

## **COLLISION COURSES: FEMINISM, POSTMODERNISM, AND THE MONKEY'S MASK**

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Dorothy Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* can be seen at a nexus of the debates surrounding the supposedly transfigured cultural space of postmodernism, particularly as these relate to feminism and women's cultural production. *The Monkey's Mask* serves as an allegory of three of the spectres haunting accounts of postmodern culture: in its literal and figural collision between high and mass culture,<sup>1</sup> its position as successful literary commodity, and a certain political nervousness generated by its commercial and critical success. Through reading *The Monkey's Mask* as text and as social relation (as Angela McRobbie suggests for feminist cultural forms) we can trace outlines of the tensions between high and mass culture, poetry and the seedy side of urban life, the working class and the inner-city intelligentsia, the logic of the market and culture, and radical and postmodern feminisms. Porter allows us to ask: who gets written off after such collisions? or rather, what is the cultural space produced in her version of writing after the Great Divide of modernist culture and ideology? *The Monkey's Mask* seems to exemplify Stanley Aronowitz's claim that "[g]enre fiction may be the best place to find the snapshots of the social world" (ix).

While one of the defining features of postmodernism is the difficulty of finding an adequate definition for an endless proliferation of objects, discourses, and practices labelled postmodern, it is generally accepted that a characteristic feature of postmodernism is a changed relationship between high and mass culture. Andreas Huyssen's collection of essays, *After the Great Divide*, is central in mapping the emergence of a transfigured culture denoted by postmodernism, namely in the collapsed modernist dichotomy of high and mass culture. Unlike many male theorists of the postmodern, Huyssen stresses the gendered nature of the emergence of postmodernism, and the importance of women's cultural production and feminist politics as an enabling condition of postmodern culture:

It was especially the art, writing, film making and criticism of women and minority artists with their recuperation of buried and mutilated traditions, their emphasis on exploring forms of gender- and race-based subjectivity in aesthetic productions and experiences, and their refusal to be limited to standard canonizations, which added a whole new dimension to the critique of high modernism and to the emergence of alternative forms of culture (Huyssen, "Mapping" 250).

In paradigmatic accounts of postmodern culture such as those offered by Huyssen or, in Australia, by Andrew Milner and John Docker, it is high culture that has been attacked and changed by the new cultural space denoted by the umbrella term, 'postmodernism' or postmodern culture. High culture has come under pressure from social and political movements such as the women's movement, and also from mass education, the institutionalisation and ossification of modernism,

and the pressures of the culture industries. Its aura of privilege has been tarnished not only by advances in techniques of mechanical reproduction, but also by intellectual and political critique (whether of masculine privilege, Eurocentrism, or bourgeois elitism).

*The Monkey's Mask* embodies the characteristic figurative movement of postmodern discourse and, more specifically, discussions of postmodern culture: that is, boundaries shifting and collapsing. Language, subjectivity, and generic categories are transgressed and transformed in a lesbian crime story that has some of the features of a Pulp thriller, and which is written entirely in verse. In this juxtapositioning and blending of the detective story (updated with contemporary and marginalised subjects and subjectivities) with the epic poem form, conventional classificatory systems, hierarchies, notions of audience and reading practices are challenged. In such a blending we have a narrative of the undermining of the high and mass culture dichotomy.

*The Monkey's Mask* narrates a collision between high and mass culture through its central concerns of desire, violence, corruption, and poetry, and the connections among them. The characters thus act as ciphers of various sociocultural classes, and are brought together because of a supposed murder. As the mystery of the crime unravels, the tensions between opposing classes and cultures increases, reflected in the increasing sexual tension of the narrative. Jill is a lesbian private eye from a working class background, who embodies a resistance to high cultural values as represented by the inner-city poetry scene and intelligentsia:

how do you talk to poets? /  
I'm not known for my love of fluffy clouds / fields of daffodils  
or brumbies on a moonlit night  
give me a good bottle of wine  
a woman with spit and spark  
and the trifecta at Randwick (90)

She is called in to investigate the disappearance and death of a female student from Sydney's North Shore. In the course of her investigations Jill begins an affair with the student's poetry lecturer, Diana, a postmodern Marxist. Jill's affair with the academic and her criminal investigation take her into the worlds of the intelligentsia and the poetry set.

Not surprisingly, as Jill tries to 'make sense' of and uncover the murky underside of male poets and their protective wives, leftie lawyers, postmodern academics, dead muses, and anxious North Shore parents, she almost ends up being killed. Jill, as working-class lesbian avenger is on a collision course with high culture. Her instrumental rationality (a product of certain class attitudes and police training) also collides with the privileged and ostensibly bourgeois spheres of poetry and the imagination. Another corpse is discovered and Jill receives death threats. Thus the detective narrative can be interpreted as an ironic variation on Fredric Jameson's claim that the underside of postmodern culture is blood, torture, death,

and terror.

