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ARTICLE

## Searching for Meaghan (Morris)

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I am delighted to be here celebrating the unique career of Meaghan Morris, who is, after all, not just a precious intellectual partner (and sometimes mentor) but also a deeply valued friend.<sup>1</sup> As it turned out, the invitation to speak at an event honouring Meaghan on the occasion of her retirement provided the pressure I needed to write something I have been trying to write—and postponing—for decades. Why *try* for so long? Because she is, in my opinion, one of the most original and dedicated practitioners of cultural studies. Why try *for so long*? Because I could never find a comfortable way of doing it. I would try identifying some representative sample, some set of exemplary texts, that would enable me to make visible the commonalities and diversities that define the singularity of her analytic practice, the contextuality of her political thematic and the trajectory of her career. Every time I thought I had settled on the texts, I would remember another of my favourites, or Meaghan would send me a new one, inevitably shattering my selection and the comfortable assumptions I had made about how to ‘read’ them.

This invitation spurred me to return to the enjoyable task of reading everything I have by Meaghan, a lot I can assure you, and the much less enjoyable task of writing I don’t know how many takes, until I was rudely interrupted by the grotesque election of Donald Trump. Under the spectre of Trump, I realised that this is the moment—in different places, but interconnected in ways that are likely to become more intense and more unstable—for cultural studies. This is the sort of conjunctural crisis for which cultural studies was called into existence. So while Meaghan’s work seemed like a bit of a respite (albeit not quite a ray of hope) from the election (and its impending consequences), it also became more pressing for me to ask what cultural studies does or, better, what the best of its practitioners do. All I could do then was to take a leap of intellectual faith (how is that for a Kierkegaardian oxymoron) back into Meaghan’s work and start somewhere. I do not claim, then, to offer a complete

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and coherent analysis, but only to offer some interrelated observations, most of which, taken by themselves, seem rather obvious and banal (in the sense that Meaghan has taught us to understand that term). I hope that by putting them together, there is something more.

My comments will proceed as follows. First, I want to start by taking a tactic from Meaghan's own toolbox, and begin with a few personal observations about my relation to Meaghan (without claiming the power of the anecdote for them). Second, I want to talk about a particular affective sensibility that I think we share, what I will call 'grumpiness', expressing especially a particular relation to the affordances of theory. Third, I will use this to identify what I take to be the key problematic in Meaghan's work—let's call it the rhetoric of popular agency. I realise that one could also argue that her work is constantly addressing the problematic of the rhetorical founding of a place (home, nation) but in fact, I think that, for Meaghan at least, these two are inseparable, for agency is always bound to place, and place is always constituted in and as agency. Finally, I want to talk about Meaghan's 'rhetorical' practice, the way she reads texts as it were.

## I. Meaghan and Me

To begin: I cannot recall all the details of my first—epistolary—contact (it was pretty close to thirty years ago from the day of this celebration). I had read one of her essays from her first—Sydney/theory—moment. I am not sure, but my best guess is 'Politics Now', and I wrote her (a rather long, typed call for intellectual comradeship if I recall) and she wrote back.<sup>2</sup> I think that's right—and we started sharing, commenting on and using each other's work.

I cannot tell you how exhilarating and important this moment was for me. As I look back on it, what it brings to mind is Nietzsche's famous postcard in which he described himself, having discovered Spinoza, as being 'utterly amazed, utterly enchanted' at having discovered that he had a 'precursor'. 'My loneliness, which as on a very high mountain, often made it hard for me to breathe and made my blood rush out, is now at least a twosome. Strange.' I admit this is rather overdramatic, perhaps even over the top monumentalising, and I make no effort to decide which one is Spinoza and which Nietzsche.

But to paraphrase Meaghan from *Ecstasy and Economics*, there was much in each one's account that the other recognised as their own.<sup>3</sup> For me, first and foremost, Meaghan was putting cultural studies (although she did not yet recognise her project as cultural studies) in conversation with contemporary continental philosophical (especially Foucault, Deleuze, Deleuze and Guattari, but also Baudrillard, Lyotard and more). I thought of myself doing something similar (starting with Heidegger, but moving to many of the same figures). At the time, in the United States I felt rather alone. Those who thought they were interested in cultural studies wanted little if anything to do with such philosophies, and those interested in current theory rarely brought it back to cultural studies. And that was the point—bringing it back home, for Meaghan as far as I could tell was not reading these theorists for a philosophical truth from which all else could be derived, but instead she was interested in using their concepts as strategies for moving forward, and for simultaneously problematising other often rather predictable concept-paths. That is, both of us saw the conversation as necessarily shaped by the political context of our respective cultures.

