

**Rebecca Louise, *The Monkey's Mask: Film, Poetry and the Female Voice*, The Moving Image No. 11, Melbourne: Australian Teachers of Media, 2012, 72pp. AU\$ 29.95 ISBN: 978 1 876467 22 7 (pbk)**

Australian poetry lost one of its most fierce and important personalities when Dorothy Porter succumbed to breast cancer at the close of 2008. It is sadly fitting, perhaps, that such a significant defender of the female artist's voice could be silenced only by that most threatening of feminine diseases. Porter was highly aware of the inherent sexism in the world of poetry; the success of her verse novels (not just locally but internationally) in particular was met not with celebration but with jealousy; her accessibility frequently criticised for simplifying poetic language and bringing poetry to the masses (why was that such a bad thing?). She once asked: 'Are we content, like the Latin scholars of medieval, squabbling Italy, to write within the confines of an exclusive club just for each other? Are we too writing in a 'dead' language?' In an interview with Peter Minter, she states: 'I believe in literature, but also in flexibility, movement.' Porter didn't shy away from pop culture and the mainstream, and as a result her poetry invites readers, rather than excludes.

Porter left behind a spirited and bountiful legacy, including collections of poetry, verse novels, libretti and young adult fiction that will continue to speak with and for her energy and enthusiasm as a writer. Her verse novels in particular brought her significant critical attention; she won *The Age* Book of the Year for poetry and the National Book Council Award for *The Monkey's Mask*, the Christopher Brennan Award for poetry, and made the shortlist for the Miles Franklin Award and the Prime Minister's Literary Award, among other accolades. Greater evidence of her success as a writer, however, can be gathered from the fact that she is credited with putting poetry back on the bestseller lists.

It is exciting to see her work receiving critical attention in monograph form with Rebecca Louise's debut critical publication, *The Monkey's Mask: Film, Poetry and the Female Voice*. Porter's verse novel, *The Monkey's Mask* (1994), which is evidently at the centre of this study, follows lesbian detective Jill Fitzpatrick as she investigates the disappearance, and then murder, of young (and sexually precocious) poet Mickey, encountering university lecturer Diane—a tricky love interest—along the way. Porter's daring exploration of female sexuality in verse form drew considerable attention from a diverse readership, at a time when gender theory and critical discourse about non-heteronormative sexualities were relatively new discussion points. A rare feat for a poetic work, *The Monkey's Mask* was also adapted to film in 2000 (directed by Samantha Lang).

Louise's thoughtful study is testament to Porter's enduring power as a storyteller, showcasing the fact that her verse found further expression in the popular medium of cinema. The proposed thesis of Louise's monograph—'to find new ways of viewing the relationship between poetry and film' (19)—is an admirable and adventurous one; it has the potential both to broaden the field of adaptation studies, and also to encourage filmmakers to consider the untapped potential of adapting verse novels or long poetic works to the cinematic medium. Taking both book and film versions of *The Monkey's Mask* as her major case studies, Louise more specifically explores the issues of the female voice, gender and sexuality, and the different ways in which book and film explore and/or challenge preconceived, masculinist assumptions about feminine identity.

An overview of the chapters demonstrates the range of Louise's study. The introduction provides a detailed overview of Porter's contribution to Australian poetry and literature. Split into brief sections, this introduction sets up the monograph as an accessible 'go-to' guide for scholars and readers of Porter's work. Chapter One shifts direction into a discussion of 'Poetry in Australian Cinema,' turning to the films *The Sentimental Bloke* (the 1919 silent directed by Raymond Longford and the 1932 talkie directed by Frank Thring) and *The Man From Snowy River* (directed by George Miller, 1982) in order to identify preceding examples of long poetic works being adapted for the cinematic screen, with—as Louise suggests—varying degrees of success.

Chapter Two moves to Samantha Lang's adaptation of Porter's *The Monkey's Mask* with a specific focus on the female voice/voiceover. Louise argues that the disembodiment of the female voice within the film (the split between Jill's embodied voice within the screen and her voiceover, and also Mickey's recorded voice, speaking after her death) opens a space in which 'the complex truth' of female experiences can be heard (40). This thread is continued in Chapter Three, which further addresses the capacity of this voiceover in the film to draw the viewer into the subjectivity of its female characters. The author turns to feminist theorists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and others to aid her exploration of both Porter's and Lang's respective representations of the 'feminine language.' Louise's study proposes that the adaptation has extended Porter's concerns by utilising the effects of the cinematic medium and developing the concept of a complex feminine tongue. However, in the fourth chapter, the author suggests that several other aspects of the film detracted from the feminist strengths of the original text—the more clear-cut resolution of the film 'fulfil[s] the generic expectations of the detective genre,' as Louise rightly states, and thus quashes Porter's original denouement of 'discontinuity and uncertainty' (60). The final chapter returns to Porter's verse novel, arguing that the poet's play with the conventions of crime fiction allows her to develop a more complex narrative for the female voice.

While it promises a fascinating study, the above overview tends to underscore the lack of a clear and convincing direction throughout the book. As part of *The Moving Image* series—monographs dedicated to the study of film, television and multimedia—there is an obvious drive to foreground the cinematic. As a result, however, these chapters almost read as discrete essays, variations on a theme. This is not necessarily a bad thing, although there are indications throughout the book that suggest continuity is intended. With an introduction so focused on Porter, I found myself wanting the author to pursue the intricacies of the poet's verse novel before exploring its adaptation, thus more clearly distinguishing between the representations of the female voice in the respective versions, and more lucidly defining the shifts that have taken place during the transition from novel to film.

While this monograph is grounded most firmly, at least by virtue of its publisher, in cinema studies, there is also room, considering the subject matter, to delve into Porter's poetry itself more deeply, and to ruminate more thoroughly on how the film *adapts the verse novel*, rather than purely discussing the adaptation of the narrative itself. Louise addresses this aspect briefly in the first chapter, in relation to Longford's adaptation of C. J. Dennis' *The Songs of a Sentimental Bloke*. For me, this aspect of *The Monkey's Mask's* adaptation boasts the most potential for both poetry and film criticism alike. This study could more critically scrutinise how films succeed and/or

fail at 'translating' poetic sources, not just through a focus on the source narrative, but also through consideration of the influence of the poetic form on the unfolding cinematic narrative.

Possibly due to space restrictions (the monographs in *The Moving Image* series are between 30,000 and 50,000 words), the exploration of these respective texts at times seems rushed. In its first incarnation, Louise's study was a Master of Arts thesis, and there is still something of a thesis quality to this work. It is perhaps not so much a criticism of the author as it is of the commissioning editors; a more nuanced critique of the novel and film, and a more careful edit of the chapters, could have transformed a promising set of ideas into an important and groundbreaking study. That said, there is certainly potential to develop this short work into a more detailed and expansive volume that could provide significant insight into this largely unexplored relationship between poetry and film.

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