

# Visible Language in Contemporary Culture

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**ABSTRACT.** Visible language appears in many forms in our society and serves a wide variety of functions. More often than not, it is built into an aesthetic design to serve a graphic as well as a referential function, as in posters, tee shirts, restaurant menus, or graffiti in New York's subway stations. This article focuses on specific instances in which visible language works with or against an accompanying image to produce certain effects on the reader/spectator by playing with conventions of representation. By exploring the book cover of Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (with its reference to movie posters of the 40's) and various "comic strip" paintings by Roy Lichtenstein, the article investigates the extent to which myths and fictions invade and play dominant roles in our daily lives.

At no time in history has language bombarded us visually to the extent that it does in the 1980's. On an average day, an average person is unconsciously besieged by an extraordinary quantity of visual language exhorting him or her to think certain thoughts, perform specific acts, play various roles, eat certain things, "buy" various ideologies. In our consumer society, advertising has never had it better. Through various juxtapositions of text and image, the power elite continues to develop markets and convince John or Jane Doe that the products being sold are necessary to their lives, capable of winning friends, prestige, and influence, or likely to make them more attractive to their mates.

Visible language so saturates our world that sometimes we hardly notice its existence. We usually go about our business relatively unaware of its presence and its effects upon us, but its absence can paradoxically be the source of extreme disorientation, as anyone trying to find his or her way through the maze of unmarked city streets of Boston knows. Some types of visible language are so non-obtrusive and repetitive that we fail to notice them anymore, like the message on the side of the cigarette package warning that what we are about to do may be hazardous to our health. Other types of visible language literally dominate our lives by looming large on obnoxious billboards along roads, interrupting our favorite cops-and-robbers television show at inopportune moments to tell us that "Coke is It," peering at us from car bumpers exhorting us to "Have a nice day," reminding us that the shoes we are wearing are "Bass" and that our jeans are "Gloria Vanderbilt."

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to serve a graphic as well as a referential function, as in posters, tee shirts, restaurant menus, or graffiti-art in New York's subway stations. The American Institute of Graphic Arts even established a separate category for bookjackets and paperback covers for the first time at their 1983 annual competition, recognizing the growing trend of publishers to try to sell books by "packaging" them in provocative or evocative cover designs.<sup>1</sup> This article will limit its field of inquiry by focusing on specific instances in which visible language works with or against an accompanying image to produce certain effects on the reader/spectator by playing with conventions of representation. The "texts" to be explored — and here I am using the word in the Barthesian sense to refer to anything that is apprehended, decoded/encoded, or interpreted (*given* meaning) by a reader, whether it be words, images, behavior, or events in the world<sup>2</sup> — are the cover designs of Manuel Puig's books, especially *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, and selected paintings by Roy Lichtenstein.

The double focus on Puig's book covers and Lichtenstein's paintings may initially seem strange, but I have chosen these two examples because each provides a clear illustration of what Barthes, in his *Mythologies*, has termed a "second-order semiological system."<sup>3</sup> Stated in another way, Puig's book covers and Lichtenstein's paintings are *metalanguages*: each is a language *about* another language that precedes it, so that the relationship between the two different languages, or semiological systems, becomes an added factor in interpretation. Puig's book covers, in addition to carrying the title of the book and an image, also signify "I am a movie poster." Certain paintings by Lichtenstein, in addition to incorporating words and images, also signify "I am a comic strip."

### *Manuel Puig*

One of Manuel Puig's trademarks is the incorporation of phenomena from popular culture into his novels; in this respect he can be compared to the American Pop artists of the 1950's and 60's. *Heartbreak Tango*, for instance, emphasizes the way in which radio soap operas, movies, songs, and women's magazines create myths about behavior and society which then control the lives of the characters. The chapters of *The Buenos Aires Affair* begin with quotations from film scripts, and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* revolves around the narrating of film plots as a homosexual window dresser and a Marxist revolutionary pass time together in prison. By juxtaposing film plots (conspicuously fictive) with a story of two people who have transgressed accepted norms of behavior (values which are less conspicuously, but equally, fictive), Puig explores the way in which myths can and do function for politically and socially repressive ends.