Let me tell you about a different—and a different kind of—personal moment. People often ask me, probably because I am such a bad writer (unlike Meaghan), for whom do you write? Who is your audience? I am pretty sure that these are not the same, at least for me, but nevertheless I usually answer both in the same way: I don't know, but when I think about it,

on the one hand, I write, embracing my insecurities, for my mentors (not as my ego ideals, but) as those who taught me what it means to be a political intellectual: Jim Carey and Stuart Hall (now both dead). And on the other hand, I write to the two people I consider my fellow travellers: John Clarke and Meaghan Morris.

All four of these people have a lot in common. All were or are institution builders, creating places out of spaces and spaces out of places. All thought of intellectual work as an ongoing conversation; all were collaborators (I am perhaps less successful in this matter). All were or are essayists, seeing writing as an intervention into real historical contexts. All are or were committed to logics of multiplicities, as articulated rather than merely collected, and to studying the construction of relations. Hence, all of them are or were contextualists rather than universalists or relativists, particularists or dualists. All were or are concerned with the problem, in Meaghan's terms, of the gaps between the politics of politics and the politics of culture. Hence, all were or are concerned with the relations among discourses, economics and state governance, the relations among institutions, contexts and formations. All of us would agree with Meaghan's desire: 'To act, as I believe feminism does [and I hope one could add cultural studies] to bring about concrete social change *while at the same time* contesting the very bases of modern thinking about what constitutes change.'<sup>4</sup> Thus, we were or are bound together as intellectual and political allies, and, not coincidentally, as friends.

But Meaghan and I seemed to share an additional set of interrelated commitments, albeit inflected in our own different ways. We are both somewhat obsessed by questions of the popular, understood not merely as a set of texts differentiated from high culture, but as the ordinary, the everyday. Hence, every site of concern, even, for example, the nation, has to be approached as a site of popular belonging and struggle. But, just as importantly, we both think that culture cannot simply be understood as meaning and representation, not as encoding/decoding,<sup>5</sup> and not as identity (which Meaghan once insightfully described as a 'US import').

## II. The rhetoric of affect

For both of us, the study of the relations of culture and politics, especially as mediated through the popular, involves matters of affect—emotions, moods, investments, feelings and so on. Meaghan is in fact one of the most astute analysts of affect in both textual and political terms, although you might not know that if you were to read all the 'latest' hullabaloo of 'affect theory'. In fact, one possible description of Meaghan's work is that she studies the popular as a 'rhetoric of affect'.

And part of what makes her writing so powerful is the self-consciousness with which she deploys her own affective rhetoric. I am, of course, not the first person to identify a particular affective attitude in Meaghan's writing. Melissa Gregg, for example, describes something powerfully affective in Meaghan's critical voice; she identifies it as frankness, fearlessness, fierceness. Meaghan's is, she suggests, the voice of vigilance, of a critical irritant.<sup>6</sup> I do not disagree with Melissa's description, but I want to elaborate it more specifically and technically as it were. Her affective rhetoric is a significant dimension she shares with John Clarke and me: for our writings, in very different ways, often embody a specific mood or sensibility (to use Bourdieu's term) that I will call 'grumpiness', although each of us expresses it in different forms, through different practices.

I do not use 'grumpiness' here in its common meaning but as a specific set of affective responses to certain common practices. Grumpiness is a way of performing critique; it expresses a kind of exhaustion and impatience that is juxtaposed to the exhilaration of serious

intellectual work. It is an exhalation of frustration, a deep sigh of recognition ('please, not this again'), a nagging and serious discomfort against practices—full of certainty and arrogance—that in any number of ways fail to hold to the responsibility and labour of serious intellectual work. In the final analysis, it is a rejection of the increasingly dominant ways in which the tension or balance between optimism and pessimism, political possibility and constraint, are predefined by habitual practices of critique and theorising.

