

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46598-4 - Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History

John Docker

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, United Kingdom
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 1994
Reprinted 1995, 1996, 1997

Typeset in Baskerville 10/12 pt

National Library of Australia Cataloguing in Publication data

Docker, John, 1945–
Postmodernism and popular culture.
Includes index.

1. Popular culture. 2. Postmodernism. 3. Postmodernism –
Australia. 4. Popular culture – Australia. I. Title.
306.40994

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Docker, John.
Postmodernism and popular culture: a cultural history/John Docker.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Modernism (Art). 2. Postmodernism. 3. Arts, Modern –
20th century. 4. Popular culture. I. Title.

NX456.5.M64D65 1994
700'.9'045–dc20

94–11552
CIP

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 46045 X Hardback
ISBN 0 521 46598 2 Paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2001

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For Ned Curthoys

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Preface

This book has seen at least two false starts. I had long been intrigued by the thought that modern popular culture, especially television, wasn't what it was usually thought to be. I knew that in my sub-culture, the 'left' intelligentsia, 'radical' and 'oppositional', largely though not completely composed of university teachers, mainly of history, philosophy, literature, media and cultural studies, the amount of popular TV watching I did was considered more a matter for joking reference at dinner parties than intellectual discussion. If I were suspected of being serious, I was usually told rather roughly that mass culture was the major means by which in this century the mass of people were secured for and dominated by capitalist values.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s 'dominant' was a key word, a required notation; various forces were always dominating. If you didn't see various things as dominating, not least, mass culture produced by media barons for 'the market', that source of evil in the world, then you were naive, slightly ridiculous, and uncaring about how people were the victims of the media and mass culture and how mass culture kept social and ideological change, disruption, transformation from happening. You were perhaps in danger of withdrawing from the proper fight, which was to limit, by critique and by assisting the regulatory powers of the state (something I thought was strange for a 'left' that had emerged from the anarchist and libertarian New Left of the 1960s), the dominating power of the media barons. Also, how could I possibly like the American programs I kept saying I so much liked, when it was clear 'American cultural imperialism' was a major terrible force in the world and in any case it was axiomatic that British television, to be watched on the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the heir of Britain's BBC, was the world's superior mode of broadcasting?

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But I had my doubts, and I had looked at a great deal of popular TV – unlike my mentors, whom I quickly realised had seen very little of the culture they denounced. I'd watched a great deal of TV since our son had been born in late 1974, first out of exhaustion, later out of childminding, to keep him company, to enjoy what he was enjoying, to try and see why he liked what he liked and why certain programs obviously fascinated him, from the cartoons (mostly American, some Japanese) when he was little to comedies like *I Dream of Jeannie* or *Bewitched*. Why was a boy so absorbed in watching young women characters as heroines of fantastical stories where they use magical powers to quickly do this or that? Why did he like American shows so much?

Occasional Australia Council grants, and some part-time teaching, supported my writing, principally in the fields of cultural and intellectual history, and literary theory and criticism. In the early 1980s, I wanted also to teach and write about popular culture and especially television, and in 1983 snared a position at the then Canberra College of Advanced Education, now the University of Canberra. The job was actually, or at least initially, to teach public relations. It quickly took in media and cultural studies more generally. I could now try my hand teaching with concepts and readings that questioned the usual critical theory, which had every appearance of being a solid orthodoxy.

I would like to thank my students of those years, 1983–1985, for listening so politely to one of their lecturers telling them how much he enjoyed soaps ranging from *Dallas* to *Days of Our Lives* to *Prisoner*. I would also like at this point to thank the then dean, Bill Mandle, for having me on staff and encouraging my teaching in whatever curious directions I wanted to take it. As anyone would know in this strange world, some people want nothing to do with you, other people go out of their way to extend kindnesses and give opportunities. So I would also here like to thank those who invited me in subsequent years to teach courses in popular culture, TV study, modernism and postmodernism: Jan Bruck in General Studies at the University of New South Wales, and, at the University of Technology, Sydney (formerly NSWIT), Liz Jacka in Humanities and Craig McGregor in Design. Jan Bruck and I also collaborated in a critique of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.¹ I also taught a continuing education course at UTS in 1990 on modernism and postmodernism. I would like to thank the students in all these courses for years of lively discussion, frequently including sharp disagreement with what I was saying.

