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ARTICLE

Keyword: Action

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My keyword today is action. No, it's not about Meaghan Morris the action hero! But it *is* about Meaghan Morris as a woman of action. It is also about Meaghan's work on action cinema and cultural research as engaged scholarship in action.

I want to begin in the official genre of a keyword.

Keyword: Action. Action refers to a genre of cinema, a culture industry and a cultural practice of 'doing'. As a body genre derived from contact sports such as martial arts, its narrative is characterised by the rivalry and combat between two or more opposing individuals or groups (what she calls 'a transnational mode of historical fiction').¹ Morris discusses the contact narrative of action cinema as a new transnational genre with an industrial history that precedes Hollywood-based beginnings in the 1970s (with films such as *The Towering Inferno* and *Jaws*). She highlights the formative role Hong Kong has played in this history since the 1950s, with the introduction of swordplay films by the Shaw Brothers studio, its co-productions with Japan, Thailand, Korea and Hollywood in the 1970s and 1980s, and the expansion of its 'direct to video' industry in the 1980s and 1990s. This industry is characterised as a minor economy consisting of low budget, fly-by-night production using local cast and crew; shot in cheap locations such as slums, factories and disused buildings; erratic global distribution; and exhibited through informal spaces of consumption.

Through minor action, Morris introduces a Hong Kong-based approach that provides a cross-cultural model to understand global cinema from a non-American but cosmopolitan local context. Her reading of the martial arts career of Cynthia Rothrock (an American martial arts champion who was a female cop action hero in the Hong Kong film industry in the 1980s and 1990s), shows how successful cultural transfer is enabled through reworking the genres of police action and comedy, and positioning her career as a martial artist rather than a film star.² In her analysis of the 1975 film *Man From Hong Kong* (an Australian-Hong Kong

co-production by director Brian Trenchard-Smith and starring Shaw Brothers martial arts star Jimmy Wang Yu), this approach exposes how Australia is imagined as an empty landscape controlled by white men and invaded by the Chinese, and provides the critical optic to problematise the boundaries of nation and race, Asia and Australia.³ By further showing how these films create ‘a model of learning based on emulation’, minor action addresses its popular reception with diasporic ethnic minority and Western working-class audiences through its configuration with the minor action hero.

Examining the genre and its industrial form in these ways invokes action not only as transnational, but also as transactional (doing) and transgressive.

For Morris, action is not only about the transnationality of a genre. Action is also about research engagement and impact. Much as Cynthia Rothrock and Jimmy Wang Yu can kick ass across entertainment cultures, Morris herself turns scholarship into action that is as engaged and resistant as a kung fu kick.

Action here refers to *engaged scholarship in action*. In Morris’s work, this practice is evident in her development of the concepts of ‘cultural research’ and ‘academic activism’.

Cultural research prioritises agendas that emerge from outside the academy, typifies a new kind of research practice that engages industry, government, cultural sectors and community groups, and involves concrete modes of action and intervention. It is characterised by ‘a mode of interest in the world’ (where research problems are generated and initiated from the concrete non-academic contexts of social life and experience), and ‘a mode of involvement with others’ (where research is collaborative, cross-sectoral and cosmopolitan). Through these two modes, cultural research is self-reflexive, interdisciplinary and engaged knowledge.⁴

Morris draws on Edward Said’s concept of ‘worldliness’ to describe this type of intellectual work as a practice that is about making an intervention on a world in which it would make some difference and have some impact. She elaborates this practice through the contribution of ‘textual orientation’ to social engagement. She suggests that text-based scholarship can be understood as an ‘apprenticeship’ that not only trains basic literacies in ‘identifying’ genres and ‘analysing’ rhetoric, but provides the practice for a ‘socially critical professionalism’ where scholarship is linked to activism, and social engagement to new relevance.⁵ While there will always be urgent institutional forces that shape the context of the ‘new relevance’—in Australia these forces currently include the need for cultural studies to respond to the increased vocationalisation of the university, and the new measurement indicators on engagement and impact in the forthcoming Australian Research Council’s Excellence in Research Assessment exercise—what is significant about the practice of a socially critical professionalism is its intervention in institution-building.

Morris provides a manifesto for institution-building through the concept of *academic activism*. For her, institutionalisation does not just refer to the narratives of formation about cultural studies and the institution-building strategies that have been implemented, but more crucially also to the response to the challenges that institutionalisation brings. Academic activism refers to the transformation of the kinds of classification that our universities make (such as its new public management of audit culture) through opening up intellectual and pedagogical spaces for new ways of creativity, intervention and imagination. In this context, action refers to the ‘active constitution’ between the emergence of new institutions, and the new bonds of living and surviving within the academy, and in everyday life.⁶

Now, leaving the official genre of the keyword, I want to talk more personally about how this practice of ‘actioning’ between new institutions and new bonds of researching, teaching and surviving, has had an impact on me.

Meaghan has been one of my earliest and longest-standing mentors. I first met her in Taiwan at the Trajectories conference in 1998 when I was a junior academic at Melbourne, still completing my PhD and fearing there might be no end in sight. A few years later, after I had settled into my job as a lecturer, I realised that she was the one who put my name forward as a presenter at the then ‘closed conference’ in the early years of Inter-Asia. Without her generosity, and her belief in me, I would not have had the privilege of being ‘introduced’ to the Inter-Asia network of scholars and activists, all of whom have had a formative influence on my work. Through the years, Meaghan and I constantly met through the Inter-Asia circuit. A few years ago in Seoul, we both remarked that even though she’s Australian and I’ve lived in Australia for the past thirty years, our most intense and enduring encounters had all taken place in Asia. Meaghan has taught me many things, not just about the research and teaching of cultural studies, but also how to create new liveable bonds between Asia and Australia. From the stories she told about maneuvering the patriarchal Chinese senior administrators at Lingnan, I learn a great deal about how to survive as a Singaporean Chinese cultural studies academic in Australia. In a strange way, I have learnt more about performing Chinese femininity from her than anyone else! I also have to thank Meaghan for all the references she has tirelessly written for me—she has probably written as many references as my PhD supervisor Chris Berry. Whether it is a letter for a job application or a reference for promotion, she always says yes immediately with no hesitation, except for that one time when I wanted to apply to a certain program and she exclaimed with her characteristic candour, ‘Are you insane? That is a toxic environment!’ I have always felt looked after by her and I deeply appreciate her readiness to support and protect younger colleagues. Without Meaghan’s guidance and inspiration, my work life would not have been half as rich. Thank you, Meaghan!

About the author

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3. Meaghan Morris 'The Man From Hong Kong in Sydney, 1975', in *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New World*, ed. J. Ryan and C. Wallace-Crabbe, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004.
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