MANUEL PUIG

KISS OF THE  
SPIDER  
WOMAN



"IN EXCEPTIONAL FORM,  
PUIG WEAVES HIS OWN  
SHIMMERING WEB AROUND  
A CLASSIC THEME."—*NEWSWEEK*

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A popular saying advises that one shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but the covers of Manuel Puig's books are designed with exactly that in mind: to make the book look as interesting as possible so that the casual bookstore browser will pick it up and take it home. The cover of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is one of the most intriguing of all (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> The peculiar shape of the letters forming the title, with their exaggerated points and angled positioning, recalls lettering used in films and film posters of the 40's. Although there was, to my knowledge, no actual movie called *Kiss of the Spider Woman* preceding Puig's book, the title is clearly recognizable as belonging to a specific film genre (in 1944, for instance, Gale Sondergaard starred in a popular Sherlock Holmes movie called simply *Spider Woman*). The words of the title, then, relay two kinds of information, one by their content and one by their form and context. We are being told in various ways that this book will have something to do with movies, with popular culture, and with the pleasures — and dangers — of story-telling.

Instead of separating the words of the title from the image, which is the usual format of most book covers, the designer has incorporated words and image together in the same space, as is often done in movie posters. What is represented is not the kiss of the spider woman, but the spider woman herself. It is left to the spectator to imagine being kissed by such a woman (or to imagine what effect the kiss of the spider woman would have on a human being). The woman on the cover seems innocent enough and, except for her bizarre dress and her mask, she is meant to represent a recognizably "pretty" woman with traditionally well-balanced facial features and healthy looking jet-black hair. Without the words "spider woman" on the cover, a spectator might not even notice the threat posed by this woman. When the words are taken into account, though, the co-presence of text and image suggests something to the reader/spectator that goes beyond either the specific words or the image. To state it differently, the words of the title, "Kiss of the Spider Woman," would not seem so enticing if they were accompanied by an ugly, repelling insect or if they appeared without an image. What makes the book cover so striking is the presence of an evocative title suggestive of danger and possible death, and the simultaneous representation of a pretty woman.

The other feature on the book's cover that is meant to be enticing is the publicity blurb from *Newsweek* announcing: "In exceptional form, Puig weaves his own shimmering web around a classic theme." White letters on a brown ground which is delineated from the rest of the image by a spikey

Figure 1. Front cover, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Random House, Vintage Books Edition, 1980.

red outline (meant to echo the effect of the moon's silvery backlighting on the trees and shrubs), the quotation from *Newsweek* figures prominently on the front cover. The designer undoubtedly chose these words because of their resonance with the title, and the endorsement seems even stronger because of the echo. Publicity blurbs probably do help sell books, especially since people have come to expect endorsement by "authorities" before reading or seeing the many books, movies, or plays that compete for their attention. That expectation, interestingly enough, has been created by the critics themselves, who now often hold a disproportionate amount of power in these matters.<sup>5</sup> *Newsweek* is right to compare Puig to the spider woman in that he weaves a web, but I shall argue later that this web is not spun around a theme, but around the reader.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger discusses how, in the history of Western painting, women, and particularly nude women, have been the object of men's (the spectator-owner's) gazes: "Almost all post-Renaissance European sexual imagery is frontal — either literally or metaphorically — because the sexual protagonist is the specator-owner looking at it."<sup>6</sup> In these paintings, the nude was most often depicted as submissive, passively looking out at the spectator who stared at her nakedness. Because she was on display for the always-absent and fully-clothed male spectator, she was a powerless object. But this is clearly not the case with the Spider Woman on Puig's cover. Even though she is portrayed frontally and erotically, and even though she wears a slinky silvery dress that is meant to reveal voluptuous curves underneath, it would be inappropriate to call this woman powerless. Unlike the reclining nudes of the tradition, she is clothed and standing rather defiantly with a cool, controlled look about her masked face. The mask is a crucial feature: she sees us, but we cannot see her. The old power structures are reversed so that we, as spectators, are meant to feel threatened, less powerful, and unsure of what we are dealing with.

