, the one who is sexually penetrated, is considered to be "maricón" (fag, queer); such penetration implies a loss of masculinity which Latin Americans associate with homosexuality (Foster 2). The active penetrator who adopts the macho role is considered to be straight and may even be

married. As David Foster points out in *Sexual Textualities*, Latin Americans do not equate gay sexual acts with a gay identity, and they frown upon homosexual identity politics as a non-Spanish concept (4-5). Argentinean readers might view Valentin and Molina's relationship through this lens (even though Puig attempts to challenge such gender-stereotyped notions), and they might be less likely than my American audience group to consider Valentin to be gay or bisexual. To understand or criticize the novel's take on sexual identity, the American readers invoked contexts that would have been foreign to a Latin American audience--gay liberation and gay pride, a belief that gay sex acts imply a gay or bisexual identity, the disassociation of homosexuality and gender inversion, and the Kinsey scale.<sup>7</sup>

I would argue that these fans are not simply reading against the grain of the text, because Puig himself was well aware of American sexual theories and included only European and U.S. scholars in his footnotes. The novel was also written while Puig was living in Greenwich Village right after the Stonewall riots, and his text seems to offer an implicit commentary on gay liberationism and identity politics in the 1970s. In a 1979 interview, Puig applauded the self-respect fostered by gay liberation in the U.S., but he also saw "danger in the American attitude" of viewing homosexuals and heterosexuals as different and segregated species (Christ 28).<sup>8</sup> In *Kiss*, Puig clearly criticizes the gender stereotyping inherent in the Latin American construction of sexual roles, but he also appreciates the ability of that construction to break down the rigid barrier between heterosexuals and homosexuals, to make people such as Valentin aware of their potential for bisexuality (Christ 30).<sup>9</sup> I argue that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* mediates between Latin

American and United States' constructions of sexuality in the early 1970s, a dialogic which my American audience group translated into their own cultural terms and debates of the 1990s--gay liberationism vs. queerness, essentialism vs. anti-essentialism, pre-Stonewall inversion vs. transgenderism, sexual acts vs. identities, and gender polarities vs. androgyny. The fact that the later film and musical were produced in English also gave audiences justification for reading the texts in an American cultural context.

Not only did this audience group read Puig's novel out of its original cultural context, but they also read it out of historical context. In a sense, my interviewees and I are interpreting the 1976 novel anachronistically by connecting it to recent debates about identity politics vs. queer anti-essentialism.<sup>133</sup> It is important to remember, however, that ideas we now identify as "queer" were in circulation in the U.S. and other cultures long before the late '80s and '90s, when they become codified as queer theory. Manuel Puig might be called proto-queer in his desire to move beyond the limits of either/or identity choices to embrace a "natural" bisexuality. He once made the anti-identitarian comment that "a sense of identity should never be based on sexual orientation" (Bacarisse, *Impossible Choices* 101).<sup>134</sup> His sensibilities may have been influenced both by a Latin American suspicion of gay identity and by a strain of mid-'70s American gay culture that was incipiently queer in its pursuit of the ideals of androgyny and bisexuality, despite the hegemony of essentialist discourses of gay liberationism at the time.<sup>135</sup>

Not only do I read *Kiss* as queer before the term came into vogue, but I also argue that the text is infused with an uncanny prescience, as if it is criticizing queer politics from a belated point of view that audiences of the late 1990s now share. Despite Puig's

anti-identitarianism, *Kiss* shows respect for Molina's deeply felt otherness and refuses to treat sexuality as merely a performative surface phenomenon, and this point of view resonated strongly with my audience group. I contend that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* can be read as pre-queer, proto-queer, and post-queer all at the same time. The temporal conflation is further fueled by the fact that the film and musical adaptations were created in the 1980s and 1990s, when discourses concerning sexuality were rapidly being transfigured; thus the storyline took on new valences and political meanings for audiences, some of whom read it as radically queer while others saw it as a throwback to a pre-Stonewall era.<sup>136</sup> At the root of this diversity of response is the text's hybridity--it elicits sympathy for both identity politics and queer politics, but ultimately endorses neither and rests in the space between. It looks forward but also backward, reappraising both old and new paradigms. This temporal and cultural liminality--this mediation between different national cultures and moments in the history of discourses of sexuality--makes *Kiss of the Spider Woman* an ideal text to shed light on the complex process of audience reception.

### **Textual Hybridity--Pop Cultural Kitsch Meets Postmodernism**

Another kind of hybridity is also crucial to the cultural work that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* accomplishes--its mediation between melodramatic popular culture and formally experimental high culture. Even though each media version of *Kiss* is differently positioned on the continuum from low to high culture, they all attempt to conjoin narrative and aesthetic elements that are often perceived as culturally at odds.



However, it is easy to see why critics have tended to stress the elements of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* that might be considered high modernist, avant garde, or postmodern.<sup>137</sup> From page one, the novel immediately announces itself as highbrow by challenging the reader to distinguish the characters from each other. Instead of a traditional narrative introduction to the characters and situation, *Kiss* begins *in medias res* with a dialogue already in progress and omits the speakers' names, which are not revealed until the end of the chapter.<sup>1</sup> The film begins with a similarly disorienting technique, eschewing the traditional establishing shot and instead offering the viewer a disembodied voice and a slowly roving camera that reveals glimpses of a bare room and snippets of a man's body dressed in drag. Both novel and film deliberately frustrate the passive reader/spectator in order to encourage a more active and critical interpretation process.

In the novel, Puig employs many experimental narrative techniques that force the reader to work hard to make meaning, thus increasing the potential for alienation or confusion but also for intellectual pleasure.<sup>1</sup> The variety of narrative techniques--such as dialogue, stream of consciousness monologues, academic footnotes, play scripts, and impersonal official reports--works to shatter a perspective of omniscience and to draw attention to form, two aesthetic projects that are often associated with high modernism and literary postmodernism. Michael Wood of the *New York Review of Books* compares Puig to Joyce for his "remarkable interior monologues" (19). The most characteristically postmodern feature of the text is its academic-style footnotes (mostly concerning theories about homosexuality), which interrupt immersion in the narrative and push the reader to make intellectual connections between the footnotes and the storyline above. The absurd

and often random placement of the footnotes, however, frustrates a reader's desire for legibility even further.<sup>138</sup> Linda Hutcheon argues that Puig's footnotes exemplify postmodern parody and irony, because the authority of these "experts" on sexuality and politics is undermined by their failure to explain the behavior of the characters (*Politics* 85).<sup>139</sup> While Puig thwarts a desire for simple keys to unlock the characters' psyches, he also rewards the careful reader by offering more subtle connections, such as clever intertextual and allegorical doubling between the inset narrated films and the lives of Molina and Valentin.<sup>139</sup> The text closes with Valentin's surreal dream narrative, which leaves many questions unanswered: Does Valentin love Molina? What motivated Molina to pass on the message to Valentin's comrades--love, a movie-inspired desire for a tragic fate, or an awakened political conscience? *Kiss*' experiments in form and its attempt to engage audiences in active, critical interpretation might satisfy even Theodor Adorno's criteria for modernist art.

In addition to fostering critical questioning among readers and spectators, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* marks its distance from typical melodramatic film and formula fiction by deconstructing the dichotomies commonly employed by popular texts. Melodramas often rely heavily on a victim vs. villain structure in which innocence usually triumphs over evil, and *Kiss* invokes such a structure by immediately drawing our sympathies towards men unjustly imprisoned and tortured by a fascist government. But midway through the text, we discover that Molina is no longer simply a victim, because he has consented to the warden's bargain to wheedle information out of Valentin in exchange for an early parole. Neither is Valentin an uncomplicated victim, for despite his own

egalitarian principles, he oppresses Molina by harshly belittling his values and feelings. By urging Molina to pass a message to his revolutionary comrades and by minimizing the danger of that venture, Valentin is also inadvertently responsible for Molina's death. Both characters are multi-faceted, capable of both kindness and treachery, unlike the pure types of melodrama. Pamela Bacarisse sees in the novel a Foucaultian message that power and oppression are ubiquitous, despite Marxists' and melodramatists' faith that they can be eradicated; even the exploited have the potential to exploit those less powerful (*Necessary Dream* 100). The grim ending of the text also diverges from typical melodramatic closure, in that evil remains unchecked--Molina is killed while trying to deliver the message, and Valentin is once again tortured in prison.

⌈ In addition to questioning melodrama's polarization of good and evil, the novel and film versions of *Kiss* also deconstructs the cultural dichotomies of masculine/feminine and gay/straight, identity binaries that are often reinforced by popular texts.<sup>140</sup> The text questions a culture that devalues qualities associated with femininity--emotionality, escapism, sentimentality, passivity, and desire for beauty and comfort--and that lauds rationality, intellectualism, realism, irony, stoicism, political activism, and critical detachment as exclusively masculine traits. Believing that all humans exhibit both masculine and feminine traits, Puig argued that "the woman most desperately in need of liberation is the woman every man has locked up in the dungeons of his own psyche" (Christ 26). ⌋ For example, although Valentin at first embodies the stereotype of the macho male, his emotional longing for his girlfriend Marta and his desire for fantastic escape through film are more powerful than his attempts to repress them. In the novel's

final dream narrative and in the last shots of the film, Valentin embraces the “feminine” world of comfort, love, and peace, imagining himself in a romantic beach landscape resembling one of Molina’s movies. On the other hand, while Molina seems stereotypically feminine and extremely emotional, he also displays “masculine” behavior by bravely double-crossing the warden. By the end of the text, this once effeminate man becomes masculinized as he agrees to act politically by contacting Valentin’s comrades, stands up to his godfather for the first time, and rationally settles his bank accounts before carrying out his final life-threatening mission.

Just as the two men move away from their initially gender-stereotyped behavior, even to the point of merging or switching places, the text also blurs their place in a binary rubric of sexual identity. The once securely macho heterosexual Valentin willingly engages in gay sex, and in the novel he appears to feel love and desire for Molina. While Molina seems uncomplicatedly homosexual at first, we learn that he feels like a heterosexual woman at heart. Their sexual union allows both men to redefine themselves in a more fluid and liberating way, as they are transformed into “someone else, who’s neither a man nor a woman,” neither gay nor straight, “but someone who feels . . . out of danger” (235). By disrupting binary understandings of gender and sexuality, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* denaturalizes these qualities and underscores their constructedness and fluidity. This post-structuralist, anti-essentialist sensibility once again situates *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a postmodern text, pushing audiences to reject dualistic models that exaggerate and oversimplify human difference.<sup>7</sup>

One could also discern a high modernist or avant garde message in the text about

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

over popular B-movies” by highlighting the clichés and absurdity of the Nazi melodrama (337).

While all of these characteristics have led to a frequent classification of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as modernist, postmodern, or at least high cultural, I would argue that the text does not merely mock kitsch culture, but also exudes a pop sensibility itself. *Kiss* differs greatly from high modernist texts like *Ulysses* whose ironic inclusion of pop cultural references does nothing to alter their status as high cultural *objets d’art*. Despite its formal difficulty and promotion of critical thinking, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* also solicits emotional engagement and encourages audience identification, much like Molina’s favorite popular films. As one interviewee said of the text, “it’s designed to pull at your heartstrings, and it works.” Many were moved to tears because they saw it as a story about the basic human need for intimacy and love, and they long for such a connection with another person in their own lives, just as Molina pines for the romance of Leni Lamaison and her Nazi officer. Molina’s belief that “there are reasons of the heart that reason doesn’t encompass” (259) emerges as a truth for the whole text, one which even Valentin learns to accept. The reader is even encouraged to respect kitschy love ballads because they “contain real truths” about human emotional life (139). Gustavo Pellón argues that Puig demonstrates “that the human element of sincere emotion can redeem even the most banal mode of expression” (198). This questioning of reason’s supremacy and insistence on the importance of emotionality and romance places the text in a melodramatic lineage. The high value that *Kiss* places on emotionality also links it to camp; for example, Dyer attributes gay men’s campy identification with Judy Garland

partly to the fact that her songs register “intense, authentic feeling . . . and suffering” (*Heavenly* 149).

*Kiss*’s attempt to foster identification with its characters and immersion in its fictional world is clearly a popular strategy at odds with the alienation effect favored by avant garde artists such as Brecht. One gay man said he “cried like a river” at the age of fifteen upon encountering a positive, brave gay character that he could identify with. This solicitation of identification is accomplished through various means--by giving audiences access to the characters’ private thoughts through first-person narratives and stream of consciousness in the novel, through point-of-view shots and subjective dreams and memories in the film, and through outpourings of emotion in the musical’s songs. Identification is also an overt theme of the narrative--as Molina and Valentin discuss which film characters they identify with, the reader/viewer of *Kiss* is prompted to ask himself the same question of Puig’s characters; this parallel implies that the inset popular films and the formally experimental outer text are not as different as they seem. Although leftists have often criticized popular culture for attempting to seduce audiences, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* condones rather than critiques such a strategy. As one interviewee aptly put it, “there’s this strong theme of seduction, as Molina and Valentin seduce each other through story-telling, and I was entranced and seduced by that plot myself.” This reader, who normally considers himself a “lowbrow kind of guy,” was also attracted to the story for its gradual building of suspense and tension, which he compared to detective fiction.

Although I have noted earlier that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* eschews the

melodramatic prescription of happy and moralistic closure, it could also be argued that the ending borrows elements from tragic popular romances. Molina's "noble sacrifice" for Valentin's cause recalls Leni's romantic death defending the interests of her lover (in the Nazi film), and the ill-fated relationship of Molina and Valentin echoes the tragic love between the singer and the alcoholic journalist (in the Mexican film). By mirroring these popular plots in his own tale, Puig acknowledges their emotional power. At the close of Puig's text, even Valentin acquiesces to his desires for fantasy, escape, and love, finally accepting the value of Molina's melodramatic worldview. The last shot of the film version, in which Valentin and Marta row off into the sunset in a boat, may be read as a parody because it is such an obvious melodramatic cliché; however, many viewers did not read this scene as ironic but rather experienced it as a respectful and poignant treatment of the human need for escapism. One reader found this ending to be uplifting, much like popular texts, "since Valentin was finally free for the first time." As Jonathan Tittler notes of the novel, "escapism is not disparaged out of hand" (56). Even as it tries to critique such banal closure, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* clearly evokes the outlines of popular tragedies and melodramas and even endorses some of their romantic and escapist values.

Similarly, although the text deconstructs the dichotomies of melodrama, the remnants of such rubrics are still present, appealing to audiences with popular tastes. About one-third of my audience group read the text in terms of familiar types and polarities (masculine/feminine, gay/straight, victim/villain, fascist/marxist) and did not notice any questioning of dichotomies. Their reading of the text, which differs from the



predominant critical take on the novel, was influenced by their differing cultural sensibilities and tastes. While I and many other readers saw moments of deconstruction in the text, it is also clear that the author has respect for the emotional pull and clear world picture that binary cultural rubrics afford people, even as he resists the harmful effects of stereotypes. Like Molina, Puig was addicted to popular melodramas, watching as many as three or four daily (Manrique 24). *Kiss of the Spider Woman* mounts a defense of popular culture by suggesting that such films can work to loosen the identities of viewers, rather than merely reifying traditional stereotypes. Although these movies solidify Molina's stereotypical feminine behavior, they help Valentin to face his emotions, uncover his *anima*, rethink his macho heterosexual identity, and connect with another person; in short, the films' emphasis on empathy and identification humanizes Valentin and allows him to explore his complexity as an individual. Thus the text counters the critical view of melodramatic film as a duping mechanism which merely sutures viewers into limiting identities.