Grumpiness is directed at the intersection between theory, analysis (or in Meaghan's case, readings) and politics, but it is not equally distributed by the three of us among these domains. Grumpiness is a response to an intellectual assumption that the answers one needs are always guaranteed in advance by one's theoretical or political certainties. In the contemporary (Western) academy, it is the former that is most common, and all three of us are concerned with the (mis-) valuations and (mis-) uses of theory, concepts and abstractions. Grumpiness is a response to certain ways of deploying theoretical claims or concepts into analysis and the consequences that commonly follow upon them. That is, the problem is with what theories or concepts are made to do, or with assumptions about what they are supposed to do. Grumpiness is most certainly not a full-out rejection of theory, and while it stands against theoreticism, it does so not in the name of an appeal to either a transparent empiricism or some pre-given political necessity.

There are in fact different ways of doing theory that are likely to elicit a grumpy response. The most common is another American export, what Meaghan once described as a culture of critique, where one builds an argument on the ruins—the active rejection—of everyone else (the more famous the better) or by appearing to embrace a theoretical analysis just so that you can then argue that it eventually fails in ways that actually gives succour and sustenance to the enemy, that it is actually complicit with the enemy (although presumably unknowingly).<sup>7</sup>

Equally common and problematic is when abstract theories are treated as if they were the equivalent of empirical claims to truth, which often results in analyses that consist of little more than a string of highly esoteric concepts that pretend to say something about the world. Theories then enable critics to avoid asking all sorts of questions that might emerge from the specific moment or, in its mirror image, when specific questions are answered by simply rehearsing 'blockbuster theories of history'.<sup>8</sup> Such theoreticism involves a misrecognition that renders empirical analysis and the specificities it might uncover at best secondary, so that it usually appears only in vague and banal terms and a few metonymic examples. Such practices (and more) misrecognise what theory is good for. There is an arrogance at work here: such theoretical analysis is often presented as if every idea were a new discovery, every position a disruptive and positive breakthrough. Surely this is a failure of education as much as of critique. Grumpiness is a call for humility in the face of the arrogance of certainty. It does not deny the absolute necessity of theory, but it does generally avoid flaunting one's theoretical credentials, so that analysis is weighed down by or subordinated to theoretical sophistication.

You will not be surprised if I assert that Meaghan expresses her grumpiness in highly distinctive ways. First, it rarely stands alone; there are always multiple affective sensibilities in her work. Yes, there is lots of straightforward and even blunt critique there, and few people do it better, especially when she thinks that people are not being reflective about their own position or their audience. But there is also, occasionally if rarely, downright anger and disdain, although she almost always eschews the straightforwardly judgmental or dismissive rhetoric all too common in the academy. Meaghan's critiques often also demonstrate a deeply constitutive spirit of generosity and respect, inscribed in her effort to individuate and offer precise analyses of the object of her concern.

Nevertheless, she is adamant that the result of such mis-uses of theory is not only to erase the specificity of the situation or context, but also to seriously misdirect—whether by diminishing or exaggerating—our sense of people’s ability to do things. For Meaghan, the problem with such theoretical arrogance is, most commonly, that they lead to a ‘relentless rejection, limitation and distortion of the possibilities of popular practices—including those that actively discredit the voices of ‘grumpy feminists and cranky leftists’.<sup>9</sup> She stands against the ways current modes of critique limit both critical and popular agency. In such practices, theory is used to ‘relentlessly generate models of the proper [use of place and time]’, that is, models of proper forms of agency.<sup>10</sup> In ‘Banality,’ she opposes theory that construct ‘a fictive position from which anything can be dismissed as already learned’,<sup>11</sup> radically diminishing the possibilities of agency in both the present and future tense. Hence, these practices are constantly displacing politics, especially the very possibility of a popular politics, pushing it always further into a receding horizon, creating a new vanguardism wrapped in high theory.

### III. The rhetoric of agency

At this point, let me return to the question of the popular as it figures in Meaghan’s work, which is presented most clearly, at least as a starting point, in ‘Banality’. In that essay, Meaghan rejects theories of the popular as either necessarily always and already compromised, or as always resistance; instead, following de Certeau, the popular opens up a science of singularity, a study of the relations that link everyday pursuits to particular circumstances. That is, popular practices are ways of operating, of travelling through an imposed (proper) system of places; the popular diverts ‘the purposive rationality of an established power’<sup>12</sup> to assert the possibility of the enactment of ordinary action as a moment of agency. For de Certeau, the popular considered discursively, as stories, ‘act as a means of transportation ... in the shuttling that ‘constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places’.<sup>13</sup> In de Certeau, the popular asserts the equivalence between (popular) tactics and space against (the established power of) strategy and place.