As a research scholar, for a few short months in the summer of 1983–84 at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, I took the chance to begin reading in the history of carnival

in early modern Europe. Frequently on television I was seeing what I took to be not a reflection or inscribing of 'dominant' capitalist values, but the reverse of such, images and dramas overturning usual social relations, in terms of power, gender, status, age, authority. I was at the HRC at a fortunate time. Its then director was Ian Donaldson, author of *The World Upside-Down*, on inversion in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English comedy. I learned a great deal from this book and enjoyed my conversations with Ian, though he was visibly doubtful of my main proposition – or hope – that continuities could be perceived between television and pre-industrial popular traditions. Didn't carnival, he gently queried, take place in the streets, while television . . . and wasn't the society of early modern Europe stable and hierarchical, enabling inversion because people knew what they were inverting, whereas modern societies are so fluid. . .? I said I'd have to shelve such questions for a while, while I explored the writings on carnival and inversion of Mikhail Bakhtin, whom I'd *just* discovered, and others I soon came to hear of and read, Natalie Davis, David Kunzle, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Peter Burke.

Also at the HRC in those months was the Bakhtin scholar Michael Holquist, who listened kindly if also quizzically to my attempts to relate Bakhtin to contemporary mass culture. I recall venturing that melodrama might somehow be seen as continuing a carnivalesque cosmology. I'd been struck by the way in *Dallas* a major inversion appeared glaringly to be happening: embodied in the evil figure of JR, the desire for wealth and power, supposedly central to American society, was created as destructive, of family, love, friendship, kinship, community. Holquist then told me I should read Peter Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination*. He also showed me material he'd written (this was before I could acquire the biography of Bakhtin, which he co-authored with Katerina Clark) relating Bakhtin to specific political situations in Soviet history.

By 1985 Ann Curthoys and I felt ready to write a book-length essay on popular culture, and made a proposal to a university press. They had, however, to let it go when the reader's report came in; it was too hostile to ignore. They were probably right: the project was as yet in too early a form, undeveloped, inchoate, though the hostility was interesting, even encouraging. We left it for a while, and busied ourselves writing other things. But the idea nagged, and when I received a two-year fellowship from the Literature Board of the Australia Council (for 1991–2), I determined to try again, though now looking more broadly at contemporary mass culture, not only television. But, again, there was a false start. I sketched a first chapter, but Ann said hold on, you're going too fast, you haven't really explained to an interested general reader

what modernism is. You got to postmodernism too quickly without explaining what it was post to.

Derrida has argued that we are always inside the concepts and philosophies we wish to critique. I am sure that my own debt to modernism, to its great literature and its critical theories, concepts, and methods, will be more than I know myself. I suspect too that while I have tried to present cultural history as replete with heterogeneity, fragmentation, discontinuity, multiple and conflicting and contesting meanings and values, history as finally undecidable textuality, my argument probably keeps reintroducing the very notions I'm trying to oppose. While I'm suspicious of psychoanalysis, particularly in cultural studies, where it frequently operates in terms of categories that unify and universalise, I know I keep returning to its terms and modes of explanation, even if ironically.

I don't of course claim my critique of modernism as unique. As Roland Barthes notes in his 'The Death of the Author' essay, writing, textuality, is a 'multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash', and the writer's 'only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them'.² I have tried to 'stage' my narrative as a scene of many writings coming together, as a conversation with many other critics. In this method I acknowledge the influence not only of Bakhtin but also Walter Benjamin, particularly in his writings on Baudelaire. My debt to recent critics of modernism like Andreas Huyssen will be clear.

Barthes' phrase about never resting on any one writing or position is important. I cannot envisage any 'movement', modernism or post-structuralism or postmodernism, any single aesthetic, philosophy, cosmology, discourse, as ever adequate to humanity and the world's infinitely variegated differences, conflicting values, argumentativeness, and lunacy.