By implying that popular texts, and not only the avant garde, can foster progressive micropolitical change, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* attempts to question artistic hierarchies and the critical assumptions that accompany them. Such assumptions include the beliefs that only formally experimental, non-realist aesthetics can have transgressive politics, that popular culture never fosters critical thought, and that the emotional strategies of melodrama are merely manipulative and escapist tactics that foster conservatism or even fascism. While Puig's novel notes the drawbacks of both sentimentality and the rationalist alienation promoted by avant- gardists and high

modernists, the text also attempts to fuse their merits, by fostering critical questioning and active reading as well as emotional engagement, human sympathy, and the recognition that the personal is political.

By focusing on this fusion or mediation, I take issue with those critics who argue that Puig's ironic tone totally undermines any sentimental moments in the text. Stephanie Merrim, for example, reads *Kiss* as a parodic exposé of mass culture's stupefying properties (157).<sup>141</sup> Merrim echoes the viewpoint of Fredric Jameson, who believes that the presence of irony and post-structuralist sensibilities in postmodern texts preclude any investment in deep feeling.<sup>142</sup> By presenting irony as omnipotent and sentimentality as anemic, these critics reveal a prejudice that blinds them to the complexity of hybrid texts. Instead, I situate myself with critics like Pamela Bacarisse who recognize the hybridity of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and its postmodern mediation between high and low culture. She counters these arguments by noting that Puig employs irony not as a means of mocking the characters but of identifying with them as victims of life's ironic situations (*Necessary* 99-105). Here irony works to increase identification and sympathy rather than to undermine it. In *Impossible Choices*,<sup>143</sup> Bacarisse further points out that Puig refuses to observe the "'Great Divide' between mass culture and the canon of high modernism" (2) because he sees "no vital difference between highbrow and lowbrow art, which are both valid indicators of personal and collective truths" (9).<sup>143</sup>

While several critics have noted the novel's dialogic vacillation between an engagement with and a critique of popular culture, many of them still display a preference for critical distance and a prejudice against kitsch reminiscent of Clement Greenberg.

Like Bacarisse, Gustavo Pellón focuses on Puig's ambivalent "double vision" as a merging of criticism and empathetic participation in popular culture, and he rightly points out that many critics have missed Puig's appreciation of kitsch (193). However, Pellón nonetheless reveals an anti-popular bias by referring to kitsch as a "parasitic art form" that betrays viewers into self-deception, "intellectual passiveness," and "servility" (199). Since he deems Puig's attempt to merge high and low culture a "fascinating contradiction" (199) that ultimately is impossible to sustain, he underestimates the political power of such hybridity. Similarly, Philip Swanson views the dialectic at work in *Kiss* (novel and film) as a problematic contradiction rather than a productive tension, and he equates popular culture with conservatism (341). Arguing that Puig's texts "consistently deconstruct any ideology or sentiment they appear to be expounding or expressing" (332), Swanson wrongly concludes that the novel's dialectic leads to "self-cancellation" (332) and confusion rather than a plurality of ways of seeing or a productive double vision.

Although I am not the first critic to recognize the dialogism of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, my paradigm of sentimental postmodernism attempts to look at such hybridity as politically potent rather than regrettable and avoids the anti-popular biases exhibited by so many of these critics. In addition, nearly all of the critical articles on the text's dialogism offer formalist readings, rather than situating the strategy in cultural or political context as I aim to do. Laura Rice-Sayre accurately points out that "most critics have taken refuge in a formalist discussion of the plurality of styles, the multiple play of discourses, and the polysemic qualities of the text and have tended to ignore or even deny the political

content and form the novel's dialogue embodies" (248).<sup>7</sup> Santiago Colás counters this tendency in his book *Postmodernity in Latin America*, offering useful readings of Puig's postmodern mixture of high and mass culture against the backdrop of Argentinean Peroniste politics, but his argument focuses only on the macropolitical, rather than investigating the text's considerable investments in micropolitical change. Furthermore, the few critics who analyze the political content of *Kiss* and explore its surrounding contexts are mainly concerned with identifying the sources of Puig's ambivalence. None has considered what effect his ambivalent texts have upon audiences or has attempted to locate the politics of the text in its interface with readers and viewers.<sup>7</sup>

For a brief example of the effects of the hybridity of sentimental postmodernism, I turn to my students' responses to *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, which we read in the context of understanding postmodern narrative technique, an unlikely forum for the outpouring of emotion. We had previously read Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, which the class found to be a clever but dry exercise in parodying Victorian culture. Because Fowles' characters did not solicit identification or even sympathy, the students were minimally engaged although they found it to be an intellectually challenging read. Even though they were also challenged by Puig's narrative style, these formal innovations did not result in reader alienation or ironic detachment. In contrast, many of the students were moved to tears by *Kiss of the Spider Woman's* affirmation of the power of human intimacy. Because they identified so strongly with Molina and Valentin, their debates about the political meanings of *Kiss* were also more heated than their discussions of Fowles' highbrow text. Their ability to think critically was not hampered by their

emotional responses, as detractors of sentimentality often argue; in fact, it was enhanced. In contrast to disaffected highbrow postmodernism, the emotional engagement fostered by this hybrid text gave it more power to affect these students on a political and ideological level, to get them thinking about the meaning of gender and sexuality. But unlike typical Hollywood melodramas and sentimental fiction, *Kiss* upsets rigid notions of identity rather than confirming them, and provokes an empathetic and thoughtful response to difference rather than stereotyping and denigrating social others. Because the text deconstructs rigid character types, heterosexual students were able to identify with the effeminate gay character Molina, which helped them to rethink homophobia and gender stereotypes. It even prompted them to communicate more respectfully with a gay student in our class. This fusion of emotional and critical strategies is the key to the cultural and political power of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and of sentimental postmodernism as a genre.

### **Camp as Sentimentality-cum-Irony**

Sentimental postmodernism, with its ambivalent attitude toward popular culture and its mixture of sentimentality and irony, shares some qualities with the strategy of “camp,” depending on how one defines the concept. The term is often used to describe a gay or queer sensibility or political strategy that critiques the absurdities and incongruities of mainstream heterosexual culture by exaggerating them. Camp has come to be associated with postmodernism and post-structuralism because of its emphasis on surfaces, play, irony, performativity, parody, and a denaturalization of gender and sexual

roles.<sup>144</sup> Because of the influence of Judith Butler's analysis of drag in *Gender Trouble*, many theorists of camp read it as a post-structuralist, anti-essentialist strategy. For example, Moe Meyer argues that camp must be seen as a specifically queer form of postmodern parody that enacts an "oppositional critique of bourgeois essentialism" (18). In line with a reading of camp as a post-structuralist tactic, many critics see irony as its chief trait. For example, Scott Long defines camp as a critical stance toward kitsch that "enjoys its distance: by definition it refuses to identify with the films except in mocking fashion" (87).

Rather than reading camp as post-structuralist, I align myself with those critics who focus on camp as involving more than just ironic distance, but also an emotional engagement in mass culture and the depth models of identity employed therein. Andrew Ross notes that gay camp often involves an appreciation of mass culture's "feminine" emphasis on emotionality (70). Jack Babuscio sees camp as an "emotional tone" not equivalent to mockery because it "implies fervent involvement" and earnestness rather than mere disdain for the object being camped (23).<sup>145</sup> The seriousness with which drag queens often take their performance of gender also suggests this duality--even as their performance questions the naturalness of sex roles, some queens with transsexual desires may nonetheless be sentimentally attached to femininity as an essential identity.<sup>146</sup> ¶ I see camp as a dualistic attitude involving both surface and depth, emotional engagement with popular culture and ironic detachment, anti-essentialism and essentialism.<sup>7</sup> My argument takes its lead from Richard Dyer, who claims in *Heavenly Bodies* that a gay camp "sensibility holds together qualities that are thought elsewhere to be antithetical:

theatricality and authenticity . . . intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity” (154). Jane Feuer extended Dyer’s point to argue that camp “embraces both identification and parody--attitudes normally viewed as mutually exclusive--at the same time and as part of the same sensibility” (*Seeing* 135). Dyer’s focus on camp as “passion-with-irony” (155) echoes my analysis of the dialectic at work in sentimental postmodernism.

Despite its overwhelmingly serious rather than playful tone, I argue that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* exudes a camp sensibility and encourages such a political strategy among its audiences. Molina’s excessive attention to the *mise en scene* of melodramatic film evokes a camp sensibility, an “emphasis on sensuous surfaces, textures, imagery, and the evocation of mood as stylistic devices . . . fascinating in themselves” (Babuscio 22). It could be argued that Molina’s subtle transvestitism (in the film version, he wears earrings, makeup, a scarf, and a woman’s robe) also participates in the theatrical, denaturalizing aspects of camp, although he is simultaneously invested in the authenticity of gender norms. By making such declarations as “my real name is Carmen [the tragic opera heroine]” (65), Molina suggests the performativity of gender and ironizes the essentialist discourse of “realness.” Bacarisse also notes that the identification of Molina and his friends with actresses could be read as camp: “this marginalized group’s ‘camp’ view of their own situation . . . [is] accurately reflected in subservient, frustrated, suffering, feminine images” (*Impossible* 105). While Molina might appear to be a campy reader of melodramas in that he fetishizes their glitzy surface aesthetics and feminine emotionality, I would argue that his reading of these texts lacks an oppositional attitude

toward their gender stereotypes, heterosexist values, and conservative (even fascist) politics. In my view, Molina lacks the critical distance and oppositional intent to qualify him as a true practitioner of camp.

But the critical eye that Molina lacks is provided by the text of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a whole. Babenco's film version clearly parodies the Nazi inset film, and the musical version also mocks extravagant, upbeat numbers, particularly in the song "Morphine Tango," whose own incongruity in the midst of this darkly serious play underscores the general absurdity of musical plots. However, these mass cultural objects are not merely critiqued and mocked, but are also fondly enjoyed for their beauty and treated as valuable conduits for emotional release. By uniting the emotional investment of Molina and the critical detachment of Valentin, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* adopts the dualism of a gay camp attitude. In an interview, Puig once defined his own version of camp: "ridiculing and trying to destroy something one loves in order to prove that it is indestructible" (qtd. in Bacarisse, *Necessary Dream*, 53).

Although most of my audience group interpret "camp" to mean a humorous or silly form of send-up, and thus they would not apply the term to such a serious and moving text, some of their responses to *Kiss* could be described as campy in the more expansive sense that I have been theorizing. Many were able to be emotionally engaged in the story and in the mass cultural films that Molina retells, while also maintaining some intellectual distance to question their ideology. One self-described "fag hag" who loves campy films noted that she could see the Nazi film through both Molina and Valentin's eyes: "I'm Jewish and I loved how Valentin told Molina--'You moron, this is



fascist propaganda!’ But at the same time, Molina was right, it was a beautiful film.”

Another highly intellectual, leftist reader reported that she “connected in a visceral way” to Molina’s rendition of *Cat People*, because she loves the popular genres of horror and the fantastic. She stated, however, that even when she’s enjoying pop culture “for what it is,” she never turns off her analytical mind or leftist viewpoint. For these viewers/readers, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* encouraged a camp reading process that satisfied their more visceral, kitschy desires as well as their intellectual cravings and leftist ideologies.

### **Political Camp and the “Aestheticization of Politics”**

I view camp not merely as a dualistic sensibility that holds sentimentality and irony in tension, but also as a political strategy. Critical discussions about the politics of camp have been inevitably circumscribed by assumptions about the politics of mass culture. Most theorists who praise camp as a subversive strategy view it as an ironic practice in opposition to sentimental kitsch, which is assumed to be inherently conservative, and thus they tend to ignore that camp also involves an attraction to a sentimental aesthetic of the “beautiful.” These post-structuralist-influenced critics locate camp’s radicality in its denaturalizing effects and ironic style.<sup>147</sup> On the other hand, those who criticize post-structuralism and postmodernism for being apolitical, passive, or lacking in seriousness tend to see camp’s politics in the same vein. Andrew Ross views camp as an anemic form of political resistance, too fascinated by the capitalist culture industry which it purports to critique.<sup>148</sup> I view camp’s politics as offering a limited

subversion and a partial critique from within, rather than an opposition from a pure space outside of the hegemonic culture and its value systems; as I have been arguing, this political standpoint is typical of sentimental postmodernism. The camp strategy at work in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* borrows from both post-structuralist and Marxist politics but fully endorses neither.

The political aims of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* are wide-ranging, involving a re-evaluation of critical assumptions about camp, kitsch, sentimentality, irony, Marxism, and the avant garde. The plot line exploring Molina's investment in the beautiful surfaces of the Nazi film "Her Real Glory" raises questions about the politics of sentimental mass culture, questions that were addressed earlier in the century by the Marxist-influenced Frankfurt School theorists, particularly Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." I argue that *Kiss of the Spider Woman*'s postmodern perspective moves audiences to question Adorno's fear of mass culture and his belief that only the formalist experimentation of high modernism can foster radical critique. By acknowledging the radical as well as the conservative potential of sentimentality, Puig also invites us to reconsider some of Benjamin's ideas in "The Work of Art," particularly his demonizing of kitsch's "aestheticization of politics"--a focus on beautiful aesthetics and sentimental rhetoric as tools to manipulate audiences politically. While maintaining a leftist perspective, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* eschews the Frankfurt School's categories for judging the political value of cultural objects and suggests that affect can be a useful tool for the Left as well as the Right.

Even though Benjamin and Adorno wrote before the advent of postmodernism, their ideas about mass culture, aesthetics, and politics are relevant to this discussion because they have had a lasting impression on contemporary cultural criticism, from Marxist-influenced cultural studies to critics of postmodernism such as Baudrillard and Jameson.<sup>149</sup> Both Benjamin and Adorno argued that the beautiful aesthetics of mass culture--and the sentimental, comforting emotions it engenders--result in audience passivity and regressive politics, a conclusion which I and Manuel Puig challenge. Although much of Benjamin's work treats mass culture more positively, in his most influential essay "The Work of Art" he reveals concerns about fascist kitsch's beautification of war and reactionary politics: "the logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. . . . [Mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art" (587-88). Objecting to a fascist "aestheticization of politics," Benjamin condemns the attempt to falsely recreate art with "aura" that invokes ritual values, beautiful aesthetics, sentimentality, and mystification. As Arato and Gebhart explain, "works with aura produce concentration, empathy, absorption, and identification on the part of the reader, or audience--modes of response that lead according to . . . Benjamin to political and esthetic [sic] passivity" (209). At this point in his career, Benjamin favored "political art" such as that produced by the Soviets and playwright Bertolt Brecht, art that alienates and shocks audiences to produce an active and critically distanced estrangement rather than enraptured identification.<sup>150</sup>

Exhibiting a much stronger anti-popular bias than Benjamin, Theodor Adorno was harshly critical of the passivity of audience's responses to the beautiful aesthetics of kitsch. Adorno condemned all products of the "culture industry" as conformist, repetitious, and complacent. Arguing that mass culture enslaved people into acceptance of the status quo, Adorno saw little difference between the Nazi propaganda machine and the American liberal culture industry (Jay 297). He saw radical potential only in the critical, noncommodified "autonomous art" of formally innovative high modernism (Arato and Gebhart 217). In my view, he wrongly assumes that a particular form implies a particular politics. Critical of social realism and directly political artists, Adorno argued in his essay "Commitment" that the shock, dissonance, and active response produced by modernist aesthetics are the best means of achieving the leftist goal of critiquing capitalist conformity (Arato and Gebhart 300). Adorno's insistence on the distinction between high and low art ("The Culture Industry" 135), and his total resistance to commodification, positions him as an opponent of popular forms of postmodernism. While he might have lauded *Kiss of the Spider Woman's* experimental aesthetics, he surely would have objected to the text's sympathy for the values of mass culture.