Often misunderstood, ‘Banality’ is not about just how banal cultural studies is, but how cultural studies might insert the banal into its analyses. Meaghan’s argument performs a subtle shift as it points us to the rich densities of a ‘common’ place, as something we arrive at at the end of discourse and action, and yet, as the place from which discourse and action are themselves rendered possible and produced. Popular practices embody stories that found a place, or create a field that authorises particular, practical actions. Many people read de Certeau’s popular as if it guaranteed that the performance of the singular against the proper is, inherently, an act of resistance. Meaghan takes it in a different direction, where the popular is the very discursive construction of the possibility and nature of common—banal—agency itself. Thus, the founding of a place is the rhetorical site of the possibility of popular action itself.

One can use this notion of the relation of place and a rhetoric of popular agency to map out some of the relations and (non-linear) trajectories in the corpus of her work. I think these articulations are mediated not only by her response to specific textual practices and political challenges but, just as importantly, I think they are partly the result of her own social and personal history, her own institutional, geographical and political-intellectual life, particularly the trajectory she has followed as she has turned increasingly to Asia (for example, her involvement with InterAsia, her teaching in Hong Kong). I think I see a growing openness to optimism, a diminishing grumpiness at home as it were and a growing grumpiness (and impatience, frustration, even intolerance) when she turns her gaze outward, especially to

the United States (but maybe also to Australia). Interestingly, this turn to optimism is accompanied by a change in her readings (maybe a return to her film criticism days) as the readings get 'closer', more 'micro' as it were (for example, using shot analysis).

Let me just hint at what one such trajectory might look like, looking at the possibilities of action in the present, by simply constructing a rather too simple binary. I start with two relatively early essays—probably better described as coming in the middle so to speak—located in and directed into Australia: 'Tooth and Claw' (1987)<sup>14</sup> poses a question about the possibility of survival in a global situation, where survival itself becomes the only form of action available in the life of the ordinary; its viability is enacted as 'fleeting appropriation', positive unoriginality, evasive action and even escapism. At the same time, Meaghan's analysis moves from questions of meaning to the matter of moods, as she considers the world through the lens of the 'cynical appropriation' of the possibilities of naiveté and nostalgia. I jump to 'White Panic' (1998),<sup>15</sup> where action is opened up into experimentation, in which an origin is projected into an uncertain future and the world appears more of a 'negotiable reality'.

But now I want to leap forward, even as Meaghan was increasingly turning toward and investing herself in Asia, evidenced perhaps in the increasing use of the trope of translation in her work. In 'Bruce Lee' (2001),<sup>16</sup> we are introduced into a pedagogy of aesthetics and, simultaneously, an aesthetics of pedagogy. Here aesthetics describes ways of regarding reality, and pedagogy involves the effort to gain access to the 'power to make' and the ability to experience something new. The 'Man from Hong Kong' (2004)<sup>17</sup> again centres on education as future-oriented and as constitutive of hope. Meaghan takes us back to the question of the transnational, but now refuses to radically separate it from the local or better, the translocal; taken together or perhaps the space between them opens us up to the 'stories we do not yet know how to write'. Now the question of agency is radically reimagined through a re-reading of parochialism (traditionally opposed to cosmopolitanism) as a new model of social agency. Parochialism involves 'modes of involvement in neighborhoods of thought and practices'. The question of parochialism is inseparable from education as a matter of the capacity of make connections, to imagine affinities; taken together, they involve the affective capacity to relate to 'cultural strangers'. Rather than being understood as the negation of the cosmopolitan, Meaghan transforms the parochial into 'a portable way of dwelling', always inscribed with heterotopic futurities, and the cosmopolitan as the multiplicity of the parochial.

Finally, one more leap forward, perhaps partly shaped by Meaghan's return to Australia (even as she continues her investment in Asia). 'Transnational Glamour' (2013)<sup>18</sup> reconsiders the question that propelled 'Tooth and Claw', namely, the negotiation between the national and transnational (screen) economies, but now Meaghan addresses directly the power of storytelling itself to change the world. The question of agency, of the distribution of diverse kinds of agency, becomes explicitly thematised, as her reading focuses on the cliché as an act of recognition, 'producing temporary but real interpretive communities' that demand involvement through the construction of a particular kind of common sense. Popular culture here constructs an 'ordinary heroism' in which uncertainty is the very condition of courage. And then, in a brilliant turn of self-reflexivity, the essay returns to teaching itself as storytelling, the function of which is to give us a way of apprehending things that are 'not yet' part of our culture.