My own speaking position is as a scholar with only loose and intermittent connections with the academy, working in cultural theory and history in Australia. In a necessarily nebulous sense I feel *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* has benefited from the vigorous life of theoretical argument and debate in Australia in the last couple of decades. Antipodean cultural studies and history have been fortunate in the mix and variety of influences they have been eager to attend to, enjoy, adapt and transform. Such can be clearly observed in the history of broadcasting this century, with state-funded media, in the Australian Broadcasting Commission (or Corporation), looking largely to British examples and exemplars, while commercial

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radio and then television would look largely to United States forms and genres. Similarly, antipodean intellectual life has been attentive to a variety of influences and schools, British, French, German and Central European, North American. I hope the present work speaks to this distinctiveness. Australian intellectual life of course has never been and isn't now an homogeneous scene, particularly in differences between its main centres, Sydney and Melbourne. Sydney intellectual traditions have been hospitable to pluralism, libertarianism, anarchism, nihilism, with intellectuals feeling ever at the margins of society and power. In Melbourne, intellectuals have seen themselves as important even central to Australian society and history.³

There are many people to thank for this book, not least the Literature Board of the Australia Council for a Senior Fellowship for 1991–2. For the stimulus of agreement and disagreement, knowledge and advice, over the years, I'd like to thank: Veronica Kelly, John Kavanagh, Jenna Price, Keith Windschuttle, Brian Stoddart, Kalpana Ram, Albert Moran, Di Powell, Camille Guy, Clive Kessler, Noel King, Tony Branigan, Tony Mitchell, Paula Hamilton, Heather Goodall, John Castles, Jane Connors, Emma Graham, Martin Barker, Lesley Johnson, Stephen Muecke. In the very early 1980s I was kindly invited into a popular culture discussion group which also included Pauline Johnson, Richard Osborne, Lorraine Mortimer, Kathy Robinson. I would like to thank the Melbourne journal *Arena* for its eclectic hospitality in publishing a paper that came out of that group, 'In Defence of Popular Culture', my first substantial contribution to the field, along with replies to the replies that came in. Other journals I would like to thank here for their hospitality are *Australasian Drama Studies*, *Overland*, *Continuum*, *Social Alternatives*, *Media Information Australia*, *Theory Culture and Society*. In 1984 I was part of a 'theory' discussion group that included Pauline Johnson, Guther Kress, Liz Jacka, Drusilla Modjeska, Susan Dermody. Another discussion group, in 1987, the 'Shibboleths of the Left' group, John Bern, Baiba Berzins, Peter Bryant, Ann Curthoys, Carol Johnston, Jan Larbalestier, Jeannie Martin, assisted with my attempts to relate postmodernism to social and political theory; Peter Bryant in particular urged me to read Alec Nove. I would also like to acknowledge the stimulation of more recent discussion with Helen Irving and Stephen Gaukroger.

The late Henry Mayer once invaluablely advised me, when I told him I was embarking on a book on mass culture, to focus on genres rather than particular programs, which can be ephemeral. Professor Mayer was also a pluralist, hospitable editor of *Media Information Australia*.

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POSTMODERNISM AND POPULAR CULTURE

I sent a draft of the chapter on fools to the Australian comedian Graham Kennedy, and the King kindly sent back to one of his admiring subjects an encouraging thank you card.

Mike Chesterman and Colleen Chesterman lent me a copy of poems and songs lampooning the Sydney monorail.

Bob Perry gave me useful information about Darling Harbour and the Harbourside Festival Marketplace. Ann Curthoys and I wrote together the chapter on *Prisoner (or Cell Block H)*. Our *Prisoner* project had a long and odd history in the 1980s. It was developed while we participated in a discussion group including the late Bill Bonney, Helen Wilson, and Di Powell, which was preparing ideas for the Australian Communication Conference to be held in Sydney in 1983. We presented it as a paper to this conference, but couldn't get the subsequent article published until 1989, when it was included in a collection of essays compiled by John Tulloch and Graeme Turner on Australian TV.⁴

I would also like to acknowledge, for their encouragement and support, my literary agent, Lyn Tranter, and my editor at Cambridge University Press, Phillipa McGuinness; and for thankfully astringent final editing, Carla Taines. My special thanks to Meaghan Morris and Iain Wright for thorough and helpful readings of the manuscript.

This book was assisted by a writer's fellowship from the Australia Council, the federal government's arts funding and advisory body.