*Kiss of The Spider Woman* offers a challenge to Adorno's generalizations about the politics of popular culture and to Benjamin's equation of beautiful aesthetics with fascism. While Benjamin is horrified by the Nazis' beautification of death and war, Puig asserts that aesthetic pleasure is crucial to human life, even if it serves to glorify death. Because Molina wanted to "die like some heroine in a movie" (279), he certainly experiences his own death as an aesthetic pleasure, just as he had enjoyed the death of his

Nazi film heroine. But the text urges us to empathize with his desire for beauty and sentimentality, which he believes give meaning to his life, rather than to judge him harshly as a masochistic dupe of the culture industry. Puig's camp strategy could be read as an "aestheticization of politics," in that camp's politics are primarily stylistic and aesthetic. *Kiss* asks us to rethink the assumption that the "beautiful" is automatically prone to fascist political manipulation, by reminding of its association with a different form of leftist critique--a queer politics of gesture and campy play with surfaces. As Angela McRobbie argues, "glamour, glitter and gloss should not so easily be relegated to the insistently apolitical" (*Postmodernism* 20).

More importantly, *Kiss* reminds that empathy and identification, which Benjamin and Adorno disdain for discouraging critical thought and fostering political passivity, may in fact move people to take political action, perhaps even in a leftist direction.<sup>151</sup> Molina decides to act politically and risk his life precisely because he loves and respects Valentin. And even though Valentin believes that emotion will interfere with his political goals, it is presumably his own empathy for the poor and oppressed, despite growing up bourgeois, that moved him to commit his life to the Marxist cause in the first place. Valentin's Marxist anti-emotional dogma, which leads him to renounce his bourgeois lover Marta, is ironically shown to be more repressive and less humane than the message of "Her Real Glory," a fascist film which admits the complexity and power of love, even if it involves betrayal of one's beliefs or nation. Here Puig seems to be previewing the call of Lawrence Grossberg and Chantal Mouffe, who have argued that the Left has much to learn from the Right's effective use of affect to mobilize people.<sup>152</sup> In "Postmodernity

and Affect,” Grossberg argues that the disjunction between affect and ideology fostered by modernism and Marxism has resulted in a postmodern apathy and therefore a “crisis of the very possibility of politics” (290). In the face of this crisis, he sees in postmodern popular culture a crucial site for affective empowerment, because it creates a basic “mattering map” of identification, belonging, investment, and engagement that is essential to political involvement (*We Gotta* 82). Grossberg writes: “affective relations are, at least potentially, the condition of possibility for the optimism, invigoration and passion which are necessary for any struggle to change the world” (*We Gotta* 86).

Perfectly illustrating Grossberg’s argument about the importance of affect to political consciousness, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* offers a warning to the Left as well as a strategy for its revival. Although Puig recognizes Adorno’s complaint that film culture can dupe and limit people, the author sees leftist potential in mass culture’s utopian spirit, which fosters a desire for change even as it shapes one’s emotions in limiting ways. *Kiss* implies that because Valentin lacked the emotional aspects of a utopian spirit, his rationalist politics were ineffectual. As the text progresses, he regains this utopian feeling through “escapist” popular culture, a possibility which Adorno ignores. Listening to the kitschy ending of the zombie film induces Valentin to imagine a happy ending to his own violent internal monologue: “the rich one sleeps peacefully after bestowing his wealth upon the poor one” (214). The novel’s last sentence also attests to the human need for a utopian space where love triumphs: “this dream is short but this dream is happy” (281). It could also be argued that Molina’s obsession with love stories gives him hope for a social acceptance of homosexual romance. Rather than merely being pacified by the culture

industry and the capitalist ethos underlying it, Molina expresses some dissatisfaction with his shallow life of surfaces: “being a window dresser all day, enjoyable as it is, when the day’s finished, sometimes you begin to ask yourself what’s it all about, and you feel kind of empty inside” (70). He recognizes that his own life lacks a plot and therefore a purpose: “when does my life start?” (254). Popular film actually *fosters* his longing for a more meaningful and emotionally fulfilling life, a longing which leads him to take political action at the end of the text.

While *Kiss* points out the potential merits of affective pop culture and of its “aestheticization of politics,” Puig also clearly aims to make art that is more directly political and leftist, although his vision of “the political” differs from the Frankfurt School and more traditional Marxism. Although Puig revels in surfaces and explores the subversive qualities of camp, he does not see aesthetics as the sole means of achieving an anti-fascist political point. Rather than pursuing its leftist goals via an aesthetic of defamiliarization as Adorno recommends, the text urges a more direct form of political action in the diegesis or narrative content. Despite its ironies and playful aesthetics, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* could be called a social protest novel or film; several of my audience group even labelled it “leftist propaganda.” Towards the end of the novel, Valentin seems to be speaking for Puig when he urges Molina to turn his campy, ironic form of resistance into something more likely to effect change, by joining some group (possibly of other gays), “even if it’s a group that just does a lot of talking” (215). Valentin’s attempt to raise Molina’s consciousness about exploitation materially influences his post-prison behavior, leading Molina to recognize his own self-worth and

to stand up to his overbearing godfather for the first time. And although Molina is killed once he attempts a bolder form of political praxis, the text still implies that such direct forms of protest or subversion are necessary and laudable, even if they are often doomed to fail. At some moments, the text uses the lens of Marxism to critique the passive politics of a post-structuralist camp agenda.

Although Puig values Valentin's revolutionary struggle to spread class consciousness and to undermine the corrupt government, *Kiss* does not conform to a Marxist worldview because it focuses on the need for change in the micropolitical sphere of sexual and gender relations rather than in the macro sphere of governmental structure. This shift towards the micropolitics of personal identities reflects Puig's skepticism about the possibility of epistemic change, a quality which gives the novel a post-Marxist perspective. Many critics have read the ending of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as fatalistic or dystopian, because neither Valentin nor Molina succeed in furthering the "revolution."<sup>153</sup> Santiago Colás argues that the text reflects a postmodern recognition of "utopia's impossibility and of the tragedy of believing in its inviolable realization" (75). In contrast to these critics, I hesitate to call this postmodern text anti-utopian, because it places considerable hope in the power of individuals to make change on an intersubjective scale. Molina and Valentin may not bring down the fascist state, but they do succeed in changing each other in an intensely emotional and powerful way.

The change in these two men should be seen as "political" because they come to a greater awareness of the broader social consequences of their own identities and relationships. Molina is awakened to the dignity and revolutionary implications of



homosexuality and of his identification with the feminine amidst such a heteronormative and macho culture, while Valentin comes to recognize his own hypocrisy in desiring power over Molina and thus relaxes his own machismo. As he chastises himself for rejecting Molina's kindnesses, Valentin worries that the "enemy," the oppression ubiquitous in the outside world, has infiltrated their own cell (202). Puig here seems to be calling attention to the Foucaultian notion that "the enemy is within," that there is no place of pure innocence or resistance outside of power structures. While *Kiss* focuses attention on the micropolitical "level where power is wielded over one subject by another" (Tittler 53), it does not condone a passive acceptance of the inevitability of oppression, but rather urges us to struggle against this Dionysian will-to-power as does Valentin. Possible antidotes to such hierarchy, the text implies, are love and compassion. Although the ending suggests that a socialist or communist revolution is nearly impossible in such a repressive state, it does offer some hope for change on the level of the individual. This helps to explain why so many of my interview subjects were inspired rather than disheartened by the ending of *Kiss*, despite the fact that most literary critics read it as dystopic because of their focus on the macropolitical. These viewers and readers found the text's positive treatment of love and intimacy between two seemingly incompatible men to offer a rare utopian glimpse of liberatory sexual and emotional possibilities.

In their response to the text, most of my audience group focused on the sexual politics of the relationship between the two men rather than the macropolitical plot about Marxism and totalitarian governments. The large majority of the group felt that the text

was arguing that “the sexual is political and being queer can be a revolutionary transgression,” as one bisexual woman put it, echoing the ideas of Herbert Marcuse that Puig includes in his footnotes. Several people argued that Molina is a more revolutionary figure than Valentin, because of the courage required to live daily life as a cultural “deviant.” One gay social worker and radical activist argued that Molina and Valentin both undergo huge political transformations because they question gender and sexual norms that they had previously taken for granted. He stated that such personal growth “is the real battlefield for any revolution. Because none of us goes through those individual changes without thinking that things in general have to change.” Most of my audience group saw *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a transgressive political text, one that urges audiences to question stereotypes and to understand the systemic nature of gender and sexual oppression.

While most of those I interviewed read *Kiss* as profoundly political and even radical in its treatment of gender and sexuality, they also recognized in the text a distance from Marxist versions of radicalism. Eight people, who were mainly drawn to the text because of their own sympathies with Marxism, overlooked its criticism of Valentin’s ideology. But the predominant reading among these thirty people was to describe *Kiss* as leftist or liberal because it critiques both fascism and Marxism at once. As one student of Latin American political history said, “it really is targeted at the middle ground, at people who are horrified by the oppressive government but are also dissatisfied by unbelievable extremes.” A bisexual woman (whose ex-girlfriend is involved in the international socialist movement) liked the film because it pointed out Marxism’s incompatibility with

human nature and questioned the feasibility of violent revolution. A woman who is now anti-Marxist after eight years of living on a kibbutz, where “if you don’t nail it down it’s stolen,” similarly appreciated the text’s revelation of Valentin’s hypocrisy. While *Kiss*’ anti-fascist message appealed to many people’s progressive, reformist politics, the text also echoed their bourgeois discomfort with the notion of radical communist revolt, a sentiment particularly common among the gay people I interviewed. Rosemary Hennessey and Dennis Allen note that “lesbigay” is often experienced as a bourgeois identity, because homosexual self-definition has been strengthened by the capitalist consumption of cultural objects and signifiers.<sup>154</sup> The practice of gay camp clearly involves an immersion in the capitalist culture industry; one can not mock without first consuming. Indeed, Puig’s footnotes point out that this consumerist tendency has placed gays “on the periphery of movements for class liberation” (213). *Kiss of the Spider Woman*’s camp sensibility marks it as a post-Marxist and postmodern text, focusing on the micropolitics of gender and sexuality rather than class struggle.

### **Interpreting the Politics of Sexual and Gender Identity**

Although the majority of this audience group focused on the micropolitics of sexuality and gender, their readings were by no means univocal. Their various interpretations of *Kiss*’ treatment of identity were influenced by many factors, including their self-identifications and their ideas about gender and sexuality as abstract concepts. The fact that the text represents the identities of Valentin and Molina in ambiguous and multiple ways also complicated the interpretation and identification process. Most

importantly, my conversations with these people about sexuality and gender revealed such complex and even contradictory narratives that they put into question sociological reception studies and identification theories which box people into simple identity categories. Although I did notice some patterns of interpretation that correlated to a self-professed identity, a naive expectation that all women, gay men, or heterosexuals would read the characters in the same way or assign a particular politics to the text was immediately upset. More important to their reception of *Kiss* than any identity label was each person's particular understanding of sexuality and gender, such as beliefs in the fluidity of gender, in a biological basis to sexuality, or in the notion that homosexuality involves gender inversion. Understandings of gender and sexuality have experienced so much contestation and change in recent years that they clearly do not operate as static, unconscious givens in the lives of these audience members. This text enacts that contestation and encourages people to reflect upon the politics of their own subjectivities.

I argue that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* highlights political tension between a 1970s essentialist conception of gender and sexual identity and a postmodern anti-identitarian queer ideology. Twelve people in my group read the text as a typical melodrama in which Molina and Valentin function as opposite types (gay vs. straight and feminine vs. masculine), a reading which confirmed their belief in polarized identities. In contrast to this group, eighteen people professed at least some belief in the fluidity of gender and sexual categories, and most of them interpreted the text as an anti-essentialist attempt to blur the outlines of those identities. But even these people influenced by postmodern reconceptions of subjectivity were unwilling to abandon or denounce traditional rubrics

for understanding difference, both in this text and in their own lives. Although *Kiss of the Spider Woman* allows diametrically opposed readings because it both installs and deconstructs identities (and some people saw only half of this dialectic), it also appeals to people who have sympathy for both queer and gay-liberationist ideas about identity, and for both difference-based and anti-essentialist constructions of gender. *Kiss*' adjudication between surface and depth models of gender and sexual identity offers viewers and readers a means of exploring their own ambivalence about such identities.

Audience members find their own ambivalence or inner conflict mirrored in the characters of Molina and Valentin, whose identities are multiply coded. While Molina uses the term "gay" to refer to himself, it is clear that this umbrella identity strains to fit his complex individuality. In one sense, he represents the apolitical pre-Stonewall homosexual who bases his identity on an earlier psychoanalytic "invert" model that elided the difference between sexuality and gender. Today, however, Molina might identify himself as transgender or a pre-operative transsexual rather than gay, because he sees himself as a heterosexual woman imprisoned in a man's body: "my friends and myself, we're a hundred percent female. We don't go in for those little games [i.e. falling in love with each other]--that's strictly for homos. We're normal women; we sleep with [straight] men" (203). His essentialist beliefs in the homosexual invert or transsexual model often lead him to adopt stereotypical behavior, such as limiting himself to the receptive role in anal sex with Valentin because "that's the natural thing" for women to do (244). Judith Butler has argued that the transsexual identification with a "real," inner gender is a "literalizing fantasy" that tries to naturalize a process that is socially

constructed (*Gender Trouble* 89). When Valentin dreams of Molina becoming the seductive spider woman, Molina is wearing a mask, which recalls Butler's concept of the performance of gender. But Molina, as the spider woman, believes her gender identity to be innate, a female soul underneath the mask of a biologically male body.

Although Molina appears to embrace depth models for both sexuality and gender common in the 1970s and earlier, I argue that he also exhibits sensibilities akin to postmodern reconceptions of identity as a shifting surface. This connection is not merely an anachronistic reading, since queer theorists of the '90s resurrected and politicized earlier homosexual interests in camp, drag, and the performative qualities of gender. Molina's campy and ironic declaration that "my real name is Carmen" (65) marks him as proto-queer, as do his investment in the surface aesthetics of kitschy films and his job as a window dresser, an artist of the surface. Further, his identifications with women could be likened to an anti-essentialist *transgender* identity, rather than to a *transsexual* naturalization of gender.<sup>155</sup> Despite his own beliefs in innate femininity, his performance of femininity--his queenly behaviors and donning of women's fashion accessories--nonetheless highlights a disparity between the outside and the inside, between the surface of gender and the depth of biological sex. Nowhere in the novel, film, or musical does Molina indicate a desire to literally change his body to match the inner woman, a somatic alienation which Jay Prosser argues is endemic to transsexuality. Instead, his emotional identification with discursive femininity in film narratives could be read as more of an anti-essentialist or "de-literalizing" move in line with Butler's sense of transgenderism as a subversive disruption of gender boundaries. The character of Molina, therefore, offers

audiences a myriad of interpretive possibilities because he combines both literalizing (essentialist) and de-literalizing (anti-essentialist) conceptions of gender and sexuality.

Interpreting Valentin's identity also posed challenges for this audience group since he is multiply coded as both macho and feminist, and as a heterosexual, bisexual, and latent homosexual. While some saw him simply as a heterosexual macho type, he eventually relaxes his anxieties about expressing emotion and dependency and even voices some feminist sentiments. Despite his desire for power over women and his belief that sensitivity "can get in a man's way" (29), he also questions gender stereotypes by asserting that "art's not just something for women" (76) and "the man of the house and the woman of the house have to be equal with one another. If not, their relation becomes a form of exploitation" (244). His machismo is mitigated by his political awareness of the oppression women face.