Perhaps it is not unfair to say that the trajectory of this rhetoric of popular agency (always articulated to the founding of place, I might add) is the rearticulation or translation of the popular, mapping out a move from pessimism of the will to optimism of the intellect.

## IV. The rhetoric of rhetoric

But this problematic of agency is not all that defines the uniqueness, the brilliance and the ‘sparkle’ of Meaghan’s work. I imagine that you are all thinking: if, as you suggested at the beginning, you have so much in common, how come your work—and the experience of reading your work—is so different. This difference in critical practice and style is what most clearly differentiates our work and what, I think, in the end, makes Meaghan’s work so unique and important. While I might argue that both of us are concerned with how particular discursive figures are inserted into/deployed within/or made to work by other practices, relations and forces, and the structures of contextualisation, it is Meaghan’s concern for the structures of composition, for popular discourse as composition, that underlies our very different relations to the discourses or texts that, in different ways, define the starting points of our efforts. And I should add that the description of Meaghan’s analytical and compositional practices is what has been eluding me for decades. Nothing about her work is more difficult to talk about, but now seems as good a time as any to try again.

Anyone familiar with my view of cultural studies will know that I am sceptical—to say the least—about the utility of ‘close readings’, especially as done by literary, film and rhetorical critics, for if cultural studies is committed at the very least to a radical contextuality, then it seems impossible to treat any text or discourse as an object open to analysis apart from its contextual overdetermination. But I have always found—but not always understood how—Meaghan’s analyses are consistently and simultaneously textual and contextual. This practice, rather than any content, is what defines the specificity of her work, so I want to try to describe her practice in terms that articulate it into and as cultural studies.

I start by acknowledging that her grumpiness often makes an appearance when she is considering the possibilities of taking texts seriously. She exhibits little patience for attempts to read texts as symptoms, representations or figures (especially metonyms—seeing the world in a grain of sand) of either theoretical problems or positions already ‘taken’ as truth, or of general forces already ‘known’ to be at work, or of some external state of affairs already ‘assured’ to be diagnosed. She has no patience for analytic practices defined on purely theoretical grounds, which deny or erase popular practices, whether inscribed in the texts or in the relation between the text and its audiences—although, as I have said, she refuses to reduce these questions to matters of encoding and decoding. Rather than separating text and reception, she sees culture instead in terms of compositions (‘Gatherings into provisional associations that traverse culture, society, etc.’<sup>19</sup>) and uptake, both as creative activities. If composition describes ‘creativity under constraints’, update describes what other ‘makers’ creatively—agentially—do with a given composition. Consequently, she always appeals to and returns to the popular as the context of the common, understood as specific practices or articulations of agency.

What then does she do with texts? How does she read texts, even offer ‘close readings’? I want to identify five elements. The first has been frequently observed as one of that differentiates her work from most other textual and even feminist practices; it is not just that her practice is self-reflective and self-reflexive, but that these practices of self-consciousness are always defined in and by the particular text and context she is working with, rather than in the more general terms common in contemporary critical theory.

And this points to the second and perhaps most important element. To put it simply, Meaghan locates texts in contexts, and makes them into points of articulation in contexts, and therefore she makes texts into contexts, without making the text a microcosm or fractal image of some larger external context. The key is how the text is inserted into and how it does things