Jill's discovery is not who the murderer was, but where the sources for the murky underside lie. The corpse of the student is one result of the relationships between men and women, sexuality and violence, pleasure and danger. As her love affair and murder investigation progresses, Jill begins to merge with the world of poetry. Her seduction by Diana mirrors her entrapment by poetry, the seduction of the reader by language, and the dangers poetry represents within the framework of the text: she thinks in it, writes it, talks it, and mixes with poets. In this, poetry is demystified and not restricted to *The Monkey's Mask's* inner-city poetry set. Yet her near downfall is that she almost succumbs to the deadly charms and practices of a corrupt intelligentsia:

did [Mickey] die / so Nick wouldn't die / of boredom?  
or his clever clever wife? / both of them  
reckless, careless / and sexy / both of them  
running on empty . . . reckless, careless sex  
nearly killed me (245).

*The Monkey's Mask* is very much a satire of the pretensions of a cultural elite, as evident in the text's epigraphs where the targets of the satire are signalled — the intelligentsia and poets. It unmasks their corruptions and 'crimes' by using high culture's repressed other (Huyssen, "Mass" 53): mass culture in the form of the crime story and the lesbian detective. Bourgeois culture's poetic discourse is used against it as Jill appropriates and starts 'living' poetry, and is exposed to the petty jealousies, hypocrisies, sleaze, and squabbles of the bearers and guardians of civilised values: poets, academics, a leftie lawyer. Similarly to poetic discourse being used against its traditional 'owners,' certain elements of popularised postmodernism are satirised by the postmodern strategies of mixing high and mass culture. Jill's quest in this epic crime poem takes her from unchic, working class dykedom, to the modernist poets' bohemia of Tony Knight and Bill McDonald, and to the postmodern lifestylism and style of Diana and Nick. The outdated pretensions of Knight and McDonald are revealed, as well as the postmodern superficialities of Diana and Nick's simulacra politics.

In such a parody of bad poetry, postmodern lifestyles, conceptions of art, subjectivities, and politics, the ludic spirit underlying the text works through tone, language, and descriptions. Humour and mischief keep the narrative mobile and energetic. The language is precise, colourful, erotic, and playful. Whether employed in dialogue, narrating events, or describing scenes and characters, the rhythm and tension never drops as it shifts register from the lyrical to the streetwise<sup>2</sup>.

The second spectre haunting theories of postmodern culture is that of commodification. Again, I read this as being enacted through Porter's text. For Milner, although postmodernism is marked by the collapse of high and mass culture, however, the result is not a popular culture (49-50). The culture industries' role should not be underestimated in what apparently seems a

democratic movement, as Milner explains:

note the relentless pressure from within the culture industries themselves to identify and exploit new forms of commodifiable culture, a pressure which might be expected to have as one possible outcome the recommodification of the popular as elite, and the elite as popular (50).

Indeed, as John Frow remarks, high culture has been fully absorbed into commodity production, with one effect being that high culture is reduced to a niche market (23). Modernist high culture no longer functions as an autonomous sphere as in Adorno's framework (Wiggershaus 645), or as a space of subversion, as was the historical avant-garde (Bürger 22). Arthur Kroker and David Cook summarise art's new postmodern status:

in advanced capitalist society the institution of art plays a decisive role in preventing the self-paralysis of the commodity-form..... The institution of art moves beyond a deep ideological complicity in the reproduction of the commodity-form to constituting the foremost site of the process of estheticized recommodification which characterizes advanced capitalism (17).

*The Monkey's Mask* slightly repositions the questions of the status of high culture, and the problem of commodification. It explores the blending of poetry, in some of its forms, one of the most elite genres, with the more typically mass cultural form of the crime thriller. The outcomes are a reinvigoration and redefinition of both genres, in terms of language and increased audience. More importantly, Porter questions what Beryl Langer identifies as the socially constructed modernist dichotomy of high and mass culture (2). Generic and marketing impurities within postmodernism work both ways, thus demonstrating "the continuing process of cross-fertilisation between the highest of 'high art' and popular genres" (Hawkins 6), and the creation of an inclusive, rather than exclusive, mass audience (Frow 24).