Valentin's sexuality is even more ambiguous than his gender identity.<sup>156</sup> Many critics read him as unequivocally straight despite his sexual liaison with Molina, but such a reading depends on a static, unitary notion of sexual identity. This reading implies that having sex with Molina is merely a gesture of friendship or a simple substitution (given the absence of female partners in prison) that never puts Valentin's heterosexuality into question. Several people in my group, however, saw this sexual act as a coming to the surface of latent homosexual desires that were repressed in the world outside prison. Puig's choice of the name Valentin also alludes to film star Rudolph Valentino, who was accused of being gay because of his androgynous appeal. It's also possible to read Valentin as bisexual, if one believes that he desires and/or loves both Marta and Molina.

Manuel Puig has admitted that one of the “experts” of the footnotes, Dr. Anneli Taube, is actually a stand-in for his own pro-bisexuality stance (Bacarisse, *Impossible* 107).

Taube/Puig expresses hope that bisexuality were a more accessible model, so that individuals would not be forced into identifying with either heterosexuality or homosexuality, or with either masculinity or femininity (207-13). All of this variation and ambiguity forces audiences to ponder Valentin’s place amidst their own rubrics for understanding identity, and perhaps even to reconsider those categories themselves.<sup>7</sup>

How these audience members read and responded to Molina and Valentin was clearly affected by their own definitions of sexual and gender identity. Invoking a wide variety of discourses, they disagreed about whether these identities are: biologically determined or socially constructed; fluid or rigid; political choices or pre-ordained givens; based on a continuum or an either/or binary; determined by internal feelings and desires, external behaviors/sexual acts, or self-presentation/cultural identification; and whether they are influenced by other social identities such as race. Several people, both gays and straights, conflated or connected gender and sexuality, arguing that being gay is like “getting in touch with one’s feminine side” (or masculine side, if lesbian).<sup>157</sup> Although everyone named sexual and gender identities for themselves when asked, it is clear that many who “belong to” the same category had differing ideas about what it means to them. Within the homosexual group, those who used the word queer experienced their identity differently than those gays and lesbians with more assimilationist politics, and butch homosexuals were often strikingly different from femmes. A few individuals in my group had changed their sexual identities and gendered behavior over time (e.g. one



effeminate bisexual man was once macho and twice-married), a phenomenon which is rarely discussed in theoretical essays on identity.<sup>158</sup> My ethnographic study adds to an understanding of “sexual difference *within* homosexuality” which Judith Butler argues “has yet to be theorized in its complexity” (*Bodies* 140). In addition, these interviews also shed light on differences within the “norm” of heterosexuality, which gay critics tend to treat as a monolithic and uncomplicated identity.<sup>159</sup> Among this audience group, social-constructionist heterosexuals and biological-essentialist heterosexuals spoke such a different language that they rarely interpreted the text in the same way. The rich landscape of difference revealed in my interviews challenges the assumption that identity determines how people read.

This group’s diverse readings of Valentin’s identity, for example, suggest that ideology can have more of a determining influence upon interpretation than does social identity. A few people from all the sexual identity groupings (gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual) interpreted Valentin as straight, but the reasons that these fourteen people cited were quite varied. It is not surprising that nearly all of the biological essentialists read Valentin as unequivocally heterosexual; they argued that he did not love Molina romantically and had only engaged in sex as an act of friendship or human need. The heterosexuals were also more likely than the bisexuals or homosexuals to read Valentin as heterosexual, possibly because more of the straight people were biological essentialists or resistant to fluidity and bisexuality. On the other hand, seven gays and lesbians also argued that Valentin must be seen as straight, even if he is repressing homosexual desire, because that is how he chooses to present himself socially; they defined identity as a

conscious and political identification unaffected by isolated sexual encounters. For example, one gay man argued that Valentin did not become gay even though he had romantic as well as sexual feelings for Molina. He reasoned that the extreme prison circumstance allowed Valentin to “transcend” his heterosexuality briefly, but it was merely an isolated “exception that proves his chosen rule.” It was important to pay attention, therefore, not just to what types of people interpreted Valentin as straight, but why they did so, and their reasons were connected to larger philosophical debates about the meaning of identity.

The question of whether Valentin felt romantic love or at least sexual desire for Molina turned out to be central to the fifteen people who believed that Valentin became bisexual or gay, or had been repressing such “innate” tendencies all along. Many argued that the romance glimpsed between the characters, more so than their sexual intercourse, showed a true shift in Valentin’s identity. The large majority of those who read Valentin as bisexual and in love with Molina were themselves gay or bisexual; two straight women (and I could add myself as a third) agreed with them. In this case, the identity of the viewer/reader did have a strong influence upon interpretation. Because it can be difficult to divine a character’s emotions in a text, particularly a visual one, some of these gay and bisexual viewers projected their own emotions onto Valentin to justify their reading of the text as a love story. This helps to explain why some people found the kissing scene in the film to be forced and awkward while others broke down and cried at the sight of such a “tender moment.” One recently divorced man who now identifies himself as gay interpreted the musical as a passionate love story (a reading which goes against the grain

of the characterizations put forth in the lyrics), arguing that Valentin experiences the same “change of heart” that he did himself. I do not mean to suggest, however, that reading *Kiss of the Spider Woman* as a love story is simply a matter of projection or wish-fulfillment, for there are many hints in the novel that Valentin feels a love for Molina that goes beyond friendship, and that he desires him sexually. Those in my audience group who had read the novel were much more likely to characterize it as a romance, and to read Valentin as bisexual or shifting away from rigid heterosexuality, than were those people who had seen only the film or musical, in which the characters remain more polarized. Even if one aims to explore the role of the reader in creating meaning, the text’s role in suggesting certain interpretations to audiences should not be overlooked.

While I found much less diversity in my audience group’s interpretations of Molina’s identity, the reasons that people invoked still revealed key ideological differences. The vast majority interpreted him to be an effeminate gay man and were hesitant to label him transsexual or even transgender. Nine out of ten straights saw Molina as simply gay, because many of them accept the stereotypical equation of gender inversion with homosexuality and have little knowledge of transsexuality. For example, one heterosexual woman made the questionable claim that “95% of gay men are feminine like Molina.” On the other hand, many people--both straight and gay--resisted the inversion stereotype but still concluded that Molina was gay rather than transsexual. They did not take his belief that he was really “a woman inside” seriously, arguing that his effeminacy was either an attempt to “follow what society tells him a gay man is supposed to be” or internalized homophobia, “the desire to be considered a normal female

rather than an ‘abnormal’ gay man.” The biological essentialists and those with difference-based ideas about gender also dismissed the concept of transgenderism and asserted that Molina was a man at the core. Transgender and transsexual were more acceptable and viable identities in the minds of the lesbians who accept some queer ideology. A few gay men in my group were willing to consider Molina genuinely transsexual because they seemed anxious to disassociate homosexuality from gender inversion. But many other gay men were quick to argue that an identification with the feminine has been an important part of gay culture and doesn’t necessarily imply transsexuality. As one man put it, “Molina may not have peed standing up, but he was definitely a gay male and wanted to be male. He wanted a woman’s life, not to *be* her.”

My analysis of this audience group’s interpretations of Valentin and Molina’s identities underscores my larger point--that although a person’s own sexual label sometimes predicted how he or she would read the characters, these interpretations were often more strongly correlated to a person’s political notions about the roots of sexuality and the nature of identity. While heterosexuals were likely to read Valentin as heterosexual, and bisexuals to read him as bisexual, the gay men exhibited the widest range of interpretations of Valentin, because their ideological understandings of sexual identity were the most varied as well. While most people identified Molina as gay rather than transsexual, their reasons revealed diverse ideologies. Because each person’s sexual history is different and each may have encountered different discourses about sexuality within their communities, the concept of a homogeneous identity cohort must be treated with skepticism.

Each individual's ideological leaning toward either essentialism or anti-essentialism, rather than any identity group affiliation, proved to be the strongest influence upon his or her interpretation of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*'s sexual and gender politics. Because the text sets up binary oppositions but also deconstructs them, it can be read as a representation of either the fluidity or rigidity of identity categories. Molina's story attests to the value of essential, deeply felt identity (in this case, a feminine essence), whereas Valentin's character development (towards a more androgynous, bisexual self) works to question the limitations of a unitary and static sense of identity. It's also possible to read Molina as undergoing a subtle identity shift away from the pole of stereotypical and abject femininity. Whether people in my audience group read the characters as static and typed, as in a melodrama, or whether they saw a shifting or "transcending" of identity rubrics usually corresponded to whether they espoused essentialist or postmodern ideas about identity. Everyone recognized the polarities set out, but not everyone recognized the attempt to break down those dichotomies. The ambivalence of the text on this issue allowed most people to see a representation of their own feelings about sexuality and gender on display.

Almost all of the sixteen people who interpreted the text's message to be about the fluidity of sexual or gender identity were either anti-essentialist themselves or at least accepting of the continuum principle. Nearly all the bisexuals and others who embraced queerness read Valentin and Molina as blurring identity boundaries. Several people noted that they were simply tired of identity politics ("sexuality is pretty negligible in the end and I wish it weren't such an issue") and were glad the characters were able to

“transcend” their identities, even if only temporarily. It’s also significant that most of those who lauded the characters for transcending identities were either female (both bisexual and straight) or anti-essentialist feminists whose frustration with gender prescriptions leads them to view identity as limiting rather than enabling. Despite *Kiss of the Spider Woman*’s efforts to question binary notions of identity, twelve people nonetheless read the text’s characters as polarized and static. This finding reminds us that, despite the predominance of anti-essentialism in academic discourses, many people continue to rely on unitary and rigid identity constructs in order to make sense of life as well as texts. Three of the four straight men saw no identity shifting in the text, and this reading confirmed their biological essentialism and difference-based ideologies.<sup>160</sup> One straight man recalled that he had been troubled by the fact that a college classmate at first dated girls but then came out as gay and started wearing lipstick. His comments reveal a fear of ambiguity and a desire for a neat division of sexuality: “it was kind of strange that he thought he was one way but then it turns out he was not. There was some ambiguity for him apparently.” It is not surprising that this interviewee chose to ignore any ambiguity in Valentin’s sexuality, since this possibility disturbed him. However, these twelve people should not be dismissed simply as “bad readers,” because the text itself takes great pains to garner sympathy for Molina, who himself views life through the lens of binary oppositions and experiences femininity as a deeply important identity. Inspired by the film’s attempt to foster respect for difference, one essentialist gay man argued: “it made me convinced that you should always be true to the way you are. That’s what I really admired about Molina--he’s accepted his difference from the norm and he’s not

letting it bother him.” These twelve people felt that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* offered a testament to the importance of accepting innate difference--“the way you are.”

While I have been arguing that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* appealed to and was interpreted differently by two distinct groups--those who accept melodrama’s polarized notions of identity and those who embrace postmodern fluidity--I would also like to complicate the picture a bit, to avoid falling into the habit or “trap” of binarism myself. In fact, it was common for individuals to express seemingly contradictory ideologies about identity at once. For example, one gay man argued that bisexuality doesn’t work because “you’re either gay or you’re not,” but he later stated that he believed in a sexual continuum like the Kinsey scale in which people can fall somewhere in between. Many who outwardly rejected either/or logic and accepted bisexuality nonetheless used polarizing language (e.g. “gay side,” “different teams” or “the opposite sex”). By frequently invoking the Kinsey scale, many people echoed the contradiction inherent in its very construction--this scale supports the “queer” belief in fluidity or bisexuality by suggesting that individuals can have both homosexual and heterosexual desires, but it nonetheless reinscribes polarized thinking by designating heterosexual as 0 and homosexual as 6. While my research reveals the folly of dividing audiences into simple sociological identity groupings, it also suggests caution in boxing people into single ideological categories, because in-depth interviews often reveal instability in their beliefs. Audience researchers studying identity must acknowledge the contradictions, multiplicity, and incoherence that muddy the waters and make reception patterns more difficult to identify or interpret.

While some people inadvertently contradicted their professed ideologies, others were conscious of ambivalence or were willing to cede some ground to an opposing ideology. Even though one essentialist gay man distrusts bisexuality and sees Valentin as inhabiting a different “planet” from him, he also “appreciated and was pleasantly surprised by Valentin’s ambiguity.” A bisexual queer woman also showed respect for those she disagrees with: “I try to blur identity distinctions without dishonoring the people for whom that is really a necessary means of living. Believing that sexuality is biological may be a very real feeling for some people, even though it’s not for me.” A gay man who is a social constructionist nonetheless accepted Molina’s belief that his “*natural* self” is female. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* encouraged some readers and viewers to respect the power of feelings of difference at the same time as they seek more fluid and less restricting conceptions of selfhood.

Even though the majority of the people in this group expressed some anti-essentialist ideas, many were ambivalent and unwilling to toss out the notion of essence even though they rejected the baggage of that line of thinking, such as biologism or binary logic. One bisexual, anti-essentialist woman has a disorder in which she rips out her hair, partly because of anxiety caused by her mother’s rigid prescriptions for appropriate feminine behavior. Despite her rebellion against gender-socialization and heteronormativity, she wears dresses and makeup and paints her nails: “Because I’m bald, when I’m without all that externally feminine stuff, people look at me as if I’m a man, and I don’t like that.” Even one social-constructionist straight man who once had a “gay phase” and did female impersonation said, “there are limits on how feminine I’d want to



seem to others. I like my masculine traits--I'm brave and unafraid of risk-taking." This fallback on comfort zones of stereotyped gender behavior may seem to be merely a conservative deployment of essentialism, but I argue that feelings of embodied identity should not be so quickly dismissed, particularly when they are felt by "subaltern" rather than hegemonic groups.<sup>161</sup>

For instance, almost all of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in my study asserted their sexual difference as a deeply felt identity, even if they did not use biological rhetoric. Very few embraced the anti-identitarian spirit of queer theory, and only five claimed an identity as queer or "post-gay" (most of the queer contingency were bisexual). One assimilationist gay man who takes pride in his "normalcy" nonetheless stated that his homosexuality "is a big sense of who I am; it's like being African American." Even though he chooses a tactic of invisibility, this man still experiences his sexual difference as an embodiment similar to race. As Jay Prosser urges in his study of transsexual narratives, critics need to relax their zeal to deconstruct "feelings of embodiment," because it often results in a dismissal of the fact that "body, sex, feeling, [and] belief in an imminent self" are of crucial importance in people's lives (16-17). My interviews with this audience group illustrate Prosser's point--the fact that so few of the homosexual people in the group identify as queer implies that faith in identity politics and embodied difference is still alive and well in this urban middle-class gay community. Straddling the line between gay identity politics and queer ideologies is perhaps what makes these people such devoted fans of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

*Kiss* and the audience's responses suggest not only the political promise of

queerness--its inclusivity and potential for coalition-building, and its deconstruction of limiting stereotypes and false binaries--but also its limitations, which include a lack of seriousness and an underestimation of the emotional power of identity rootedness. On the pro-queer side, the majority of the viewers and readers applauded the text for fostering fluidity and questioning rigid binary oppositions; one bisexual man valued *Kiss* for its message to “tear down the walls and stop limiting yourself, stop pretending you’re one or the other.” Many audience members were moved by the text’s hope that “people who appear to be very opposite to each other can learn to respect, admire, and even love one another,” a message which could be read as a criticism of a politics of solidarity based only on shared, fixed identities. When Valentin respectfully tells Molina that “if you enjoy being a woman, you shouldn’t feel any the less for it” (243), his statement could be read as a queer criticism of the gay liberation movement’s exclusion of transgenderists and its narrow conception of difference. Instead of a politics based on sameness, *Kiss* calls for a recognition of multiple differences that would allow the building of a queer coalition of gays, transgenders, straights, and bisexuals, of people like Molina and Valentin.