with its context. That is, she specifies and constructs a text's or discourse's existence as always located in and inseparable from the complexity of a context, a complexity that it articulates in particular, describable ways, 'inside' and outside its own spaces as it were. Moreover, she does not take contexts for granted: instead she starts by 'saturating with detail an articulated place and point in time' to prolong 'the life of the ephemeral item or "case"',<sup>20</sup> thus constructing a context as a set of particular circumstances, even while unpacking the density of relations and intersecting social domains that inform them. Texts are not transcendent objects but contextual constructs and actors. The result is that texts are not only specific to their circumstances but are themselves complex contexts, crystallisations, points of intersection of many determinations and effectivities.<sup>21</sup> The real question, however, is what these texts, these complex crystallisations, do and can do in their circumstances.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in her somewhat famous use of anecdotes. Her anecdotes are not offered as fragments of a life, but as the 'singularity' of a popular practice, an occurrence of contingency; they are not personal but referential. And that referentiality has its own temporality, for a popular practice is futuristically oriented towards the construction of a precise, local place (understood as both social and discursive). As she puts it in *Identity Anecdotes*, an anecdote is a parable of practices embodying 'an ethics of uncertainty ... to introduce an opening, to hazard an initiative, to accept the bother of not having a clue what might come next, and to make room in time for history to happen'.<sup>22</sup> It does not tell us a truth but exposes a functioning. It offers a model, an allegory, of the way the world is working. In this world, the impact of a popular practice, including the anecdote is always small—and there is no way to know in advance and no reason to assume what that 'small quantity of force' might actually do. Hence the very notion of the popular as singular and contextual means that Meaghan rejects the all too common assumption that the popular necessarily 'disrupts, subverts, transgresses or dramatically feminizes a grand discursive other'.

And again, this leads me to the third element: namely, that texts as enunciative practices do things, enacted both in and by the text, offered up as it were to their contexts. Not only do they do things, but, sometimes, they reflectively recognise and refigure their own activities. Thus, on the one hand, texts are always functional: they found a place, authorise an action, define a space. As Meaghan puts it, 'I am less interested in music or TV than I am in how these cut across and organize the various time/spaces in which the labor, as well as the pleasure of everyday living is carried out'.<sup>23</sup> And on the other hand, texts are also parables of practice, of change and of reciprocity. They are models of ways of operating—with a past and a future; they are to be understood in terms of their possibilities for being deployed, their potentialities for re-use and re-appropriation. Again, 'a critical reading can extract from its objects a parable of practice that converts them into models with a past and a potential for re-use, thus aspiring to invent them with a future'.<sup>24</sup>

Fourth, for Meaghan, the notion of popular practice as singularity, contrary to many interpretations, means precisely that one has to embrace complexity at every level, that of texts as contexts and of historical contexts. But even more, it demands that every popular text, every discursive event, be seen as a specific actualisation or configuration of what Guattari calls a mixed semiosis. That is, every text is itself an articulation of multiple regimes of signs, so that the effects of any event have to be seen as both multiple and negotiated. Meaghan does not deny that texts have meaning or referentiality but rather recognises that texts can have different semiotic strategies, embodied in rhetorical forms (such as clichés, allegories and anecdotes), that produce different modes of agency, different modalities of reference as it were. But these multiple semiotic possibilities are never separable from the context they

configure. Thus, there is no binary division between text and context, but a space of action and description.

Finally, the specific accomplishment or productivity of the text is elucidated by constructing around a text, discourse or cultural formation, what I see as the most interesting embodiment of what Foucault calls a ‘polyhedron of intelligibility’, a particular kind of triangulation that brings together—in each essay—a theoretical concept, a political problematic (and a sense of agential possibility) and a rhetorical trope or practice, all as part of and a response to a particular context. In a sense, then, I am not only reading Foucault’s discourse theory as offering a possible practice of cultural studies, although Foucault offers epochal rather than conjunctural analyses; I am also suggesting that Meaghan is perhaps the most astute practitioner of such discourse analysis. Actually, this came to me as one of those ‘aha’ moments as I was reading through Meaghan’s papers; it was a moment that returned me to the affinities that drew us together and have continued to bind us, and to the differences that mark our works. My version of cultural studies attempts to bring Hall’s Gramsci together with some Foucault and some Deleuze and Guattari. I am suggesting that Meaghan is, before all else, a Foucauldian, with a strong dose of Deleuze (and Guattari), and sprinklings of de Certeau, Lefebvre, and so on, for spice as it were. I think, whether intentionally or not, Meaghan has figured out how to make Foucault contextual *and* conjunctural.<sup>25</sup>

Now what I mean by referencing Foucault here is rather specific: it depends upon some of Foucault’s reflective, theoretical essays, particularly ‘Questions of Method’.<sup>26</sup> These essays cannot be read as actual descriptions of what Foucault does in his more empirical—archaeological and genealogical—studies. And I do not know if they describe what he would have liked to have done. But what they do offer is a more detailed description of his practice of problematisation, which in the ‘Method’ essay is presented as ‘eventalization’. He describes this as involving four moments: first, ‘a breach of self-evidence ... making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all’. Second, ‘rediscovering the connections, encounters, supports, blockages, plays of forces, strategies, etc.’ This is, he admits, always a necessarily incomplete saturation. Third, a sort of multiplication or pluralisation of causes or determinations, analysing an event according to the multiple processes that constitute it, what Foucault calls their ‘external relations of intelligibility’. And fourth, constructing around the singular event, analysed as process, a ‘polygon or rather a polyhedron of intelligibility’.

