

SEMIOTICS AND POPULAR CULTURE

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# The History of the Kiss!

*The Birth of Popular Culture*

MARCEL DANESI



## The History of the Kiss!

## Semiotics and Popular Culture

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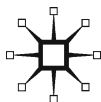
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## Preface

What's more romantic than two people embracing, looking into each other's eyes, and then, to put the final touches on the idyllic moment, kissing each other on the lips? At that instant, the force of gravity seems no longer to be in effect, as the kiss transports the lovers to another plane of existence—high above the mundane. Why is this physical act so meaningful and emotionally powerful? Why does the same kind of lifting experience not come about by touching knees or elbows? What is it about the romantic lip kiss that turns ordinary people into passionate lovers? Is kissing part of human nature, as instinctual to courtship as salivation is to digestion? Or is it something that we have inherited from our past?

This book is an attempt to make sense of the kiss. Unlike current thinking in the human sciences, which tend to ascribe a biological basis to its origins, I will claim that it surfaced in the society of the medieval period as an act of betrayal and carnality, as opposed to the sacred act of breathing into the spouse's mouth as an act of fidelity and spirituality (the exchange of souls through the breath). In that period the romantic lip kiss started appearing in narratives, poetry, and the chansons celebrating the deeds of legendary figures and their love affairs. Romance has not been the same since. Nor have courtship practices. The kiss has since evolved into the ideal symbol of love in the popular imagination, empowering everyone to seek their own romantic destiny, apart from the wishes of family or traditional customs. The origins of the kiss signal the birth

of popular culture, or at least of a proto-version of it, and of women's gradual liberation. I will bring some original research to bear on my argument in the final chapter—research asking young people about their interpretations of kissing that was conducted at the University of Toronto between 2009 and 2012. Overall, my claim is that kissing is not imprinted in our genes; rather, it is a product of cultural events that took courtship away from the control of the family, making it a matter of personal choice. The need for love is universal, but the enactment of love is culture specific. Its contemporary form originated in a specific place, at a specific point in time. Because of the electronic global village in which we live, the kiss, like popular culture itself, has spread throughout the world, finding its way into, and changing (or at least upsetting), traditions and practices of romance everywhere.

I was challenged indirectly to write this book by a student in one of my classes at the University of Toronto. I was discussing romantic movies, when the topic of the kiss inevitably came up. At a certain point, a young lady at the back of the class raised her hand and asked: "Why do we experience such an unhygienic act as beautiful and romantic?" I couldn't answer her question on the spot, because I really had no answer. I simply gave her the usual academic evasive comment: "I will get back to you on it." I never did. This book is my response.

We do indeed experience a kiss as something "beautiful," as my student pointed out. It unites the physical, sexual part of lovemaking with the romantic, spiritual part. As the 1950s pop music singer Jimmy Rodgers so aptly put it in his number one hit song, "kisses" are "sweeter than wine." Like a sip of a vintage wine a kiss is pleasurable and intoxicating, leaving us satisfied, but desirous for more, much more. In the end, the story of the kiss is a story of why humans need and seek love and why they need to express it freely. Without it, the world would make no sense, as the famous American dancer, Isadora Duncan, wrote in her uncompleted memoirs: "All that is necessary to make this world a better place to live in is to love."<sup>1</sup>

## Series Preface

Popular forms of entertainment have always existed. As he traveled the world, the ancient Greek historian Herodotus wrote about earthy, amusing performances and songs that seemed odd to him, but which were certainly very popular with common folk. He saw these, however, as the exception to the rule of true culture. One wonders what Herodotus would think in today's media culture, where his "exception" has become the rule. Why is popular culture so "popular"? What is psychologically behind it? What is it? Why do we hate to love it and love to hate it? What has happened to so-called high culture? What are the "meanings" and "social functions" of current pop culture forms such as sitcoms, reality TV programs, YouTube sites, and the like?

These are the kinds of questions that this series of books, written by experts and researchers in both popular culture studies and semiotics, will broach and discuss critically. Overall, they will attempt to decode the meanings inherent in spectacles, popular songs, coffee, video games, cars, fads, and other "objects" of contemporary pop culture. They will also take comprehensive glances at the relationship between culture and the human condition. Although written by scholars and intellectuals, each book will look beyond the many abstruse theories that have been put forward to explain popular culture, so as to penetrate its origins, evolution, and overall *raison d'être* human life, exploring the psychic structures that it expresses and which make it so profoundly appealing, even to those who claim to hate it. Pop culture has been *the* driving

force in guiding, or at least shaping, social evolution since the Roaring Twenties, triggering a broad debate about art, sex, and “true culture” that is still ongoing. This debate is a crucial one in today’s global village where traditional canons of art and aesthetics are being challenged as never before in human history.