While most of the audience group applauded *Kiss*’s queer ideology concerning fluidity and inclusivity, both the text itself and these viewers recognize the drawbacks of surface models of identity, particularly their political anemia. Even though Puig’s novel was written before post-structuralism became a widespread theoretical paradigm, it gestures towards such a future while also offering a warning to those bent on dismissing depth models and identity politics. Despite its efforts to question rigid identities, *Kiss of*

*the Spider Woman* redeems the gay liberation movement's attention to the serious depths of sexual identity, instead of merely celebrating the playful surfaces that queer theory privileges. Molina himself seems to tire of a campy life of surfaces and drag play when he remarks: "being a window dresser all day, enjoyable as it is, when the day's finished, sometimes you begin to ask yourself what's it all about, and you feel kind of empty inside" (70). He has an incipient but undirected desire to do more than just find pleasure in his own difference, and to actually do something serious and important, to *make a difference*.

This moment in the text resonated deeply with one audience member, a man who claimed a strong identity as a "black gay man" but also expressed an affinity with the moniker queer (even though his friends disdain the term) because he tries to "interrogate and play with gender." Despite this man's willingness to consider identity as a performative surface construction (he once participated in a gay performance art troupe that wore skirts), he also worries about the political usefulness of drag culture and about its anti-feminist tendencies. Because he is a politically active social worker, this black gay/queer man was glad to see Molina adopting a more serious tone after his release from prison: "when he goes back to his drag friends, they don't have meaning to him anymore. This whole game he played with gender is no longer important; it tells him nothing about himself. He grows up and decides to act politically, to put himself on the frontlines instead of merely playing." These statements echo the concerns of Stephen Seidman, who worries in *Fear of a Queer Planet* that the queer post-structuralist model could devolve into "an empty politics of gesture or disruptive performance that forfeits an

integrative, transformative politics” (135). *Kiss of the Spider Woman* presents a warning to queers who have wholeheartedly embraced pre-Stonewall drag and camp as subversive strategies without paying attention to their drawbacks; in a violently homophobic world, a campy politics can be like a feather “trying to stop an elephant” (Bergman 12). My study of the interpretation patterns of this audience group serves as a reminder to the academic community that although queerness and anti-essentialism are gaining discursive prominence, they are by no means unilaterally accepted even among educated liberal or leftist communities.

I believe that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* resonates so strongly with audiences, and was so successful in its screen and stage adaptations in the 1980s and 1990s, because it spoke to people trying to negotiate shifting and conflicting cultural ideas about sexual and gender identity. While *Kiss* allowed some audience members to confirm a pre-existing ideological preference for surface or depth models, the textual hybridity encouraged others to envision a strategic compromise between them. Whatever these audience members decided about the characters’ particular identities or about the text’s overall message concerning sexuality or gender, they all recognized that something political was at stake. Rather than conceiving of these identity categories as social or biological givens, these audience members saw them as highly charged and politically significant concerns that required careful consideration.

### **Identification and Disidentification Patterns**

The complex relationship between identity and identification, and the political

promise of cross-group identification, are central themes of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, in which two characters with seemingly opposed identities come to identify with each other. A cross-over identification with the feminine is also the central motivation for Molina's obsession with melodramatic film. In the early moments of the novel, Molina asks Valentin which character he identifies with in the film *Cat People*, and Valentin's predictable answer is based on his macho identity. As the novel progresses, however, the once simple question "who do you identify with?" (25) takes on more political resonance, and the answers to it become more unpredictable. While at first Valentin disidentifies with the emotional landscape of Molina's films, he is gradually seduced into identifying with both Molina and his popular film narratives, which causes him to rethink his previously rigid sexual and gender identity. Meanwhile, Molina's previous identification with abject, passive femininity wanes as he begins to recognize the worth of Valentin's political stand against oppression. The boundaries between the two men slowly dissolve as they retreat from their polar positions to the point of identifying with the other.

I argue that this cross-group identification has subversive power because it urges audiences to free up the rigid distinction between self and other. After the two men in *Kiss* have sex, Molina's desire for Valentin turns into an identification, so strong that he searches his own face for a mole that he knows is Valentin's. He reflects: "it seemed as if I wasn't here . . . like it was you all alone. Or like I wasn't me anymore. As if now, somehow . . . I . . . were you" (219). As Leo Bersani argues in *Homos*, "the desire to have is never entirely distinct from the desire to be" and "the boundaries between having and being are bound to be more blurred in same-gender desire than in heterosexual desire"

(63). Bersani believes that the sameness of homosexuality is subversive because it involves giving up “knowing where he ends and the other begins” (129). While Bersani is only interested in identifications among people who share a sexual identity, I argue that cross-group identification can also yield a subversive dissolving of boundaries. Although *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is more invested in difference than is Bersani, it does attest to the political value of a search for sameness, of finding yourself in another person. Molina and Valentin feel very differently gendered, but they both move closer to androgyny and to a recognition of sameness. Even their language becomes less gendered and less polarized as the text progresses, and it becomes increasingly difficult to tell who is speaking in the late portions of the novel. I contend that *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, by relaxing the division between self and other, offers a liberating model to audiences of all sexualities and genders. Seeing ourselves as primarily similar to others, rather than different, could be a positive change for heterosexuals as well as homosexuals, since it could lessen misogyny (Bersani 147) as well as homophobia.<sup>162</sup>

The boundary-shattering cross-group identification present in the plot was mirrored by the identification patterns that I found among these audience members. Some heterosexuals and macho individuals identified with Molina, and many women and gay men in the group identified with Valentin, a finding that challenges theories based on a one-to-one correspondence between a viewer's social identity and his or her identifications. Furthermore, identification theories that employ an essentialist model of either/or identity poles would be at a loss to explain the fact that many of the people I interviewed identified with both men at once. Others both identified and disidentified

with the same character, and this simultaneous recognition of difference and sameness has not been given adequate attention by theorists. I argue that the text itself fosters such ambivalent and multivalent forms of identification as part of its larger project of re-envisioning the relationship between identity and solidarity.

I can not ignore the fact, however, that some people did identify with characters who appeared to belong to their social group. As essentialist theories might predict, twelve out of the twenty gays, lesbians, and bisexuals identified with Molina on the basis of shared “sexual otherness.” Likewise, all of the straight men identified with Valentin. Since Valentin’s sexual identity was interpreted variously, people of all groups (straight, gay, and bisexual) identified with him based on the perception that he shared their orientation. While sexual identity was sometimes cited as a reason for identification, so were politics, cultural interests, and personality traits. Some connected with Molina because of his apolitical stance or his love of popular culture, while others identified with Valentin’s intellectualism or his angst over his class background. The largest number (ten) identified with Valentin’s Marxist ideology, which underscores that identification can reflect a conscious political affiliation. Not surprisingly, my audience group most often identified with the two men for the reasons that they were in prison--Valentin’s Marxist identity and Molina’s sexual difference.

Many people also cited “same gender” as a reason for connecting with a character, and this was sometimes a simple case of essentialist identification (i.e. men identifying with male characters on the basis of their masculine traits). However, the majority of the group defined gender in an anti-essentialist way, as a set of cultural behaviors,

predilections, and feelings not necessarily determined by the sexed body. For example, some biological females (four heterosexuals and one lesbian) crossed groups to identify with Valentin for being realistic, goal-oriented, tough, strong, and active, all qualities associated with masculinity. While one literalist woman could not identify with anyone because “there were no women in the film,” many other women crossed the sex divide to identify with Molina for his emotional, romantic, and nurturing traits. Since Molina straddles genders himself, claiming to be “a woman inside,” what does it mean to identify with him on the basis of “shared gender”? These instances of identification on the basis of shared masculinity or femininity flout essentialism by highlighting the distinction between gender characteristics and the sexed body, with the result of relaxing the boundary between men and women.<sup>163</sup>

While it would seem more likely for women to identify with the feminine Molina, in fact more of them (7 out of 12) identified primarily with Valentin. Freudian and Lacanian theory would predict that heterosexual women would desire rather than identify with Valentin, but only two women (one straight, one bisexual) expressed sexual attraction for him. Furthermore, these two women felt both desire *and* identification for Valentin, which puts into question the Freudian opposition between these psychic processes. Some women identified with Valentin because they shared his masculine personality, but many feminine-identified women crossed over both the sex and gender divide to see something of themselves in him. What they empathized with, primarily, were his political and intellectual struggles. A woman whose bourgeois desires conflict with her leftist ideology had experienced similar inner turmoil: “he wants to go out and



help people, but he wants to hang out in a beautiful penthouse and sip a martini. I identify with that--I'm not sure if I'd rather have the money or the satisfaction that what I'm doing has a higher purpose." A bisexual woman who has been "ridiculed for having different views" said that she identified with being "persecuted for something you believe in" as Valentin was, while a lesbian activist shared Valentin's resolve to fight against such persecution. Obviously, these instances of cross-gender identification should not be dismissed as a sad act of transvestitism, of women wishing they were men. These feminist women identified with Valentin because they are already like him--intelligent, political, and committed to egalitarian principles.

For similar reasons, several gay men crossed the sexuality divide to identify with Valentin, whom they read as straight.<sup>164</sup> One "black gay political activist" said: "I see myself like Valentin, trapped, not allowed to be the full round circle that I could be, in a hostile situation. Since my identity and my sexuality have a political base, I identify with Valentin rather than Molina." A political identity can often be more important to one's self-concept and identifications than the mere fact of sexual orientation, or sex, or gender. Such cross-group identifications between gays and straights, and women and men, highlight the fact that a singular identity category can not wholly define people or their ability to relate to others. The man in the previous example is not only homosexual and male, but is also queer, black, feminist, leftist, a social worker, a college graduate, and masculine-identified.

The unpredictable identifications that this audience group experienced are a result of the fact that each individual is made up of multiple identities, sometimes at odds with

one another. For example, many of the gay men in the group--eight out of thirteen--were surprised that they disidentified with Molina. Although these men were at first attracted to the text because it featured a gay character, they did not see themselves reflected in this effeminate man. Their gender identification as butch prompted some of them to connect more strongly with a masculine straight man than with a queen. Since they love all things masculine, they believe their gender and their homosexuality to be linked, but not in the "inverted" way that Freud and the sexologists theorized. While these examples disrupt the equation of homosexuality with gender inversion, another example upset a stereotypical view of heterosexuals as rigidly gender normative. One heterosexual male senior citizen crossed the sexuality divide to identify with Molina because he is also feminized--he loves musicals and old melodramas and is the submissive partner in his marriage. These examples of men identifying with people of other sexualities but similar gender affiliations serve as a reminder that the vectors of sexuality and gender are intertwined in unpredictable ways and must be analyzed in conjunction. Since homosexuality and heterosexuality are not homogeneous identities, they do not always lead to simple group solidarity.

My study also revealed that disidentifications--such as those expressed by masculine gay men for Molina--were often felt more strongly than identifications. Psychoanalysis maintains that a disavowal of the other is crucial to the formation of a self, and this proved to be true for some people I interviewed. Nine gay men disidentified with Valentin for exhibiting traits stereotypical of heterosexual men--homophobia, machismo, and violence--or because they felt he was "denying his gay side," while three

women were alienated by Valentin's "masculine" inflexibility. Two straight men disidentified with Molina's gay-ness, as did a gay man and a bisexual woman who were not yet "out" when they encountered the text. What made this process of disavowal more interesting to me, however, was that many people disidentified with the character with which they might have been predicted to identify. Ten gay men and five women were turned off by Molina's femininity, and four men disidentified with Valentin for being too macho (three gay, one straight). It's interesting that more gay men disidentified with Molina (ten) than with Valentin (nine), a finding which goes against essentialist expectations.

Judith Butler contends that disidentification is not merely a refused identification, but an "identification one fears to make only because one has already made it" (*Bodies* 112). I did see a few examples of this process of projection, of denying something within the self by rejecting another. Some gay men seemed to be trying a little too hard to distinguish themselves from the effeminacy that Molina represents. When I asked one gay man whom he identified with, he said,

Well, not Molina. I'm not a transgender, I'm not a drag. . . . I did identify with him in the aspect that he was gay. But not to the standpoint that I would want to emulate that sort of thing. I have no desire to be a woman. I've always been proud of the fact that I am not the least bit interested in going with someone who is in a dress. I'm embarrassed for those people.

Despite the fact that this man was wearing a baseball cap and a Redskins shirt, he struck me as quite feminine in mannerisms. Other people were more conscious of the fact that a

particular character made them uncomfortable because he hit too close to home. One woman psychoanalyzed her own ambivalent feelings about femininity: “the things I didn’t like about Molina--his self-destructive romanticism--are probably things I do myself, which is why I got annoyed with him.”

While disidentification may sometimes reflect a fear of something hidden within the self, I am more interested in the way that such disavowals are consciously politicized. Several men, both straight and gay, rejected an identification with Valentin because they stand against homophobia and machismo, while many people disidentified with Valentin’s extremist Marxist politics. Two gay men disidentified with Molina not because they feared femininity but because they read him as a self-loathing homosexual who “internalized homophobia” by wishing he was really a woman rather than a gay man. A few anti-essentialist feminist women were similarly critical of Molina for buying into stereotypical notions of femininity. Reflecting on her disidentification with Molina, a bisexual feminist said, “Why is he so hung up on being a woman? The idea of what it means to be feminine freaks me out sometimes. There’s nothing like a drag queen to heighten this femininity that I’m not sure I always want to be a part of.” More than just an unconscious fear of the other, the process of disidentification clearly plays a role in helping people to articulate their own ideologies and to establish their own political identities.

The disidentification patterns that I found illuminate broader social trends and attitudes as well as the construction of individual subjectivities. I believe there to be some cultural significance in the fact that both the men and the women in this group

showed a much stronger disidentification with femininity than with masculinity, even though the text itself seems to criticize masculinity more harshly. Although nine of the twelve women saw themselves as primarily feminine rather than masculine, the majority of them nonetheless disidentified with Molina's performance of abject femininity on the grounds that it was anti-feminist. This disidentification pattern could be seen as evidence of the positive cultural power of anti-essentialist feminist critiques of gender stereotypes. On the other hand, anti-essentialist feminism may have further exacerbated our culture's general disdain for traditionally feminine traits. The general devaluation of femininity common in Western cultures was clearly a root of the gay males' disidentification with Molina's femme persona. Very few of these gay men offered feminist critiques of Molina's behavior; instead many of them expressed a thinly veiled fear of being tainted by femininity and a strong reaction against gender inversion theories of homosexuality. While feminism has allowed women in our society to break free of some of the constraints of the feminine gender role, men--even gay men--still appear to be enthralled with masculinity and the power it confers. When I asked the men what masculinity meant to them, many cited a long list of positive traits (strength, bravery, protectiveness, honor, access to "perks") and only occasionally offered negative ones (rigidity, competitiveness), while the women usually led with what they disliked about femininity. This audience group's stronger disidentification with Molina than with Valentin highlights the fact that femininity is less valued than masculinity even among liberal Americans, despite the gains of feminism. In fact, anti-essentialist feminism may be inadvertently deepening the devaluation of femininity.

Although many people disidentified with characters on the basis of gendered traits, very few people in my survey group rejected an identification because of the sexual identity of a character. Only four gay people disidentified with Valentin for being straight. Likewise, Molina's homosexuality led four people to disavow any connection to him--two straight men and two people who were not yet "out of the closet" when they encountered the text. The relatively small amount of homophobia among this group is probably due to the fact that *Kiss of the Spider Woman* draws readers and viewers who are already tolerant, if not gay-friendly. Nonetheless, I was surprised and heartened to see so few people rejecting an identification with their sexual others, because it suggests that the social divide between homosexuals and heterosexuals is becoming less stark, or at least that people are no longer reducing the sum total of a person's being to his or her sexuality.