This book cover is a good example of what Berger means when he says that publicity images "stimulate the imagination by way of either memory or expectation."<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, bookstore browsers will probably, upon seeing this book advertised on the shelf, consciously or unconsciously classify it in relation to what they already know and remember: a slinkily dressed woman promises eroticism and seduction, but a spider-webbed dress and a mask simultaneously mean danger. The picture teases the spectator and introduces feelings of uneasiness by presenting a dangerous enticement. Even the full moon and the way it backlights the spikey trees, plants, and grasses signifies strangeness, possible danger, and possible romance — certainly a privileged time of the month when things are out of the ordinary. Seduction, enticement, power, strangeness, possible duplicity, exoticism, and eroticism are all advertised by the cover design.

What is promised by the cover, then, but only to a reader who does not already know Puig's work, is pure escapism. Mark Roskill and David Carrier, authors of *Truth and Falsehood in Visual Images*, have suggested that fantasy serves a social function and that "one of the key functions of fantasy in any form must inevitably be the provision of an escape mechanism, for those who need to step outside the concrete and limited possibilities of their work or life situation. Science fiction illustrations and posters, which deal in the suggestion of impossible rather than possible worlds, would then be forms of fabrication catering directly to such escapist social needs."<sup>8</sup> Although Puig's book covers do not fall under the category of science fiction illustration, the types of images represented on them come from this same "impossible world" — the fictionalized world of movies into which we can temporarily escape from our lives. This is, ostensibly, the reason why the two prisoners in the book engage in the recounting of movie plots.

But Puig's books are anything but escapist. Once Puig, as spider man, has lured us into the web of his unravelling story, the politically radical nature of his enterprise becomes clear and poignant. In the midst of seemingly innocent story-telling of movie plots, other stories of political repression, terror, torture, and coercion insert themselves, interspersed with political and social criticism by Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, and others. Although the book cover may promise escapism by building on the conventions we normally associate with fantasy, what we get is something quite the opposite. Those who judge the book by its cover will find that they have been too easily taken in. But that is precisely the point.

In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger has shown how publicity images are often nostalgic, resuscitating works of art of the past in an attempt to sell the future: "Publicity is, in essence, nostalgic. . . . It cannot itself supply the standards of its own claims. And so all its references to quality are bound to be retrospective and traditional. It would lack both confidence and credibility if it used a strictly contemporary language."<sup>9</sup> Berger's words about nostalgia ring especially true in the contemporary culture of 1985, where an ever-increasing number of television commercials are incorporating songs from the 60's (encouraged by the success of *The Big Chill*), where clips from old television shows like *Leave it to Beaver* are cut into potato chip commercials, where women's clothes and hairstyles take on looks from the 20's, 30's, 40's, and 50's, where Art Deco graphics and jewelry have again come into vogue. The cover of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* with its 40's graphics and reference to old movies is part of this general trend of quoting the past. Yet it is not so much a nostalgic return to some better time that is at stake here as much as a critique of the ways in which movies and the myths they perpetuate have influenced the way we see the world.<sup>10</sup>

*Roy Lichtenstein*

While the covers of Puig's novels play with signifying systems of cinema, Lichtenstein's paintings refer to yet another aspect of popular culture: comic strips. Comic strips are only one of the many kinds of objects taken from the culture of mass-production that Lichtenstein and other Pop artists chose to depict in the early 60's. Perhaps the most famous of all are Andy Warhol's Campbell soup cans, but other important examples include Rosenquist's billboards, Jasper Johns' flags, Oldenburg's giant hamburgers, or Rauschenberg's collages of objects and images of contemporary culture. Lichtenstein was fascinated with, and reproduced, furniture and other material found in magazine advertisements (a kind of extension of Duchamp's readymades), claiming that it was above all their artificial appearance that intrigued him.<sup>11</sup> Given his desire to comment on the artificiality of mass-production, it is not surprising that comic strips would attract him with their stylization, limited color scheme, minimal indication of volume, impersonal treatment of the great themes of love and war, and especially the benday dot pattern required by the printing process.