Introduction

In this book I question the way a century of modernist critical theory has understood twentieth-century mass culture, and suggest that postmodernism promises more illuminating approaches. Modernist critical theory has demonised mass culture by apocalyptically condemning it as the chief danger to civilisation, leading to mass acceptance of, lack of resistance to, all that is bad and wrong in the world. There are an infinite number of things wrong with the contemporary world, but mass culture and the media are not the chief culprits. Rather might we think of racism, colonialism, lack of democracy and human rights, state censorship, political repression, torture, sexual violence, history as threat, fear, destruction and cruelty. Western mass culture and the media have neither univocally supported such forces nor unilaterally reconciled the mass of people to them. In many many cases, and very often, it's been the reverse.

Postmodernism – or at least the strands I like – does not ascribe to popular culture phenomena any single commanding meaning or purpose. It does not assume any easily explicable relationship between popular culture and its audiences, and it does not see audiences as transparent in their desires and consciousness (or their unconscious). It does not wish to install and police a hierarchy of genres in culture in general. It does not prescribe innovation and experiment as cultural absolutes by which to judge all aesthetic expression. Rather it is interested in a plurality of forms and genres, a pluralising of aesthetic criteria, where such forms and genres may have long and fascinating histories, not as static and separate but entwined, interacting, conflicting, contesting, playing off against each other, mixing in unpredictable combinations, protean in energy, moving quickly between extremes, from pathos to farce, intensity to burlesque, endlessly fertile as narrative,

theatricality, and performance. Postmodernism defends the 'lower female genres' and their readers and audiences so excoriated by modernism this century. It sees popular culture as a frequent site of flamboyance, extravagance, excess, parody, self-parody, a self-parody that has philosophical implications for popular culture as a worldview, a cosmology, a poetics.

While my sympathies are clearly with postmodernism rather than modernism, I do not pose them as alternatives in any simple way. I have tried to present postmodernism as varied, heterogeneous, contradictory, as was, is, modernism. 'Post' means coming after as well as critical of, in tension with. The history of their relations is inevitably messy and confused.

To explore postmodernism, then, we have first to evoke modernism, that movement that gathered momentum in another Nineties period, the 1890s, and was at its most powerful and striking and new in the early part of the twentieth century and especially in the 1920s. In architecture and design there was the Bauhaus movement and the key manifestos and exhibitions of Le Corbusier. In poetry there were Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922). In the novel D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* was published in 1920, Joyce's *Ulysses* appeared in 1922, and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* in 1927. The various avant-garde movements, German Expressionism, French Dada and Surrealism, Italian and Russian Futurism, shocked audiences by paying scant respect to previous boundaries between cultural forms and were indeed exhilaratingly iconoclastic, experimental and daring. Modernism flowered into a great aesthetic movement, challenging and transforming every received art form, from literature and music to painting and architecture.

But modernism was also deeply divided, bewilderingly diverse, often highly contradictory. It was international, yet different in different continents and different cities. It was always more than a cultural phenomenon; it always involved philosophical, sociological and economic contexts and arguments as well. Like any influential aesthetic, its political implications and affiliations varied enormously, from, at various times and places, the nihilist, the socialist, to the conservative, even the fascist.

I start with Le Corbusier because much postmodernist theory has focused on postmodern architecture as the defining break from modernism. But I also wish to show just how varied twentieth-century modernism is by contrasting Le Corbusier's 1920s conceptions of modernity to those of high literary modernism, beginning with the writings in the 1930s of F.R. Leavis, in his *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture*, and Q.D. Leavis, in her *Fiction and the Reading Public*. These early

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essays of the Leavises now appear as uncannily foundational, prefiguring – though not necessarily by direct connection or influence – major modernist mass culture theories and movements to come. From there I move on a decade, to the cultural theories of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno and Horkheimer's essay 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as mass deception' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), as well as Adorno's postwar essay 'Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture' (1954).

Postwar cultural studies began to grow and institutionally take grip as mass culture, media, and advertising themselves began in a recovering and recovered world a new efflorescence. I continue tracing the lineage of 'high literary modernism' in Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), before turning to a book, published just across the English Channel in the same year, that perhaps more than any other launched postwar British cultural studies. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* inaugurated the left turn in British mass-culture theory that would continue in the Marxism of Hoggart's successors at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, in particular the commanding figure of Stuart Hall. An important feature of the work of Barthes, Hall, and the Birmingham Centre at this time was structuralism, an approach which sought a central identifying feature to a mass culture text, or to mass culture itself. In the 1970s another critical movement, Screen Theory, became a persuasive force. While also structuralist in method, Screen Theory effected a shift in geocultural focus from Birmingham to London, and from ethnographic research into various youth sub-cultures to analysis of film and television texts, in terms of literary history and psychoanalysis. Accordingly this part of the book looks at and picks over the implications of two influential essays, Colin McCabe's 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses' and Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. So ends Part One, with modernism at its most institutionally and discursively powerful.