In fact, I found that most of these viewers and readers understood subjectivity to be multi-faceted and perceived individuals to be an amalgam of multiple identities. This understanding led to a more complex and ambivalent identification process, since twelve people were able to disidentify as well as identify with the same character in the text. While some saw part of themselves in another character, identifying with them did not mandate an acceptance of the whole. For example, many gay men made comments like this one: "well, I identify with Molina for being gay, but he's so different from me---I'm not queeny." One woman likened herself to Valentin for his realism but criticized his rigidity. These examples underscore that identification and solidarity do not necessarily result in an erasure of difference. Instead of a facile unity based on the principle of

homogeneity, these audience members experienced a looser connection that did not totally collapse the boundary between self and other.

While many people voiced disidentifications in order to maintain some sort of boundary between self and other, many in my audience group were able to see the other *within* themselves. The text of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* prompted them to experience multiple identifications that upset facile polarizations of self and other; fourteen people in my study group identified with *both* Molina and Valentin. Since each person's subjectivity is made up of disparate loyalties, ideologies, and identities that can rarely be mirrored in another single individual, readers and viewers may feel affinity for more than one character in a text, even when the characters seem polarized. Lacan prefigured this idea when he theorized that we are all "split subjects" in a state of contradiction or vacillation between self and other. Rather than relying on an either/or logic of exclusion based on unitary notions of the self, the best current studies of identification focus attention on the vacillating or ambivalent self.<sup>165</sup> I also aim to move beyond Lacan's binary logic to offer examples of identification that reveal the multiplicitous rather than merely ambivalent nature of identity.

I find it highly significant that so many people simultaneously identified with two men who seem to be polar opposites (at least at the beginning of the text). Four of the five bisexuals identified with both Molina and Valentin equally, because they felt both gay and straight sexual desires or they defined themselves as androgynous and thus were able to identify with both genders. Six women (bisexual, straight, and lesbian) also connected to both characters, and it might be tempting to explain this by turning to Teresa

de Lauretis' theory that female spectators are particularly capable of a "double identification" with the masculine subject position, defined by the active desiring gaze and force of narrative movement, and with the feminine object position of the passive image or "space of narrative movement" (143). But how would de Lauretis explain the fact that eight men (straight, gay, and bisexual) also experienced this double identification? Furthermore, gender was not necessarily the crucial or only factor in the double identifications these people experienced; in other words, not all who identified with both men did so on the basis of gender androgyny or bisexual fluidity. Those psychoanalytic film theorists, such as Cowie, Rodowick, and de Lauretis, who have discussed the possibility of vacillating or multiple identifications see this vacillation only in terms of sexual difference (Mayne 90). While identification theorists have tended to privilege either gender or sexuality (or occasionally both) as the most meaningful identity axes, I found the identification patterns of these people to be much more complex, involving various and intersecting identities. Sallie Munt's concept of the "multivalent self" as a set of "intersecting plates" (2) aptly describes the multiple identities embraced by many in this audience group.

For example, the gay men who identified with both men did not exhibit androgynous feelings as did the bisexuals; four of them identified with Molina's homosexuality but also connected to Valentin as either a political activist or a repressed, closeted gay man. The multivalent identification of one "straight" man (Joe) poses a serious challenge to polarized and unitary theories of identity. Joe identified with Valentin's leftist politics but also with Molina's rejection of politics, since he has become



jaded about the efficacy of his past activism. While Joe stated that he identified with Valentin for being masculine, he also connected with Molina's gender flux since he used to impersonate female singers when he was an adolescent. Now he defines himself as straight like Valentin (and like him, he desired Sonia Braga, who played Marta in the film), but his experimentation with homosexuality in college gave him a kinship with Molina. Lastly, since this man is socially ostracized because of a mental disability, he identified with Molina's dignity in being different: "Molina was not willing to put up with anyone who didn't appreciate him, and I'm like that too." Joe's multiple and contradicting identities enabled him to experience a network of identifications with various groups.

This layering of present identities over past ones, like a palimpsest, was experienced by several other people in addition to Joe. This palimpsest effect, which records the impact of time upon identity, has not been emphasized in apparatus film theory, which treats identity as static rather than dynamic. Even when identities shift over time, such a change in identification often does not completely erase all connection to a person's past selves. A twice-married, bisexual, transvestite male in my group identified with Valentin as his past self (straight, political, masculine), and with Molina as his present self (gay, apolitical, feminine). Another formerly married and currently homosexual man identified with both characters since he had experienced their different sexual desires. One gay man had gone through a "silly campy stage" when he was younger, so he could see that part of himself in Molina, while his current persona as masculine and serious made him identify with Valentin as well. More attention needs to

be paid to this diachronic factor and the layering of multiple identities that results with the passage of time.

Time proved to be an important factor in many people's responses to the text, for they had encountered *Kiss of the Spider Woman* during a particularly sensitive period of their lives when their own identities were in flux. For example, this cultural text played a crucial role in aiding many young adults to identify themselves as gay or bisexual. One man recalled sneaking out to see the film when he was fifteen because he was dying to witness a screen kiss between two men: "There were no positive gay role models in film or on television at the time, and I was so hungry for it. This film probably set my tastes and my interests." A bisexual woman saw with hindsight why the novel had so perplexed her: "I hadn't articulated my own bisexuality at that point. Maybe that's why I was responding so strongly, asking what was going on here with the sex between these two men. Maybe that's why it was important to me to try to figure that out." Another young man who now identifies as gay came across the film when he was in high school, when "the theme of repressing sexuality was a very cogent issue" for him. Although he was too afraid to identify with Molina's "out homosexuality" at the time, he was able to see himself in Valentin as a person with latent gay desires. By allowing a "safer" identification with the sexually ambiguous Valentin, the text offers an important point of entry and connection to viewers and readers who are tentatively questioning their sexuality. Identifying with Molina and Valentin allowed many people to acknowledge their own non-normative sexual desires and to enjoy a feeling of solidarity rare in their everyday lives.

*Kiss of the Spider Woman* also helped heterosexual viewers to reflect on their own identities. By identifying with homosexual and bisexual characters, many straights in my audience group were able to solidify their identities as non-homophobic, open-minded liberals. Other heterosexuals who still harbor some prejudices against gays and lesbians were moved to question their beliefs in the polarity of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Since the beginning of the text presents Valentin as a clearly heterosexual character, many straights slipped into an easy identification with him only to have the rug pulled out from under them. Because Valentin himself begins to question his sexual identity, the text moved some readers to consider the idea that “sexual identity as well as gender identity is fuzzier than most of us would like to think,” as one woman put it. In addition, several heterosexual viewers and readers were surprised by their identification with Molina, which also worked to destabilize their beliefs in a clear opposition between self and other. Even though most of the heterosexuals in my audience group were attracted to *Kiss* because they were already tolerant or gay-friendly, the text still played a role in furthering the questioning that they had already begun.

*Kiss of the Spider Woman* had an even more powerful political impact upon a more conservative audience group that I observed informally--my students at the University of Virginia, where the student culture is not known for being gay-friendly. This group offers a useful counterpoint to the self-selecting liberal Washingtonians that I interviewed. When I taught *Kiss* (novel and film), my students experienced the transformative and subversive power of identification. While some homophobia marked their discussions of the first few chapters, their sympathy for Molina grew exponentially

to the point of intense grief at his death. A closeted gay student in our class was so encouraged by this outpouring of empathy that he came out to his classmates during our discussion and was treated with remarkable sensitivity. Not only did the text encourage those in the majority culture of heterosexuality to overcome prejudice to identify with their social others, but the text also offered a rare identificatory moment for this minority student. Molina's relationship with Valentin inspired this gay young man to turn an unrequited passion in his own life into his first reciprocal relationship. Of all the novels and films that I have taught, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* stands out as the one that moved students most intensely, and I mean the word "moving" to signify not only an emotional experience, but one that disrupts stasis and leads a reader to new ground, to consider change in his or her own attitudes, relationships, politics, and self-constructions. Sentimental postmodernism could be called a "dynamic" genre for its ability to move audiences emotionally and politically.

Without this detailed study of the impact of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* upon readers and viewers, an analysis of the politics of this text would be incomplete and highly speculative. My interviews with audience members were crucial to my conclusion that much of the political power of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* can be found in the intense identifications that it fosters both within and across sexual identities and genders. Much of the current critical work about identification and sexuality or gender has been produced by textual scholars writing from psychoanalytic and/or queer perspectives. While these textual theorists have given us valuable insights concerning the ambivalent, fragmented, and impure nature of sexuality and gender, they have hastily dismissed empirical work as

overly simplistic. I believe that ethnography need not be viewed as inimical to theory or speculative textual analysis, for it can be a means of corroborating, refining, and opening up new ground for more nuanced theorizing. Just as the founders of psychoanalysis revised their ideas through encounters with patients, critical theory about subjectivity and identification can be greatly enriched by an interface with the object of critical speculation--spectators and readers. I hope that my ethnographic work stands as an important reminder that these objects of speculation are in fact subjects whose own narratives have much to tell us about the meaning and political significance of cultural texts.

## NOTES

1. See Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*.
2. See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* and *The Pleasure of the Text*. Barthes compares “writerly” avant garde texts with “readerly” popular texts that invite passive reading and leave traditional assumptions unchallenged.
3. See Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulations*.
4. See the essay collection *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*, edited by Christopher Sharrett.
5. For an elaboration of this point, see Gledhill, “The Melodramatic Field” 33.
6. My study focuses on both sentimentality and melodrama as two related generic categories, but it is also important to remember their differences. While melodramas may be sentimental, they are not always so. Gothic melodramas, in particular, contain sensational or violent elements absent in most sentimental works. However, many texts, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, have been described as both sentimental fiction and melodrama. The similarity is in the way that both use typed characters and manichean oppositions and provoke strong emotional reactions in the service of their social messages. While melodrama is often discussed as a genre, sentimentality is not usually considered a generic category except when discussing 18th- or 19th-century novels; it is more often viewed as an emotional register or a rhetoric. For a brief history of sentimentality, see chapter two of Suzanne Clark’s *Sentimental Modernism*.
7. Other examples of the genre include *Magnolia*, *Reality Bites*, *Zelig*, the fiction of Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (television series), and the musical *Rent*.
8. For an argument similar to Grossberg’s, see Baudrillard’s *The Transparency of Evil*, 73.
9. Grossberg’s book, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place*, addresses a different form of postmodern popular culture--rock music--but his general comments about affect and politics resonate with my work.
10. Chantal Mouffe is one leftist theorist who has defended some aspects of liberalism--its pluralism and emphasis on individual liberty--in response to post-structuralist detractors such as Lyotard. See Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 7.

11. For a description of postmodern film as a “masculinized culture” (149), see Denzin. I base these generalizations about postmodern film criticism on the following essay collections: *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*, ed. Christopher Sharrett; *Postmodernism in the Cinema*, ed. Cristina Degli-Esposti; and *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative, and the Postmodern Condition*, eds. Roger F. Cook and Gerd Gemunden.
12. Edmund Burke and Kant established a distinction between the aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful. “Beautiful” originally signified pleasing, calm, comforting, and feminine, and was ascribed to “lesser” forms of art. See Clark, *Sentimental Modernism* 28.
13. Lyotard views the avant garde as strictly high cultural (i.e. the high modernists rather than DuChamp's toilets). In contrast to Lyotard's view, Huyssen offers an important reminder: the historical avant garde actually wanted to break down the barrier between high and low, art and life, to gain a popular audience so that it could accomplish its socialist projects. Then high modernism co-opted the avant-garde role, and modified it to become elitist and anti-popular.
14. Baudrillard does not use the word postmodernism, but other culturally pessimistic theorists such as Fredric Jameson have adopted Baudrillard's concepts of the simulacrum and the hyperreal as constitutive features of postmodernism
15. At some moments in his work, Baudrillard goes beyond a purely negative view of postmodernism to express fascination, a feeling somewhat like Edgar Allen Poe's devilish imp of the perverse: “But for all that we may gag on the absence of differentiation, it still fascinates us. We love to mix everything up, even if it simultaneously repels us” (*Transparency of Evil* 74).
16. Examples of the fluidity and mutability of self are numerous on *Buffy*--a spell causes slayers Buffy and Faith to switch bodies, various characters are turned into demons and werewolves and back again, and in one Halloween episode, all the characters become their alter egos. More recently, the formerly heterosexual character Willow has begun a lesbian relationship.
17. Although he emphasizes the heterogeneity of modernism, Hassan's definition of modernism is largely based upon the high modernists, when they had reached a period of codification and restraint. This view of modernism enables him to set up a crisp opposition between modernism and postmodernism. In *The Postmodern Turn*, he notes: “Modernism--excepting Dada and Surrealism--created its own forms of artistic Authority precisely because the center no longer held; Postmodernism has tended toward artistic Anarchy in deeper complicity with things falling apart” (44-5).

18. See Grossberg's *We Gotta Get out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* and McRobbie's *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*.
19. For discussions of generic hybridity, see Timothy Corrigan's *A Cinema without Walls*, Jim Collins' book *Uncommon Cultures* and his essay "Genericity in the 90's: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity." In this article, Collins sees two distinct types of contemporary films--postmodern hybrids that involve "eclectic juxtapositions of elements" and sincere genre films that are "obsessed with recovering some sort of missing harmony" and purity of form (242). I look at texts that combine these preoccupations with irony and sincerity, which Collins sees as distinct and opposed.
20. See Suzanne Clark's *Sentimental Modernism* for a feminist history of the association of affect with the popular and with the feminine. See also Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*.
21. Several critics have discussed sentimental moments in modernist fiction. See Clark's *Sentimental Modernism*, as well as essays on Eliot, Hemingway, Lawrence, and Faulkner in the collection *Sentimentality in Modern Literature and Popular Culture*, ed. Winfried Herget.
22. Another critic who is concerned about the "conflation of the postmodern with poststructuralism" is Lawrence Grossberg. See "Putting the Pop Back into Postmodernism," 171.
23. See Alan Wilde, *Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Ironic Imagination*; Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*; and Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*.
24. In a 1996 lecture, "Politics and Passion: Stakes of Democracy," given at the University of Virginia, Chantal Mouffe made a similar call for leftists to mobilize passion via identification in order to counter the Right more effectively.
25. Exceptions are Suzanne Clark's *Sentimental Modernism* and the essay collection *Sentimentality in Modern Literature and Popular Culture*. While they treat 20th-century sentimentalism positively, neither focuses exclusively on contemporary sentimental texts as I do.
26. For a similar argument depicting television melodrama as conservative for depoliticizing social problems, see Sasha Torres, "Melodrama, Masculinity and the Family: *thirtysomething* as Therapy." Unlike Torres, Byars looks at both the conservative and resisting elements of melodrama in her book *All That Hollywood Allows*: "Although we must acknowledge the repressive elements within our culture's texts, we must also recognize the emancipatory elements that challenge them" (258).
27. See Paul Willemen and Jon Halliday.



28. See Wolfgang Iser's work on reception theory and Mary Anne Doane's treatment of female spectatorship for examples.
29. Christine Gledhill comes to a similar conclusion that "the text alone does not provide sufficient evidence for conclusions" concerning the "political effects of textual ideologies," but she continues to offer only textual readings, claiming that she lacks "ethnographic skills" ("Pleasurable Negotiations" 73). Instead of persisting in a method that I found only partially useful for my purposes, I decided to acquire the skills necessary to answer the questions I wanted to ask.
30. See Dorothy Hobson's belief that "there can be as many interpretations of a programme as the individual viewers bring to it" (*Crossroads* 170).
31. Chris Christie also takes Hall's model to task for its "assumption that the literal meaning of a text is uniformly apprehended across audiences" (52), who then either accept or resist a supposedly stable ideological meaning.
32. For examples, see Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* and Jacqueline Bobo's study of black female audiences of the film *The Color Purple*.
33. For ethnographies of film and literary audiences, see Bobo, Radway, and Helen Taylor.
34. See Morley, "Changing Paradigms in Audience Studies." In contrast to this argument, Radway has recently called for ethnographers to "begin with the everyday, not with texts" in order to examine the larger "process whereby the historical human subject is constructed" (245). See her article "The Hegemony of 'Specificity' and the Impasse in Audience Research." Ang makes a similar argument for decentering the text in *Living Room Wars*, 126.
35. See Ang, "Wanted: Audiences" 103.
36. I refer here to the second volume of Morley's study, entitled *The "Nationwide" Audience: Structure and Decoding*. The first volume in the study, *Everyday Television: "Nationwide"*, offers a textual reading of the way that the news program constructs an image of its audience.
37. Quoted in Morley, "Changing Paradigms" 24. Feuer made these comments in "Dynasty," a paper presented at ITSC, London, 1986.
38. See Ellen Seiter's "Making Distinctions in TV Audience Research: Case Study of a Troubling Interview."
39. I told them that I was interested in looking at the way people's backgrounds, political ideas and identities might affect their responses, but may not always predict them.