The comic strips also provided him a means of rejecting the inward, private emotional emphasis associated with Abstract Expressionism (because any emotion portrayed in comic strips is so universal, conventional, and impersonal) while they furnished him with a model to paint representational images in an artificial, highly stylized way that is neither abstract nor realistic. The limited color scheme of red, blue, yellow, black, white, and sometimes green was also a reaction against Abstract Expressionism and its seemingly unlimited palette of color to convey emotion. Finally, the plain, straightforward style of lettering found in advertisements and comic strips (unlike, for example, the artful use of lettering in Cubist, Dadaist, or Futurist collage) corresponded to the impersonality of the mass media that Pop artists embraced. As Lawrence Alloway points out in his recent book on Lichtenstein, the artist's use of words in his paintings implicitly resists the twentieth-century theory of "medium purity" by introducing elements from culture and advertising (low art) into easel painting, or what is supposedly high art.<sup>12</sup> By "quoting" a mass-produced comic strip in a single easel painting, Lichtenstein invites a reconsideration of the very distinction between what has conventionally been called high and low art.

Lichtenstein's earliest comic strip paintings depicted recognizable characters such as Dick Tracy (1960), Mickey Mouse, and Donald Duck (1961), but soon he opted for the more anonymous characters found in love or war comics of the period. Unlike Rauschenberg, whose collage canvases contain fragments of recognizable realistic scenes or images of real figures

such as John F. Kennedy, and unlike Warhol, whose silkscreens portray images of real objects such as Campbell's soup cans or real people like Marilyn Monroe, Lichtenstein has drained his images of literal reference so that there is no doubt that what we are seeing is something artificial, or, at best, the representation of a stereotype ("the representation of a representation," as Donald Judd has called them.<sup>13</sup>) The women in Lichtenstein's comic strip paintings are all recognizable types, and they are always caught in the midst of some dramatic situation. One might even say that the genre preferred by Lichtenstein in these paintings is melodrama: exaggerated situations full of cliché, usually about amorous intrigues in which 1) the woman is left alone to suffer in silence (*Drowning Girl*), 2) the woman wants to be alone to suffer in silence (*Eddie Diptych*), or 3) the woman finds ecstatic fulfillment in coupledness (*We Rose Up Slowly*). Just as Lichtenstein exaggerates and intensifies emotions in his canvases, so too does he enlarge the scales of the paintings from tiny comic book size to full-blown wall size. The panels of *We Rose Up Slowly*, for instance, measure 68" x 24" and 68" x 68".

Most often, but not always, the situation depicts anxiety and crisis so that what ultimately emerges is a sense of the incongruity between the subject matter (anxiety) and the cool, impersonal, mechanical style in which it is portrayed.<sup>14</sup> Lichtenstein seems to be parodying emotions at the same time that he comments on the mechanical perfection of mass media reproduction. The emotions, though, are not those of real people or even real characters; they are the stereotyped emotions of stereotyped, anonymous cartoon figures.<sup>15</sup>

Lichtenstein's comic strip figures are always already "in situation," always in a context that is not too difficult to decipher. This is not surprising, since a real comic strip is composed of a band made up of several individual frames that are meant to be read horizontally from left to right, as in any conventional narrative. Each individual scene, or frame, only makes sense in the context of the whole band. Similarly, just as individual frames are read in the context of the band, so too is each band only a fragment of a larger narrative, the one that develops in time in successive newspaper editions. By excerpting a single frame from an imagined band and isolating it on the canvas, Lichtenstein invites us to reconstruct the situation and to supply the contextual information we need for interpretation to take place. Because we know the conventions of comic strips so well and because these are such stereotyped situations, we have no difficulty in imagining the required context.

I turn now to three examples of Lichtenstein's incorporation of visible language in comic strip paintings to explore the various ways in which his words and images interact. Since the relationship of text to image often

I TRIED TO  
REASON IT  
OUT / I TRIED  
TO SEE  
THINGS FROM  
MOM AND  
DAD'S VIEW-  
POINT / I  
TRIED NOT TO  
THINK OF  
EDDIE, SO  
MY MIND  
WOULD BE  
CLEAR AND  
COMMON  
SENSE  
COULD  
TAKE  
OVER / BUT  
EDDIE  
KEPT  
COMING  
BACK ...



Figure 2. Roy Lichtenstein, EDDIE DIPTYCH, 1962. Oil on canvas, 44" x 52" (2 panels). Photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

influences the way an image is read, it seems important to consider both carefully. The first example, *Eddie Diptych* (Figure 2), is composed of two separate panels, the one on the left containing words and the one on the right containing a combination of words and images. As is customary, we start reading in the upper left hand corner and discover that the words on the left serve as a narrative introduction to the situation portrayed on the right, with the "I" clearly referring to the daughter: "I tried to reason it out!