The books are written in clear language and style so that readers of all backgrounds can understand what is going on in pop culture theory and semiotics, and thus reflect upon current cultural trends. They have the dual function of introducing various disciplinary attitudes and research findings in a user-friendly fashion so that they can be used as texts in colleges and universities, while still appealing to the interested general reader. Ultimately, the goal of each book is to provide a part of a generic semiotic framework for understanding the world we live in and probably will live in for the foreseeable future.

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## CHAPTER 1

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# The Popular Origins of the Kiss

Give me a thousand kisses, a hundred more, another thousand,  
and another hundred.

—Catullus (84–54 BCE)

Romantic love and the act of lip kissing are now so intertwined in the popular imagination that people hardly ever stop to think not only why we do it, but also why we have developed a worldwide culture of lovemaking revolving around that act. The German language has 30 words referring to different types of kisses, including *Nachkuss*, which means “making up for kisses that have not been given.” Some societies, on the other hand, have no words whatsoever for this act, indicating that it is not a part of their courtship rituals, or at least was not in the past. But wherever it is a part, kissing has an enduring and transformative effect, physically, psychologically, and socially, regardless of the age, social class, and educational background of the kissers. It has been estimated that, before marrying, the average American woman has kissed 79 men;<sup>1</sup> more than 92 percent of Americans have engaged in kissing before the age of 14; and husbands who kiss their wives on a regular basis apparently live five years longer on average than those who do not.<sup>2</sup>

Some kisses have become so iconic that they have come to emblemize significant episodes in the history of romance. These include the kiss between Romeo and Juliet, Guinevere and Lancelot, and a sailor and a nurse in downtown Manhattan

captured in a 1945 *Life* magazine photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt. Many movies are memorable because of a particular kiss performed in them: *Gone with the Wind* (Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh), *From Here to Eternity* (Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr), *Rear Window* (James Stewart and Grace Kelly), *An Officer and a Gentleman* (Richard Gere and Debra Winger), and *Titanic* (Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslett), to mention but a few. Kissing is the theme in such classic pop songs as *Kiss of Fire* (Louis Armstrong and Georgia Gibbs), *Kiss Me Big* (Tennessee Ernie Ford), *Kisses Sweeter than Wine* (Jimmy Rodgers), *The Shoop Shoop Song* (Betty Everett), *Kisses of Fire* (ABBA), *Suck My Kiss* (The Red Hot Chili Peppers), and *Kiss from a Rose* (Seal).

How and why did lip kissing become such an iconic symbol of romance? Is it part of ancient courtship practices, as Dan Brown intimates in his best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code*, where he suggests that Jesus and Mary Magdalene kissed on the lips as a sign of their romantic involvement?<sup>3</sup> Unlikely. The story of the romantic kiss starts in the medieval period, as I will claim in this book. It constitutes a fascinating narrative that coincides with the origins and rise of popular culture (or proto-popular culture), as distinct from traditional, religious, or folk culture. But finding evidence for the first kiss is, ironically, very much like a Dan Brown archeological mystery story. There are no photos or trace clues of that first kiss. The only way to hunt down its emergence is to consider the time frame when romantic kissing becomes a theme in poetic and prose texts. And that time frame, as we shall see, is the medieval period.

The forms and functions of kissing are not, of course, limited to courtship and romance. As a greeting sign it has ancient roots. The act of blowing kisses, for example, originated in Mesopotamia as a means to gain the favor of the gods. It is still around today, even though it has lost its divine connotations, having evolved simply into a form of greeting—blowing a kiss with the fingertips in the direction of the intended recipient



conveys affection. As recorded by Herodotus, in Persia, a man of equal rank was greeted with a kiss on the lips and one of a slightly lower rank with a kiss on the cheek.<sup>4</sup> Plainly, these kisses did not have romantic meaning; they were greeting rituals, plain and simple. Likewise, in Slavic cultures, kissing between two men on the lips was, and continues to be, part of salutation etiquette. The ancient Romans also kissed to greet each other. An individual's social status dictated what part of the emperor's body he or she was allowed to kiss, from the cheek down to the foot. The lower the part of the body kissed, the lower the rank of the kisser. Early Christians greeted one another with a "kiss of peace" (called the *osculum pacis*), which was believed to carry the soul of the kisser thus connecting him or her spiritually to the other. The *osculum pacis* became a ritualistic part of the Catholic Mass up until the thirteenth century, when the Church substituted it with a "*pax* (peace) board," which the congregation kissed instead of kissing one another. The Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century eliminated all forms of kissing from religious services, seeing it as a disgusting carnal act. However, in both Catholicism and Protestantism "breath kissing" was allowed to be a part of marriage ceremonies, symbolizing the spiritual union of the bride and groom. Coincidentally, in ancient Celtic love rituals, too, the breath kiss was seen as an exchange of the breath of life and an intrinsic part of courtship.