40. In *Nationwide*, Morley argues that by saying little in the interviews, he avoided unduly influencing his respondents.
41. See Seiter, "Making Distinctions," 387.
42. In Morley's later book *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, he acknowledges the class essentialism of his *Nationwide* study and warns other ethnographers about this problem (69-70).
43. Some psychoanalytic theorists do consider identification to be a social as well as an unconscious process, but they still are not interested in the conscious responses of actual spectators. Diana Fuss recognizes the role of culture in shaping identity, and Kaja Silverman looks at identification as an interface between the psychic and the social. Fuss and Silverman both consider the socio-political effects of identification, as I do. See Fuss, *Identification Papers*, and Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*.
44. Jane Ganes critiques feminist counter-cinema's project of "annihilating the pleasure of identification" (81) in her essay "Women and Representation."
45. For a counterpoint to this view, see Doane's "Women's Stake: Filming the Female Body" in her book *Femmes Fatales*. She argues that psychonalysis is anti-essentialist and merely uses "the body as a prop, a support for its description of sexuality as a discursive function" (172).
46. See Friedberg, "Identification and the Star." In her more recent book, Friedberg has taken postmodern theories of the subject into consideration, arguing that identification is like trying on different selves rather than a static function inhering in an essentialized body. See *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, 185.
47. See Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*.
48. See hooks, "Dreams Conquest." In this review of the documentary *Hoop Dreams*, hooks makes sweeping generalizations about the white viewing public based on the reaction of a few filmgoers in the theater where she saw the film.
49. For examples, see the work of Barbara Christian and Joyce A. Joyce. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has written about the resistance to theory among black critics in his article "Criticism in the Jungle."
50. See cognitive film theorist Berys Gaut for his concept of "aspectual" identification. Television critic Tamar Liebes also discusses the complex mixture of disidentification and identification. For example, Liebes sets out a few of the many possibilities: wanting to be like someone but knowing that you never can be; hating someone but fearing you are like them; identifying with someone but wishing that you were different from them.

51. See Lacan, *Écrits, A Selection*, 22.

52. See Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't*; Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*; Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*; Laura Mulvey, "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun*," and Miriam Hansen, "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship."

53. For an argument in favor of the inclusion of queer-identifying straights in the community, see Calvin Thomas. He cites Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner as "critically queer" heterosexuals. For arguments that the queer camp has become too inclusive and needs to reclaim its relation to gay sex, see Leo Bersani's *Homos* and Sedgwick's *Tendencies*. A similar debate has been engendered by the advent of male feminists; see Modleski's *Feminism without Women* for a critique of that cross-over identification.

54. In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott presents a more balanced picture of the phenomenon; he argues that the identifications of the 19th-century white working class with blackness reflect both a positive cross-group "love" and a colonizing desire to absorb the other into the self.

55. While it won several Oscars (for best screenplay, best actress, and best supporting actress), and the Cannes Palme d'Or, it also grossed 40 million dollars in the United States and £3.5 million in the UK, an unusually large amount for an "art-house" film. I consider the film "popular" not only because of the box office figures, but because the film hit a nerve and was much discussed. Audiences latched on to it as relevant, important, and useful to their own lives. My sense of the popular is similar to John Fiske's in *Understanding Popular Culture*, but he would probably consider this film highbrow rather than popular. I part company with Fiske because he implies that popular culture belongs only to the "subordinate" classes, thereby ignoring hybrid postmodern texts that challenge Bourdieu's class-bound theory of taste cultures. Fiske also privileges class over gender as a category of subordination.

56. See Mulvey's "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure,'" and de Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't*, 143-144.

57. See Doane's *The Desire to Desire* and *Femme Fatales*.

58. Kaja Silverman, Gaylyn Studlar, and Carol Clover have done interesting work considering that men may adopt a feminine or masochistic spectator role.

59. See Dana Pollan, "Brief Encounters: Mass Culture and the Evacuation of Sense," and Kaja Silverman, "Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse."

60. I disagree, however, with Bourdieu's essentialist labeling of highbrow cultural products as "bourgeois" and popular cultural forms as "working class." Marxist class definitions no longer serve as such clear group distinctions in postmodern U.S. culture. See his book *Distinction*.

61. Just as using the term postmodernism invites confusion, so does the term *avant garde*, which has been variously defined. Andreas Huyssen may object to my usage of the term, because he argues in *After the Great Divide* that the historical avant garde actually tried to break down the barriers between high and popular culture, art and life, before it was co-opted by high modernism. While Huyssen's argument may be historically accurate, the word *avant garde* is most often used by literary and film critics to indicate a high cultural break with mimesis, sense, traditional narrative, and rational order. This view aligns the avant garde with high modernism and places it in an antithetical relationship with popular culture. I use the term as Lyotard does in *The Postmodern Condition*, in which he sees the avant garde as a precursor to his anti-popular version of postmodernism. My usage of the term also derives from the specific context of film; film historians often present avant garde cinema and Hollywood melodrama as genres in opposition to one another. See Anne Friedberg's *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, 165-66, for a similar account of the use of the term *avant garde* in film criticism.

62. *The Piano*, however, deviates significantly from Gothics by refusing to redeem Ada's husband Stewart as truly good, refusing to depict Ada as a powerless waif, and refusing to repress Ada's sexual desire.

63. See Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama."

64. See Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field" 33.

65. For a view of the film as racist, see Leonie Pihama. For arguments that the film is a misogynist text, see Margaret Morganroth Gullette's review and bell hooks' essay.

66. It is important to remember that the categories of sentimentality and melodrama are different but overlapping. While melodramas may be sentimental, they are not always so. The similarity is in the way that both manipulate emotions in the service of their social messages.

67. One major exception is Sue Gillett's critical article in *Screen* which discusses *The Piano* as melodramatic in form and accentuates its powerful affective dimension.

68. The film did win several Oscars, for screenplay, best actress (Holly Hunter) and best supporting actress (Anna Paquin).

69. See Stella Bruzzi, "Tempestuous Petticoats: Costume and Desire in *The Piano*."

70. See Freud's *Totem and Taboo*.

71. For example, Stewart is very self-conscious and hesitant at first to claim his "conjugal rights" with Ada. Baines' connection to the Maori tribe obviously separates him from British patriarchal laws and practices, particularly since the Maori women seem to have greater freedom than the European women. As Baines falls in love with Ada, he is also portrayed as sensitive and feminized in important ways that serve to qualify his connection to patriarchy.

72. Sara Mills and Janet Staiger have both made the point that resistant readings are not necessarily subversive. See Chapter 6 of Staiger's *Interpreting Films*, and Mills "Reading As/Like a Feminist," 41.

73. See Mulvey's "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure" and Doane's *Desire to Desire*, 32-33.

74. It is important to note that Ada is also deliberately de-aestheticized at many moments in the film as well. Ada's ashen pallor, Stella Bruzzi argues, is "never fetishized or aestheticized, so jarring with, rather than complementing, her attractiveness and sensuality" (263).

75. Many leftists see postmodernism and post-structuralism as apolitical or conservative because they privilege an ironic surface over depth-model concepts, many of which have historically been crucial to political movements (teleological narratives, base/superstructure, emotional commitment to a cause). The implication is that an over-emphasis on surface, on formalist aesthetics over function, both alienates audiences and results in the neglect of social and political analysis that had once been a powerful motivator for the production of art.

76. See Berys Gaut, "Identification and Emotion in Narrative Film," 209; Carl Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film;" and Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*, 157-161. Smith cites François Truffaut as one of the first directors to challenge the presumption that p.o.v. shots are crucial to identification.

77. For differing definitions of power and victim feminism, see the collection "*Bad Girls*"/"*Good Girls*": *Women, Sex and Power in the Nineties*, edited by Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry.

78. In her book *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway has suggested the need for research on the function of romance consumption among highly-educated women in male-dominated professions (50), and my study attempts to examine the complex desires of such a group--academic feminists who love romance.

79. The term postfeminist has been used by writers such as Tania Modleski as a synonym for an anti-feminist backlash fostered by men (see Modleski's *Feminism Without Women*), but in the popular press it is often used neutrally, and even positively, and connected with power feminism or postmodern anti-essentialist feminism (see Patricia Mann, *Micro-Politics: Agency in a Postfeminist Era*). In my survey of the term's usage in 300 magazine and newspaper articles on the Lexis/Nexis database, "postfeminist" is most often associated with a return to femininity, with "politically incorrect" sexual desire, with female sexual power, and with a traditional desire for kids and family as well as careers.

80. Rita Felski has noted a similar ambivalence in Marie Corelli's popular romances which "articulate a persistent if inchoate dissatisfaction with the ideal of heterosexual romance that they simultaneously seek to invoke" (131).

81. The program's other awards include two Golden Globes, two Peabodys, an Electronic Media Critics Poll Award, "Program of the Year" (1992) from the Television Critics Association, and a 1995 Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Portrayal of the American Scene (for diverse representations of racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities, and persons with disabilities).

82. For a historical genealogy of "quality television" that underscores the connection between textual strategies and commodity production, see Jane Feuer et al, eds., *MTM: Quality Television*. The collection defines as "quality" those programs employing self-reflexivity and liberal humanist themes to target affluent, urban consumers. Betsy Williams applies Feuer's definition to *Northern Exposure* in her essay, "'North to the Future.'"

83. See Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance*; Lawrence Grossberg's *Dancing in Spite of Myself* on rock music; and the many essays and books written about *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, and daytime soap operas, such as Ien Ang's *Watching Dallas* and Dorothy Hobson's *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera*. For articles on a wide range of low cultural television genres (the made-for-tv movie, talk show, soap opera), see Horace Newcomb's collection *Television*, now in its fifth edition.

84. See Grossberg's "Putting the Pop Back into Postmodernism" and McRobbie's *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*.

85. Lynne Joyrich's *Re-viewing Reception* and Jane Feuer's *Seeing Through the Eighties* are among few books that discuss individual television programs and forms as examples of postmodern culture.

86. One exception is *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski's formalist analysis of the narrative strategies of soap opera (and other female-centered forms) and their psychological effect on female viewers, but her speculative readings are as one-sided as

audience studies that ignore the text's role in shaping and delimiting interpretation.

87. See Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

88. See Ien Ang, "Wanted: Audiences," for an argument favoring qualitative over quantitative mass communications research that tends to objectify audiences, although she also notes that qualitative methodologies (like Morley uses in his study of *Nationwide*) are not free from political shortcomings. For a useful summary of the debates about empirical versus ethnographic audience research, see Ang's book *Desperately Seeking the Audience*.

89. See David Morley's more recent work, in particular *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, where he argues for the necessity of studying domestic contexts for viewing to get a fuller picture of how consumption works.

90. Lynne Joyrich also notes that commercials and audience readings may also be considered part of the television "text" (*Re-Viewing Reception* 12).

91. My audience group was also acutely sensitive to the shift away from high cultural references, postmodern aesthetics, and quirkiness, and towards lowbrow romantic themes and a more conservative politics in the sixth season. Many of the newsgroup posts during the last season lamented these changes in the program's character.

92. The show was in syndication at the time, as well as running its last few original episodes (summer of 1995).

93. John Ellis also discusses the different contexts of reception in his book *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, but he theorizes that television form has adapted to its place in the home, where it is more likely to be ignored, by continually grabbing for attention with sound and short segments. By focusing on the ways that TV can be ignored and on its inability to invite a voyeuristic look like that of cinema, Ellis underestimates the ways that particular television texts provoke strong emotional identification, and intense rather than casual viewing.

94. It seems fitting that *Northern Exposure* has found a syndication home on A&E, which runs "art" (operas, ballets, and productions of literary classics) alongside "entertainment" (mysteries and biographies of celebrities).

95. The newsgroup members accentuated the active nature of their viewing by posting (on alt.tv.northern-exp) long critical analyses of episodes, potential scripts they had written, or critical reviews of episodes whose values, characterizations, or style they disliked or felt was inconsistent with the program as a whole (particularly in the last season).

96. See Jane Feuer's *Seeing Through the Eighties* for a discussion of the mixture of elitism and populism in postmodern television of the Reagan era. I object, however, to her implication that this elitist/populist mixture is causally linked to a presidential ideology, because it has often been considered to be a constitutive feature of the postmodern sensibility. Charles Jencks has also linked the elite/popular double-coding to postmodern architecture beginning in the late '70s (14).

97. Feuer notes that in the '80s, MTM television and other studios began developing "quality programs" aimed at a narrower but more affluent audience because competition from cable networks made reaching a large and broad audience much more difficult (*Seeing* 3).

98. See Jeanie Kasindorf, 46.

99. See Betsy Williams and Robert Thompson.

100. In an article in the *New York Times*, in which he calls *Northern Exposure* the "granddaddy of CBS High Quirk," Jeff MacGregor defines what the term "quirky" came to mean: "It's a smarter than average show that demands the fullest attention of its audience because it proceeds in a nonlinear manner, and it wouldn't hurt if you've attended an accredited university, either, come to think of it, since they make use of a lot of gratuitous literary references. . . . A little bit of Taoism goes a long way at 9 o'clock after a tough day at the office; there might be an angry midget in it, too, someplace" (34).

101. Books spawned by the program include *Chris in the Morning: Love, Life, and the Whole Karmic Enchilada* (1993), *The Northern Exposure Book: The Official Publication of the TV Series* (1993 and '95), *Northern Exposure Cookbook* (1993), *Letters from Cicely* (1992), and a book of photographs from the set taken by Rob Morrow (1994). Two CDs and two cassettes highlight the eclectic soundtrack, and ten episodes were released for sale on videocassette. The most commercial moment of all, however, was when the studio auctioned off the set after the show's cancellation, including parts of Chris' flung piano, thus literally turning the piece of performance art into commerce. One of the newsgroup members, who is actually a priest, owns a piece of the piano and treasures it as a "religious relic."

102. The episode's title is a reference to a popular song by the Talking Heads, an eclectic band whose style Dick Hebdige has analyzed as an example of postmodernism. See chapter 12 of Hebdige's book *Hiding in the Light; on Images and Things*.

103. *Northern Exposure*'s intertextualism resembles Hutcheon's postmodern parody more so than Jameson's sense of postmodernism as pastiche, a kind of empty parody that flattens history; the program affirms the importance of understanding one's roots, explored most directly in the episode about the founding of the town of Cicely at the turn of the century. See Jameson's *Postmodernism*, 16-19.