I tried to see things from mom and dad's viewpoint! I tried not to think of Eddie, so my mind would be clear and common sense could take over! But Eddie kept coming back . . ." We read four separate sentences on the left, each one punctuated with an exclamation point except the last. The lack of exclamation point and substitution of the ellipsis marks this sentence's difference from the others; it is also the only one that does not begin with "I". Instead of showing final resolution at the end of the sentence with a period, Lichtenstein uses ellipsis to indicate a lack of resolution that corresponds with the sentence's content, "But Eddie kept coming back . . ." In addition, the ellipsis trailing off to the right invites us to turn our eyes to the panel on the right for further reading.

Following the conventions of comic strips, Lichtenstein portrays speech by enclosing words in a balloon and including a directional indicator under the balloon that points to the person speaking. In this example both people speak, although it is clear that the mother's speech precedes the daughter's because her balloon is on top (convention dictates that we read from top to bottom). Her words, "I have something for you to eat in the kitchen, dear . . ." trail off in ellipsis to indicate either a hesitation on her part (she is playing the role of the mother trying to be helpful but not knowing what to say) or else an interruption on the daughter's part (given the fact that the daughter's balloon follows immediately). The wrinkles on the mother's forehead signify her concern for her daughter's plight, but she falls into the cliché of the mother who believes that feeding her children will cure all their problems, or at least keep their minds off their problems. The daughter, eyebrows knit in obvious emotion (although it is difficult to tell if it is sadness, anger, pain, frustration, or stubbornness), rejects her mother's irrelevant offer: "I'm not hungry mother! PLEASE, I just want to go to my room!" The letters in the word "please" are bolder than the others, boldface type being the sign of a more emphatic voice, and the exclamation point reinforces the sense of melodramatic intensity. This daughter just wants to be by herself so that she can think about Eddie, although she pretends the opposite and denies her desire in the panel on the left ("I tried not to think of Eddie"). While the left hand panel indicates an attempt at a more rational mode of behavior with words like "reason," clear [mind]," and "common sense," the right hand panel portrays emotion.

It is interesting that the conventions of comic books call for speech to be represented by a directional indicator attached to balloons containing words rather than by open mouths. Although both mother and daughter speak in *Eddie Diptych*, their mouths remain shut. Sometimes words enclosed in balloons are meant to represent thought instead of speech, and this is done by connecting the balloon to the person thinking with a few



Figure 3. Roy Lichtenstein, *DROWNING GIRL*, 1963. Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 67 5/8" x 66 3/4". Collection, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Philip Johnson Fund (by exchange) and gift of Mr. and Mrs. Bagley Wright.

mini-balloons, as in *Drowning Girl* (Figure 3). Paradoxically, although the woman in *Drowning Girl* is thinking instead of speaking, Lichtenstein has painted her with an open mouth.

*Drowning Girl* is another of Lichtenstein's canvases of exaggerated emotion. In this painting the image occupies most of the canvas while the balloon's size is reduced to a very small area. Its size and position in the upper left portion of the painting balances the hand with rounded fingers emerging from the water in the lower right portion. The image depicts a female head surrounded by swirling water and Hokusai-like waves, her rounded shoulder and hand emerging from the waves. There are no straight lines in the picture: shoulder, fingers, hand, and hair all repeat the wave motif that dominates throughout. Even the balloon of words with its rounded contours fits pictorially into the overall design, as do the round mini-balloons that signify thought. Lichtenstein has painted tears underneath the woman's closed eyes so that the water on her face, associated metaphorically with the water surrounding her, suggests that she is drowning in her own grief. Her thoughts, "I don't care! I'd rather sink -- then call Brad for help!" reveal the stereotypically distraught female so characteristic of comic strips of the period. Exclamation points at the end of sentences again serve to intensify emotion, while the relatively small, than lettering seems to suggest a lack of strength or vigor, an inability to deal actively with the situation ("I don't care"). The two dashes after the word "sink" may signify a time lapse (the passage of time between thoughts) or else the presence of something like a sniffle between thoughts. In either case the dashes interrupt the sentence and create an effect of discontinuity that is at odds with the wavy continuity of the image.