Part Two charts modernism's strange decline, in the coming of postmodern architecture and its challenge to the International Style. Here I focus on Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), and in a continental change of location, the application of postmodern ideas and ideals of building and design to Sydney – yes, I can't but add, home of the Olympics in the year 2000. In mass-culture theory, modernism encountered the rise of poststructuralism (I focus on Derrida) and its challenge to decades of structuralism. There were also new conceptions abroad of the age as postmodern, in the work of Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Jameson. Yet this cannot be a simple narrative. In cultural studies as a specific field, I trace the difficult disintegration of the certainties of high literary

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modernism, not least in Raymond Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974). These uncertainties had been evident earlier, notably in Walter Benjamin's differences with mainstream Frankfurt School theory in the 1930s.¹ But now they began to increase and multiply, as shown in the work in the late 1970s and early 1980s of Tania Modleski and Dorothy Hobson, exploring strengths in TV soap opera and defending their audiences, and John Fiske in the later 1980s evoking the various pleasures of popular culture. I also ponder here the dangers of a new orthodoxy developing around the notion of pleasure.

Part Three is devoted to those theorists who offer a positive account of popular culture, especially Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of carnival and carnivalesque, of monologic and dialogic and heteroglossia, and differing fictional notions of time, space, and character. This journey from early modern Europe to the present takes in festivity and theatre, fools and tricksters, vaudeville and television, melodrama and the detective novel. I test Bakhtin's theories across a range of cultural material, and discuss other theorists of trickster figures, festive inversion, and world upside-down, like Enid Welsford, Natalie Davis, David Kunzle, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Peter Burke, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White.

In his introduction to the memorial volume of Allon White's writings, *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing*, Stuart Hall discusses the major transition that occurred in cultural theory from the 1970s to the 1980s. Hall argues that the work White wrote with Peter Stallybrass, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), was a landmark text in cultural studies because it helped shape and define this transition. As Hall sees it, the 1970s 'moment' in cultural studies was characteristically Marxist. Key metaphors were of social, cultural and political transformation where a dominant order and class could possibly be overthrown by subordinate, oppositional forces. The dominant and the subordinate were in constant relations of negotiation, resistance and struggle. The 1980s 'moment' disturbed such clear binary oppositions, drawing on Bakhtin's notions of carnivalesque to point to cultural life, particularly in its relations of 'high' and 'low', as historically ever hybrid and ambiguous. An imperative to order, regulate, and exclude is confused by powerful unpredictable desires for the 'low', the other. The dialectic, enshrining a notion of history, theory, culture as moving forward through the resolution of conflicts and contradictions, had now to compete with the notion of the dialogic, of language and culture as ceaseless unpredictable heterogeneity, history as reversible. Where the dialectic assumes history as meta-narrative, as governed by logic and laws, the dialogic refers to forces and meanings which endlessly shift

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and slip. The dialectic looks to a transcendence of that which is opposed; the dialogic suggests spatial metaphors, the dispersal of conflicts and antagonisms into repetition and ambivalence.²

The transition Stuart Hall talks of, from binary metaphors of cultural and symbolic transformation to tropes of dispersal, is intensifying to the point where the very project of cultural theory, the attempt to comprehend the relations between 'the social' and 'the symbolic',³ has become deeply problematic. The key figure in this movement is, perhaps, Meaghan Morris, her cultural theory writing a kind of mimesis of post-marxist epistemological vertigo, a poetics of witty self-reflexivity and self-disturbance returning again and again to the enigmatic status of cultural studies itself, facing the impossibility of its project, its unthinkable death. In this sense, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture: A Cultural History* is the charting of a century's passage in cultural theory towards the vertiginous uncertainty of the 1990s, its Janus face, foreboding and hope, opportunity or end, new futures or disaster, dream and nightmare.