104. Jim Collins makes a similar point about *Twin Peaks*, arguing that its parody “encourag[es] an empathetic response rather than the ironic distance of the explicitly parodic” (“Television” 346).
105. This late-19th-century poem by Ernest Lawrence Thayer is about an arrogant baseball player who brings his team to defeat by refusing to swing at the first two strikes and then missing the third. It ends with the line “There is no joy in Mudville / Mighty Casey has struck out.”
106. Of course, the class demographics might have been affected by the fact that the group is an Internet fan club, since many working class people do not have access or computer knowledge. But I have also read several other Internet television newsgroups for comparison, and there is a marked difference between alt.tv.northern-ex and alt.tv.friends or alt.tv.party.of.five in the kinds of discourse used and the cultural capital that the posters appear to draw upon. Furthermore, since Internet access is generally available in the workplace to many lower-middle class office workers (secretaries, technicians, service people, clerical workers), it is still significant that relatively few people of this class group responded to this fan survey. Even when Internet access narrows the field, *Friends* and *Party of Five* still seem to draw a much wider class demographic than does *Northern Exposure*.
107. It may be relevant that although this working class man did not finish high school, his roommates were college graduates who also took part in my study. Since he watches television with them, he is part of their discursive community.
108. 99% of American households own televisions.
109. See Seiter’s “Making Distinctions.”
110. See Radway’s *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire*.
111. As of 1995, 34.4% of 18-24 year olds had attended at least some college, as compared to 20% of all adults over 18. This growing percentage suggests that college is no longer merely for elite or upper-middle class Americans (who constitute less than 10% of the population). For these and other statistics, see the website <<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs/d96/D96T009.html>> produced by the National Center for Education Statistics, at the U.S. Department of Education.
112. The increase in social mobility and the new permeability of class boundaries has been remarked upon by many historians, sociologists and cultural critics. See Rosemary Crompton, *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates* or Kenneth Roberts et al, *The Fragmentary Class Structure*.

113. Very few of those surveyed chose their favorite characters on the basis of desire for the opposite sex (Chris and Maggie inspired a few statements of desire), probably because the program does not fetishize the sexuality of the characters. The psychoanalytic dyad of desire/identification isn't clearly at work here either, since one man both desired and identified with Maggie. This strikes me as an important freeing up of either/or possibilities that might contribute to better male-female relationships.

114. Cixous posits bisexuality as "the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes" (85), and argues that women have had much easier access to bisexuality than men, who have been "trained to aim for glorious phallic monosexuality" (85).

115. Clover is careful not to over-celebrate such cross-identification, admitting a deep reluctance "to make progressive claims for a body of cinema as spectacularly nasty toward women as the slasher film is, but the fact is that the slasher does . . . constitute a visible adjustment in the terms of gender representations" (64).

116. In his article "Postmodernity and Affect," Lawrence Grossberg points out that modernism fostered a disjunction between affect and ideology that has intensified today, causing people to question their "ability to invest in the meanings--and meaningfulness--of the world" and thus leading to a postmodern "crisis of the very possibility of politics" (290). By attempting to construct an affective politics, *Northern Exposure* aims to heal this problematic rift between affect and ideology.

117. See Raymond Williams' *Towards 2000*.

118. John Fekete has voiced a complaint about the seamless union of utopia and heterotopia in cultural studies work, arguing that the socialist utopianism of cultural studies is an odds with postmodern anarchic heterotopia. But Fekete's anxiety about preserving critical boundaries strikes me as antithetical to the postmodern anarchy that he claims to support. He also tends to equate postmodernism with post-structuralism, which I do not.

119. Marxists and possibly even Mouffe herself might object that *Northern Exposure* isn't sufficiently "radical" (due to its complicity with capitalism) to be an example of "radical, plural democracy." She argues that although we should retain liberal notions of democracy, "economic liberalism" (i.e. bourgeois capitalism) must be thoroughly critiqued from a more radical socialist viewpoint (7). Clearly, the analogy I am making between her political concept and the ideologies of this television program can only be taken so far. But I do take issue with critics of mass culture who tend to view the concept of "radical television" as an oxymoron, since they believe that only the supposedly untainted space of the avant garde can spawn radical texts. There has been an ongoing debate about whether mass cultural texts can ever be granted revolutionary status for trying to resist dominant ideologies, since they operate from within the dominant system. Although it may be inappropriate to apply the terms radical or revolutionary to a

television text, I argue that moments of critique are not rendered completely ineffective just because they come from within the culture industries. The fact that *Northern Exposure* supports capitalism (through commercials and marketing of products) does not wholly undermine any resistance to this ideology within the text (such as the criticism of Maurice's capitalist fervor). Hutcheon's term "complicitous critique," rather than radical critique, seems a more appropriate term for the kind of resistance that can be found in television texts.

120. Hardly the most radical goal being voiced by gay activists, gay marriage has been championed by some "family values" conservatives, such as Andrew Sullivan in his book *Virtually Normal*. However, this relatively conservative portrayal of gays didn't prevent the episode "I Feel the Earth Move" from being banned by two local television stations in Alabama and Louisiana (See Harris and Pryor).

121. In *The Necessary Dream*, Pamela Bacarisse briefly discusses Puig's first two novels (*Betrayed by Rita Hayworth* and *Boquitas pintadas*) as camp literature, but she refers only to Sontag's "Notes on Camp," an essay which underemphasizes camp's connection to gay or queer culture and therefore treats it as apolitical.

122. See Meyer's introduction to *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* for a summary of various definitions of camp.

123. Although it was an art-house film, directed by Hector Babenco and made in Brazil with an international team, the 1985 film was still relatively popular in the U.S., largely because it boasted a major Hollywood actor in William Hurt, who won an Oscar for his portrayal of Molina. The film also helped to rejuvenate sales of the novel in the U.S. and paved the way for the musical, which became a Broadway hit in 1993.

124. Bacarisse qualifies her use of this dichotomy slightly when she acknowledges that serious "sophisticated" readers also enjoy "wallow[ing] in soothing security and emotional comfort" (3), but she never considers the possibility that mass audiences can be critical.

125. Fuss, however, also expresses concern that cross-group identification can involve a colonizing usurpation of the position of the other rather than true empathy.

126. Fuss notes that Freud saw the "central role of ambivalence in identification. The sons hate their father but they also simultaneously love and admire him. Identification travels a double current, allowing for the possibility of multiple and contradictory identities coexisting in the same subject at the same time" (Fuss, 34). Likewise, Judith Butler notes that "identification is always an ambivalent process" since it can include "unresolved aggression" or an incomplete acceptance of a norm (*Bodies that Matter*, 126).

127. The ads noted only that I was a graduate student interested in interviewing people who had either read the novel or seen the film or musical.

128. Out of 30 people, there were only 8 white Protestants; 17 of the 30 total were Catholic or Jewish; 4 practiced Asian religions (Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu). Nine people were racial minorities and/or people of mixed race, and two were foreign nationals (Malaysia and Jamaica). 66% of the group were either gay, lesbian, or bisexual. 60% of the group were under 35, 20% were 36-50, and 20% were over 51.

129. On the last page of the novel, Valentin is having a conversation in his head with his beloved Marta, but Marta speaks lines of dialogue that Molina had once said to him, such as "That's the only thing I don't ever want to know, the names of your comrades" (281).

130. See the song "Anything for Him" in which Valentin muses that Molina would do anything for him, so he decides to trade on his affection.

131. It's curious that the musical's producers, by muting Valentin's romantic and sexual desire for Molina, seem to have discounted the desires and politics of a good percentage of their own audience--gay men. This alteration to the plot is even more curious given that Terrence McNally, a well-known gay playwright, wrote the book for the musical.

132. Philip Swanson also believes that the film dilutes the political message of the novel by making Valentin less radical, but Swanson's take on the film is far more negative than mine. He goes so far as to call the film a "liberal, bourgeois version of mainstreamism" and a "sell-out to liberal elements in the American motion-picture industry" (339).

133. The first English translation was published in 1978.

134. Puig made this comment in 1987 in an interview with Pamela Bacarisse to explain his viewpoint in *Kiss*. Although anti-identitarianism was gaining popularity in the late '80s, queer theory did not become a pervasive discourse until several years later, so this comment reveals that Puig was a vanguard.

135. Steven Seidman argues that in the early '70s there was a constructionist strain in gay liberation politics that emphasized freedom from homo/hetero and male/female dichotomies, but gay liberation abandoned this in favor of an essentialist ethnic-minority model (108-110). See Seidman, "Identity and Politics in a 'Postmodern' Gay Culture: Some Historical and Conceptual Notes."

136. One fascinating article by David Román and Alberto Sandoval considers the symbolism of the musical version (kisses of death, blood imagery) against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis. In comparison to these writers who see the musical version as *au courant*, reviewer Dennis Harvey gave a negative review to the film, arguing that it seemed like a throwback because it treats Molina as a gay victim, a "tragic outcast."

137. These terms obviously have different histories and have been defined variously, but all three have been invoked in different critical fields to refer to formally experimental texts that disrupt the narrative and aesthetic strategies of classic realism.

138. The connections that can be gleaned between the footnotes and the narrative are often ironic ones. For example, the scene in which Valentin succumbs to diarrhea is accompanied by a footnote concerning Freud's beliefs that the anal retentive drive is at the root of repression and that anal fixation leads to homosexuality (141).

139. For example, "The Enchanted Cottage," the film that Molina revisits in his mind but refuses to share with Valentin, rests on the theme of looking beyond surfaces to see "not the body but only the soul" (111). This metaphor applies to Molina's struggle with the disparity between his interior female self and his masculine exterior, while the love story between an unlikely couple mirrors Molina and Valentin's relationship.

140. The musical supports these dichotomizing rubrics more so than the film or novel, since Valentin and Molina seem to remain polarized in terms of gender and sexuality even at the end of the play. The Valentin of the musical never clearly embraces the feminine world of fantasy, nor does he question his sexual orientation.

141. Naomi Lindstrom has also noted that many Latin American critics, such as Marta Morello-Frosch and Bella Jozef, have found Puig's works to offer a "parodic denunciation of pop culture" (Lindstrom 29).

142. See Jameson's *Postmodernism*, 15-16.

143. See Lindstrom and Michael Dunne for similar arguments.

144. See Bergman's introduction to *Camp Grounds*, in which he notes that Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* has done much to revive the subversive potential of camp for post-structuralist anti-identitarians, by focusing on camp's parody of gender roles through drag.

145. Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" presents camp as both detached and emotionally involved. At one point she says "detachment" (45) is essential to camp, but later she argues that "camp taste identifies with what it is enjoying. People who share this sensibility are not laughing at the thing they label as 'a camp,' they're enjoying it. Camp is a tender feeling" (119).

146. See Esther Newton's analysis of the contradictory symbolism of drag. In her view, drag simultaneously implies that one's sex role is innate (the transsexual idea of the woman trapped within) while it also questions the naturalness of gender and underscores its performativity.

147. See Meyer and Butler.

148. See Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp." Although he sees subversive potential in camp, he argues that it can be co-opted and integrated with bourgeois values because it accedes to the capitalist logic of the culture industries.

149. See the preface to Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* for a discussion of the relationship of their ideas to postmodernism.

150. Although Benjamin reacted against the identification and absorption that today we associate with popular narrative film, in 1936 he saw potential for mass culture to provoke critical distance, albeit in the montage style of silent film that we might now consider avant garde rather than popular.

151. Andreas Huyssen has similarly argued that the identification fostered by the television miniseries *Holocaust* did more to encourage Germans to come to terms with their own history than did the rationalist critical examination and avant garde aesthetics fostered by the Frankfurt School. See Huyssen, "The Politics of Identification: 'Holocaust' and West German Drama."

152. In a 1996 lecture at the University of Virginia entitled "Politics and Passion: Stakes of Democracy," Chantal Mouffe argued that the Left needs to mobilize passion and offer people identification, rather than relying solely on Enlightenment rationalism, in order to effectively counter the Right.

153. See Bacarisse's *Impossible Choices*, where she argues that Puig is a cultural determinist with a "fundamental authorial ambivalence vis-a-vis the question of change" and utopianism (149-50). See Gustavo Pellón for an extremely pessimistic reading of the ending of *Kiss*.

154. See Dennis Allen, "Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Consumer's Guide," p. 32. He uses and criticizes Hennessey's formulation of lesbian identity as consumerist.

155. Transsexual and transgender are often conflated, or transsexuals are seen as a subset of the umbrella group transgender. But when critics distinguish them from one another, they usually employ the binary opposition literalizing (transsexual) vs. de-literalizing (transgender) or essentialist vs. anti-essentialist. See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter and Gender Trouble*. In *Second Skins*, Jay Prosser offers a poignant argument in defense of transsexuality, criticizing Butler's equation of transgender with queer subversion and transsexual with regression and heteronormativity. Prosser argues that essentialist feelings of embodiment should not be dismissed as inauthentic, but respected.

156. It's important to note that the novel and the film represent Valentin's identity(s) much more ambiguously, accentuating shifts in his ideas about sexuality and gender, whereas the musical depicts him as more definitively heterosexual and macho throughout.

157. Even though many feminists (Gayle Rubin) and queer theorists (Eve Sedgwick) debunk inversion theories and aim to separate sexuality from gender in their analyses, many people continue to feel that they are inextricably linked categories, an experience which should be respected rather than dismissed as outmoded. Focusing on the interwoven nature of these two identity vectors, Judith Butler rightly points out that “this very opposition [between sexuality and gender] needs to be rethought” (*Bodies*, 239).

158. Eve Sedgwick briefly mentions this phenomenon in *Tendencies* (8).

159. The totalizing concept of a social “norm” is problematic in and of itself. Since minorities represent difference, theorists concerned with these groups tend to pay attention to difference within the minority, but they still tend to homogenize the socially dominant group. Whiteness studies are usefully shedding light on how whiteness is an organizing culture, but in their zeal to bring it into visibility they tend to homogenize whiteness. There is a theoretical problem here with the binary of norm vs. difference-from-norm. I would argue that the concept of a monolithic norm is a fiction (albeit a useful one), since there are always differences even within a dominant identity group.

160. It’s also interesting that both lesbians in the survey group felt that the characters remained polarized. Like the straight men, they saw no message of fluidity, but not necessarily because they are biological essentialists. One of the lesbians saw sexuality as totally socially constructed and did not feel that she was “born lesbian.” She saw no shifting in the characters because she had seen the musical version, in which fluidity is not emphasized. I hesitate to make any generalizations about the interpretations of these two lesbians, because the sample is so small and because neither had read the novel version of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.

161. See Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 32. Fuss refers to Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism,” which is based on the idea that essentialism can be deployed to the political advantage of subaltern groups. See Spivak, “Subaltern Studies,” 205.

162. Bersani overestimates the subversive anti-social qualities of sameness, in my opinion, but he is right on target in his criticism of the way that contemporary theory has fetishized difference. His critique is based on the idea that “antagonism is bound up in the very origins of differential perception” (40), and thus he believes that using homo-ness as a model will be more effective in fighting the oppression of those who differ from the norm.

163. Cognitive theorists Crawford and Chaffin conducted a study that similarly questioned essentialist ideas about gender and reading, arguing that how one positions oneself on a scale of masculinity and femininity leads to differences in interpretation.

164. Since some gays and bisexuals identified with Valentin as a fellow bi or gay man, I did not consider those to be examples of cross-group identification. Once again, it’s

important to remember that identification is affected by how a person interprets the text.

165. Teresa de Lauretis, Elizabeth Cowie, Carol Clover, and David Rodowick offer useful studies of identification as vacillating, ambivalent, or multiple. See Lauretis' *Alice Doesn't* for her concept of "double identification." She writes: "the analogy that links identification-with-the-look to masculinity and identification-with-the-image to femininity breaks down precisely when we think of a spectator alternating between the two" (142-3). See Cowie's analysis of the multiple identificatory positions enabled by fantasy, in the chapter "Fantasia" of her book *Representing the Woman: Cinema and Psychoanalysis*. See Carol Clover's argument that slasher films offer vacillating identifications with both femininity and masculinity, with both victimization and power. See Rodowick's *The Difficulty of Difference*.



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