Although the title promises a turbulent subject, the compositional elements of *Drowning Girl* are anything but turbulent. Her hair is absolutely in place, and her relaxed hand and head resemble the posture of a peacefully sleeping figure snuggled up against a pillow. Without the knitting of the eyebrows and the lines between the eyes and eyebrows, the face would appear calm — perhaps even eroticized. Everything in the painting suggests a calm, posed image, with no sign of danger and no potential for drowning. Lichtenstein has even used compositional elements to create depth in the traditional way (by overlapping forms) so that the viewer's eye is easily directed into the painting without ambiguity or conflict.<sup>16</sup> In this painting, the spectator's response to the visual material is quite different from our reaction to the verbal material.

In *We Rose Up Slowly* (Figure 4), Lichtenstein has separated the words from the image by creating two separate panels to hold each. The panel on the right depicts a highly stylized embracing couple caught in the ecstasy of anticipation: eyes closed, lips parted, heads positioned for what promises



Figure 4. Roy Lichtenstein, *WE ROSE UP SLOWLY*, 1964. Oil and magna on canvas, 68" x 92". Collection Karl Stroher, Darmstadt. Photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

to be a passionate kiss, they seem oblivious to the rest of the world. They are submerged in water, the blond locks of hair echoing the ribbon-like wavy patterns of seaweed and underwater currents that Lichtenstein has painted in black, white, and fields of benday dots. White bubbles scattered throughout reinforce the underwater quality and recall the benday dots, although they are printed on a much larger scale. Stylistically, Lichtenstein has included many of the conventions used in comic books to represent handsomeness or beauty, for instance, his thick neck and square jaw, or her long eyelashes, delicate nose, and full red lips. The panel is perfectly square so that neither horizontal nor vertical elements can compromise the overall way fluidity.

The panel on the left contains the words that are meant to serve as the caption for this image: "We rose up slowly . . . as if we didn't belong to the outside world any longer . . . like swimmers in a shadowy dream . . . who

didn't need to breathe . . ." Unlike the two earlier paintings, the words of *We Rose Up Slowly* are not enclosed in a balloon and do not occupy the same physical space as the image. The convention of representing thought by connecting the balloon to an area near the thinker's head with a few mini-balloons (as in *Drowning Girl*) and the convention of representing speech by appending a directional indicator at the bottom of a balloon (as in *Eddie Diptych*) are both absent here. As a result, it is impossible to know with any certainty who these words belong to, although one can safely assume, given the proximity of the impending kiss, that they represent thought, not speech. The juxtaposition of the two panels seems to indicate that these are the thoughts of one member of the couple, and familiarity with the conventions of comic strips would lead us to associate the romantic, dreamy content of the words with the female rather than the male. Once again, it is clear that the convention of representing speech or thought in comic book images is completely separate from the content of the image (i.e., the presence of an open mouth).

Because the words of the sentence are separated into four fragments and visually divided from each other by ellipses, the impression created is one of slow abandon, timelessness, and weightlessness, with the end of the sentence trailing off into infinity. The same effect is obtained in the panel with the image. Although Lichtenstein has depicted his romantic couple in a close-up view and has cropped their heads and bodies so that the kiss occupies the very center of the frame, the passionate intensity of the moment paradoxically translates into the same timelessness, weightlessness, and abandon suggested by the form and content of the visible language in the other panel. Similarly, ribbons of swirling water currents, seaweed, and flowing waves of hair contribute to the overall sense of freedom from constraints. Even though the subject matter of the painting is designed to depict timelessness, Lichtenstein's use of the iconography of mass-produced comic strips plunges his painting right back into a specific time: the time that we now associate with popular culture of the 50's and 60's.