Kissing has played significant roles in various religious traditions. Kissing a holy book or icon to show reverence and adoration has ancient roots. Moses is portrayed in images as kissing the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Catholics kiss the Pope's toe to show reverence and obedience. In the gospels of Matthew and Mark, Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, the sign of obedience at the time, distorted into an act of duplicity. Jews kiss the Western wall of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem during prayer; they also kiss the Torah. Eastern Orthodox Christians kiss the icons around a church and the priest's hand during blessings. Hindus kiss

the ground of a temple to acknowledge its sacredness and purity.

Research by anthropologists has shown that a significant percentage of humanity actually does not practice kissing rituals of any kind. In cultures across Africa, the Pacific, and the Americas, kissing simply does not exist or, at least, was not known until contact with Europeans and the advent of global communications technologies, which have spread images of the kiss throughout the world. Even though kissing is now tolerated in many of these cultures, to do so in public is still seen as indecent or at least as uncalled for, given that it is an import from the West. In 1990, the *Beijing Workers' Daily* warned its readers that the kissing custom imported to China from the West was a “vulgar practice” that was suggestive of “cannibalism.”<sup>5</sup> Similar reactions can be found in other areas of the world. Anthropologist Leonore Tiefer comments on this situation as follows:

Sexual kissing is unknown in many societies, including the Balinese, Chamorro, Manus, and Tinguian of Oceania; the Chewa and Thonga of Africa; the Siriono of South America; and the Lepcha of Eurasia. In such cultures, the mouth-to-mouth kiss is considered dangerous, unhealthy, or disgusting, the way Westerners might regard a custom of sticking one's tongue into a lover's nose. When the Thonga first saw Europeans kissing, they laughed, remarking, “Look at them—they eat each other's saliva and dirt.”<sup>6</sup>

### Osculation in the Ancient World

Lip kissing is known technically as *osculation*. Osculation is not part of the courtship traditions of China or Japan, although it has now spread to those societies as well, thanks, as mentioned, to the influence of the images spread by the mass media and the Internet. In Inuit and Laplander societies romantic partners are more inclined to rub noses than to kiss—a practice found in other parts of the world. Early explorers of the Arctic dubbed this act “the Eskimo kiss.” Obviously, what is normal

romantic behavior in one system of courtship practices is seen as bizarre or vulgar in another. Lip kissing is indeed a bizarre act, given that it involves an unhygienic exchange of saliva, as the young Stephen Dedalus intimated in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "Why do people do that with their faces?"<sup>7</sup>

The scientific study of kissing is known as *philematology*. According to some scientists, osculation may have ancient roots, appearing in India as far back as the 1500s BCE. The Vedic writings of that period mention lovers "sniffing" each other with their mouths and "smelling each other." As philematologist Sheril Kirshenbaum writes: "In the Vedic texts no word exists for 'kiss,' but the same word is employed to mean both 'sniff' and 'smell,' and also has connotations of touch."<sup>8</sup> From there, osculation is believed to have been exported westward by Alexander the Great after conquering the Punjab in 326 BCE.<sup>9</sup> Representations of osculation have also been found on two thousand year-old Peruvian pots and vases and in various tribal African societies, as anthropologist Nicholas Perella writes.<sup>10</sup> But did the lip kiss of these ancient cultures have the meaning that it does today, namely as a symbol of romantic love? The fact that a word for *kiss* did not exist, as Kirshenbaum points out, is strong indirect evidence that there was no consciousness of kissing as a romantic act. Subsequent Indian texts, moreover, suggest that osculation had a purely erogenous function from the outset. The fourth century BCE epic poem, the *Mahabharata*, describes lovers as salaciously setting "mouth to mouth" or "drinking the moisture of the lips."<sup>11</sup> In the *Kama Sutra*, an early treatise on sexual techniques put together around the third century CE, osculation is, in fact, described as part of sexual fun and games. Kirshenbaum describes the relevant part of the text as follows:

An entire chapter is devoted to the topic of kissing a lover, with instructions on when and where to kiss the body, including the forehead, the eyes, the cheeks, the throat, the bosom, the