As Terry Lovell argues, whether classed as high literature or popular fiction, the book has always had the status of commodity (7). Therefore the 'problem' or dynamic of commodification in postmodern culture works slightly differently depending on which cultural form is involved. This is not to deny the powerful effects of the globalising and monopolising tendencies of publishing houses on literary production and distribution, nor the increased importance of marketing and advertising for the book as successful product. The argument concerning postmodern culture's defining feature of commodification, however, needs to be approached with caution for, as Langer notes, "[t]he difference between the two [high and mass] resides not in the presence/absence of commercialism, but in the extent to which the culture declares itself as commercial" (16). To argue that the commodification of culture is in some new virulent phase may be true, yet the effects of this are not so reductively certain. As *The Monkey's Mask* demonstrates, the increased attention paid to design and marketing strategies can broaden an audience without necessarily compromising the contents or fetishising

the text as object/product.

The book's attractive design<sup>3</sup> and potential for a general audience were noted in a number of reviews of *The Monkey's Mask*. Porter's generic grafting results in a text which makes poetry "approachable and exhilarating" for readers outside the academy (Elliot 30), reinvigorating poetry with its streetwise language and story. "Is *The Monkey's Mask* state of the art poetry — this book which transgresses boundaries between poetry and fiction, which makes poetry accessible, readable, exciting?" (Digby 44). Porter herself remarks on the change in marketing strategies when she moved from the University of Queensland Press to Hyland House: "[Hyland House] are prepared to treat a book of poetry as mainstream and run with it" (Elliot 16). As Cathryn Tremain comments, "[t]he book is selling like a novel, being promoted in the front windows of bookshops that do not normally stock poetry" (11). The attention to design and the production qualities of the book also increase the attractiveness to potential readers, and reflects Porter's updating of, and experimentation with, poetry. The symptomatically postmodern emphasis on style and design does foreground and emphasise the condition of commodification (often to the neglect of anything else, as Dick Hebdige argues about *The Face* magazine [175]), yet this does not necessarily detract from the book's narrative. In fact, as Kathleen Mary Fallon notes, "[o]ne of the most important political dimensions of *The Monkey's Mask* for writers lies in Porter's determination to have some control over the way the book was designed, published and marketed" (197).

The commodification argument thus can sometimes lapse into a simple celebration of consumerism, a reduction of the active reader to passive consumer, or an idealism for when art was pure, that George Stauth and Bryan S. Turner describe as an elitist nostalgia for the by-now institutionalised certainties of heroic modernism (524).

The final spectre haunting postmodernism is its relationship or interaction with feminism: if, as Huyssen argues, woman was modernism's other, what might be the other of postmodernism? But in the light of a recent feminist debate concerning *The Monkey's Mask* in *Southerly* in 1995, it seems that for some versions of feminist politics, postmodernism might serve as a certain feminism's (repressed) other.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout its history as theoretical discourse and practice, postmodernism has often produced polarised responses, whether from Marxists, feminists, or conservatives. In Finola Moorhead's review essay of *The Monkey's Mask*, and Kathleen Mary Fallon's reply two issues later, we see one of the more recent feminist struggles over the anxieties engendered by the cluster of changing cultural forms and ideologies clustered under the referent 'postmodernism,' and related cultural and political debates in the feminist community. It is a politically interesting time when three of the most innovative Australian women writers, all three having produced formally and politically challenging lesbian texts, collide.

Moorhead's review is startling for two reasons: first, the nature of her

critique, based on an unreconstructed radical feminism, signals another and growing source of dis-ease with postmodernism; and second, is the fact that Moorhead herself has written one of the most strikingly postmodern feminist fictions in *Still Murder*, and has always championed sophisticated textual strategies (which might easily be termed postmodern in nature, if not intent). Yet her critique of Porter's text doesn't seem like the author of *Quilt* and *Remember the Tarantella*: for example, "[e]xperimentation with form is an absolute necessity for a woman writer. For what has been done and how that was done neither says what she has to say nor provides the way of saying it" [*Quilt* 128]). Rather, Moorhead at times sounds uncannily like any of a number of conservatives railing against a sociocultural context that appears to them only as a nightmarish cartoon, or the latest in a long line of moral panics emanating from a declining civilisation.

For Moorhead, Porter is a symptom of the decline of a lesbian/radical feminism into the decadence of postmodernism. Moorhead does give credit to Porter for her command of poetry and form, yet "[w]hat is disturbing is what is said and what is done" ("She" 178). She describes *The Monkey's Mask* as "very easy to read. It is formally slick; a derivative, lesbian-porn 'thriller' sped-read for you" (176). In this description, the two major problems for Moorhead are present: namely, what Porter does with poets and poetry, and what she does with lesbians and women. For, as Fallon notes, Moorhead's reading is "breathtakingly literal and moralist" (191).