Verbal and visual discourse operate together in several different ways in this painting. At the simplest referential level, various elements in the image become recognizable thanks to the accompanying words, such as the fact that the couple seems suspended in water ("like swimmers") or that the darker ribbon-like patches of benday dots crossing the bodies may be shadows of seaweed or water currents ("in a shadowy dream"). Some of the words serve as ironical self-commentary on the status of the painted figures who literally do not "belong to the outside world" (outside the world of the painting, that is) and who literally do not "need to breathe." The verticality of the panel on the left with its vertical arrangement of words serves

an important function as it forces the eye of the reader/viewer to plunge from top to bottom, contradicting the directionality indicated in the title and the opening fragment, "We rose up slowly." And finally, by juxtaposing verbal and visual signifying systems, Lichtenstein has underlined the essential difference between language, which is directional in syntax, and this specific visual image, whose subject matter, pictorial elements, and square frame all work together to subvert a fixed directionality of reading, emphasizing instead a harmonious, spatial simultaneity.

Although the images offered on the front covers of Puig's novels and inside the frames of Lichtenstein's paintings are false in certain respects, they are true in others. Many critics have formulated theories about truth and falsehood in visual images, and the recent study by Roskill and Carrier has explored this issue in some detail, mapping out the different ways in which images can be true or false. The authors contrast "correspondence" theories of truth (which stress truth of representation and concern themselves with likeness or verisimilitude of behavior) with "coherence" theories of truth (which stress the way the work of art offers an insight into reality). A coherence theory, for example, might focus on the way something is framed, such framing being the expression of political, social, and cultural interests of a class of society. The example of the engagement photographs of the Prince and Princess of Wales, in which the Prince was positioned at a slightly higher level than the Princess, makes this point clear. Although the image is false with respect to the facts (the actual heights of the two individuals), it is true in terms of the prevailing male ideologies of the time, which sought to establish the male as taller and physically dominating (and thus superior to) the female. The same image may thus be both true and false at the same time, depending on the criteria being used to evaluate it.

It is in this respect, then, that the images on Puig's covers, with their reference to movie posters, and those in Lichtenstein's paintings, with their reference to comic strips, can be said to be true. Not only do they reflect the way all art involves a reworking of something that exists previously (literary critics use the concept of "intertextuality" to deny the self-sufficiency of any text and to affirm instead the dependence of a given text on a number of other texts already in place), but they serve to emphasize the extent to which myths and fictions invade and play dominant roles in our daily lives. As metalanguages, these semiotic systems function precisely because we are so familiar with the stories they tell.

1. David R. Brown and Steven Heller, *AIGA Graphic Design USA: 5* (Annual of the American Institute of Graphic Arts) (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1984).
2. See, for example, Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). "Why not forgo the plurality of the 'arts' in order to affirm more powerfully the plurality of 'texts'?" (p. 56). Barthes develops his definition of "text" in "From Work to Text," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 155-164.
3. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 114-15.
4. Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (New York: Vintage Press, 1980).
5. Tom Wolfe provides a satiric account of how artists have conformed to the theories of prominent critics (Greenberg, Rosenberg, Steinberg) in *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976).
6. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London and Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), p. 56.
7. Berger, p. 129.
8. Mark Roskill and David Carrier, *Truth and Falsehood in Visual Images* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1983), p. 90.
9. Berger, p. 139.
10. The power of film to alter perception is discussed by Walter Benjamin in his well-known essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zorn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). See especially his remarks about reception in a state of distraction, pp. 239-40.
11. Many critics have commented on this aspect of Lichtenstein's work. See, for instance, Lawrence Alloway's interview with the artist in his *Roy Lichtenstein* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1983), and Robert Rosenblum, "Roy Lichtenstein and the Realist Revolt," *Metro*, no. 8 (April 1963), reprinted in John Coplans, ed., *Roy Lichtenstein* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), pp. 115-36 (especially p. 134).
12. Alloway, p. 24.
13. Donald Judd, *Arts Magazine*, 38 (Nov. 1963), p. 33, quoted in Diane Waldman, *Roy Lichtenstein* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1971), p. 10.
14. Diane Waldman has spoken of the contrast between the "hot" subject and the "cool" style (p. 13).
15. Cartoon figures have become a "serious" subject of study recently; Umberto Eco analyzes the various types portrayed in Charles Schultz's Peanuts and Krazy Kat comic strips in the *New York Review of Books*, 32, No. 10 (June 13, 1985), pp. 16-17.
16. Diane Waldman points out the "series of overlapping forms that direct one's attention into the painting: a wave uncovering the girl's hand at the wrist, the tip of her thumb touching her face, the top of her shoulder covering her hair, etc." (p. 15)