

Pirate Power

Feminism, Reading,
Postmodernism: The Pirate's
Fiancee
Meaghan Morris
Verso £9.95 pbk

The Pirate's Fiancee, a collection of essays written between 1979 and 1987, demonstrates what it might mean to read as a feminist in a post-modern world. This is a world where general theories and universal truths no longer hold; we cannot, for example, resort to fixed notions of femininity. What it means to be a woman is the effect of a range of social practices and, as Morris argues, this allows for diversification and extension of the grounds of women's struggle. The Australian context which frames the essays highlights both the importance of cultural specificity and the political usefulness of seeing shared problems from a different perspective. It is also interesting in itself and a positive help in understanding the postmodern.

Reading is a prerequisite for positive intervention in cultural politics. If meaning in a post-modern world is always plural, it is never beyond politics and, as Mor-

ris' arguments suggest, the political challenge for those anxious to take an active part in cultural politics and social change is to deconstruct the rhetorical structures of cultural practices and to produce positions from which it is possible to speak out as feminists, anti-racists, anti-capitalists.

Writing of the work of Michele Le Doeuff, Morris defines the key reference points for postmodernism as 'femininity, pleasure and power, the politics of 'style', the limitations of *philosophical* Reason, the work of figuration in discourse, the function of Other-ness in meta-discourse, and the complexity of historical relations between a philosophical imaginary and popular culture'. She suggests that despite a widespread myth to the contrary, women have made a considerable contribution to the post-modern debate and male writers have borrowed extensively from feminism, though they rarely acknowledge this. This complex post-modern agenda is addressed in essays which are clearly written and well worth the effort which they demand of the reader.

In each essay the texts chosen, for example, Mary Daly, Michele Le Doeuff, Baudrillard, Lyotard and *Crocodile Dundee*, set the

terms of the issues addressed. In keeping with post-modernism, the book does not offer a fixed position from which to read but, as Morris explains in her introduction, she reads sympathetically in order to understand the texts as criticisms of the answers that her own feminism might automatically provide. In some ways this makes the anthology a frustrating experience, at least for this feminist reader, who had hoped for more overtly political critiques of post-modern discourses which positively exclude both feminism and other forms of radical political practice.

Postmodernism is, of course, a plural signifier, dependent on context and reading for meaning. While there are competing uses in the different essays in the book, they share an assumption about the lack of any certainty or fixity of meaning. Feminism and other forms of radical politics have an investment in politicising and transforming difference, for example, the apparently fixed and natural meanings which justify existing gender relations. Morris argues that postmodernism abolishes the 'critical distance' necessary to such transformation and, as such, presents a real challenge to left-wing cultural politics.

If we can no longer look to fixed standards of truth, objectivity or morality, the answer lies perhaps in attention to the specific forms which power and knowledge take. Morris's readings are concerned throughout with the specificity of discursive strategies and their political implications. Like the heroine of Nelly Kaplan's film *The Pirate's Fiancee*, women, she argues, but men too, must act critically on our everyday conditions of existence to transform our position within them. These conditions are shaped by relations of class, gender and race which determine who has access to powerful discourse. Radical cultural politics involve, Morris suggests, the production of speaking positions for marginalised groups. This in part is a problem of rhetoric and of developing strategies in relation to the cultural and social conventions that make speaking difficult or impossible for the marginalised. But first we must understand how these conventions work. *The Pirate's Fiancee* is a contribution to this process. It begins to deconstruct the intricacies of theoretical and critical practice and to produce positions from which we might speak and act with power.

Chris Weedon



Quoting History:

Modern classicism is emerging as the strongest post-modern challenge to the modernist architectural tradition. Robert A M Stern's *Modern Classicism* (Thames & Hudson £28) revels in the explosion of architectural ornament and decoration as an antidote to modernism. Raiding the dustbin of history for decorative features, the new classicism rejects the minimalist line of the modernist tower and is characterised by an impulsive referencing of the past, refusing to acknowledge the boundaries of history and geography. Even the most enduring symbol of modernism, the skyscraper, has fallen under the neo-classical spell, the AT&T Building in New York (left) being shamelessly crowned with a classical flourish. •