Her review is literal in that she reads the characters as 'real' people, (and more importantly, 'real women'), and Porter's use of poetry as something more than a textual device. Thus whatever Porter does to poetry and women is a litmus test of her ideological positioning, which doubles as the text's moral worth. For in Moorhead's scheme, politics and textuality are conflated with morality and the author. So when Porter writes parodies of teenage angst poetry, Moorhead is offended; when Porter kills off poets, Moorhead is disgusted; when Porter shows female characters as enjoying sadomasochistic sexual practices, Moorhead is "slandered" (186). Moorhead's position, therefore, is a strange mix of cultural conservatism, namely the special nature and role of poets and poetry, and radical feminism. This leads her to conclude that "*The Monkey's Mask* is about distrust of women/woman," female masochism, and self-hatred (186); rather than what I see as its bold attempt to makeover the crime form by making lesbian characters and desire central, and satirising the sexual politics of the literati.

I'd argue that the real target of Moorhead's critique of Porter, is that continual whipping girl of radical feminism — lesbian s/m. Porter's satire of poets and poetry, postmodern subjectivities and lifestyles, is instead used by Moorhead (aptly renamed "The right Reverend F. Moorhead" by Fallon) to launch an attack on Porter's supposed lack of feminist politics. See, for example, Moorhead's lengthy digression on pages 184-88 where she criticises Porter's treatment of victims, victim poetry, female self-hatred, and sadomasochism, which are all elements in Moorhead's version of that demon lover, lesbian s/m. For a similar analysis of lesbian s/m and its implicit relationship with the decadence of postmodernism, see Sheila Jeffreys' *The Lesbian Heresy*. It is in Moorhead's final

sentence that the moral panic induced by Porter's snapshot of feminine sexuality is evident, and what I think is happening here and throughout her essay is that feminine sexuality, feminism, and poetry are conflated and interchangeable terms in Moorhead's cultural and political framework:

So the case was not a murder mystery at all, but about of sickness, the cholera of love: a case of the hots, in which the standards of poetry take on the standards of fiction and come out wanting, morally and ethically depraved (192).

Well, Fallon's response to Moorhead is to keep it fairly humorous, while trying to point out the flaws in Moorhead's theorisation of representation (namely, commonsense, transparent, and mimetic [194]), and how Porter deals with ethical issues — of ignorance, innocence, evil, and pleasure. She rightly points out the moral high ground that Moorhead's version of lesbian feminism likes to occupy by "the way they try to set themselves up as Authorities, policing the borders, surveilling practice and meaning, controlling definitions of identity" (196). And Fallon argues that Moorhead's literary and political framework seems unable to engage with the changed conditions of cultural production at the end of the twentieth century (197). This point highlights the contradiction between Moorhead's review and her own novel *Still Murder*, itself an adventurous and largely successful attempt at intervening into this same cultural context.

So where does this leave the snapshot I've been composing of the collision of feminism, postmodernism, and *The Monkey's Mask*? Well, after the supposed great divide of modernism, *The Monkey's Mask* seems to exemplify women's cultural production that is getting off the ground and rearranging the modes and registers of the once dominant dichotomy of high and mass culture, bringing some of patriarchal capitalism's others into focus, while rejecting being the victim of the succubus of commodification. Yet as the debate between Moorhead and Fallon shows, such playing and transforming is not without its casualties, nor cries for the old cultural and political certainties.

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## Endnotes

1. Throughout I use the term mass rather than popular culture, although I agree with some of Raymond Williams' points concerning the pejorative aspects of the phrase 'mass culture' (Heath 3). I do not regard the two as synonymous, but prefer mass to popular culture because in the terms of the debates concerning postmodern culture, mass culture is regarded as the precise antithesis of high culture within the modernist paradigm. Mass culture suggests both a culture of the masses, and a culture mass-produced by industrial methods (Naremore and Brantlinger 2). 'Popular' suggests a sense of 'the people's involvement', or a degree of nostalgia and authenticity as opposed to the commercial orientation and supposed uniformity of mass culture. This dichotomy of authentic and unauthentic is not tenable in a framework that places importance on the reception of the text, as well as its relations of production.
2. By streetwise language, I refer to Porter's emphasis on colloquialisms, the jargon of her subcultures, and the attention to the 'natural' rhythms of speech and thought.
3. The cover itself works as something of a mystery, with no title, and no indications as to whether it is poetry or a novel. It is dominated by a grainy photography of a woman's arched neck and face, suggestive of pleasure and/or pain, with her eyes covered over by a fragment of poetry. The cover uses only two colours, mainly a deep maroon, and with the heavy weight paper announces itself as an enigmatic and stylish text.
4. See, for example, Somer Brodribb's *Nothing Matters*, for a radical feminist critique of postmodernism, or Lisa Macdonald's "Dismantling the Movement", for a socialist feminist misreading of postmodernism.