To summarise, what this means is that every practice of reading entails (1) specifying (constructing) a discourse’s existence as located in and inseparable from the complexity of a context, with the resulting complexity that it articulates in particular describable ways ‘inside’ itself as it were (or better in its relations); (2) specifying the particular regimes of semiosis at work and the relations among them; (3) specifying the particular modalities of action enacted both in and by the text, and offered up, by the text, to its context; and (4) triangulating the specific discursive productivity, always in a self-reflexive way, at the intersection of rhetoric, theory and politics. This means that there is and can never be a single analytic at work.

Perhaps this is why each essay by Meaghan stands out as an exhilaratingly original act of critique, always unique, irreproducible and unpredictable. Perhaps it also helps explain her writing practice: so carefully crafted (a piece of advice here, don’t ever think of editing her writing) and why they often go through so many drafts and versions. And, even more importantly, it may enable us to see them as offering a way to deal with the disappearing event of the popular, and the contested possibilities of a popular politics.

## About the author

Lawrence Grossberg is the Morris Davis Distinguished Professor of Communication and Cultural Studies at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. His most recent works include *We All Want to Change the World: The Paradox of the U.S. Left (A Polemic)*, available free online, and *Under the Cover of Chaos: Trump and the Battle for the American Right*.

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## Notes

1. I have decided to keep as much as possible to the oral presentation I made at the event in Sydney. As a result, these comments remain more of an outline of a detailed paper that I continue to hope I will write.

2. I can no longer find the very earliest letters we exchanged, although I do have many that followed. Meaghan says that she may have them in her archive in Canberra.
3. Meaghan Morris, 'Ecstasy and Economics', in *Ecstasy and Economics*, EMPress, Sydney, 1992.
4. Meaghan Morris, 'Preface' to her *Too Soon Too Late*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1998.
5. Jim Carey always rejected this concept which, he argued, made it too easy to fall back into linear and binary understandings of communication, although he acknowledged that this was not what Stuart was proposing.
6. Melissa Gregg, 'A Voice of Vigilance: Meaghan Morris, Anecdotal Critique and the Politics of Academic Speech', in her *Cultural Studies' Affective Voices*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2006.
7. This 'logic' is frequently displaced onto politics as well.
8. Meaghan Morris, 'History in Cultural Studies', in Morris, *Too Soon Too Late*.
9. Meaghan Morris, 'Banality in Cultural Studies', *Discourse*, vol. 10, no. 2, Spring-Summer 1988, pp. 3-29. Just to be clear, the description of feminists as grumpy is not Meaghan's; rather it is one she is contesting.
10. Meaghan Morris, 'At Henry Parkes Motel', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, January 1988, pp. 1-47.
11. Morris, 'Banality in Cultural Studies'.
12. Ibid.
13. Morris, 'At Henry Parkes Motel'.
14. Meaghan Morris, 'Tooth and Claw: Tales of Survival and *Crocodile Dundee*', *Art & Text*, no. 25, 1987, pp. 36-69.
15. A paper that I know personally went through more drafts than is even normal for Meaghan.
16. Meaghan Morris, 'Learning from Bruce Lee: Pedagogy and Political Correctness in Martial Arts Cinema', in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, ed. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo, Routledge, London, 2001, pp. 171-86.
17. Meaghan Morris, 'The Man from Hong Kong in Sydney', in *Imagining Australia; Literature and Culture in the New, New World*, ed. Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 235-66.
18. Meaghan Morris, 'Transnational Glamour, National Allure: Community, Change and Cliche in Baz Luhrmann's *Australia*', in *Storytelling: Critical and Creative Approaches*, ed. Jan Shaw, Philippa Kelly and L. E. Semler, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013, pp. 83-113.
19. Tony Bennett (following David Toews), cited in 'Introduction' in Meaghan Morris and Mette Hjort (eds), *Creativity and Academic Activism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2012.
20. Morris, 'History in Cultural Studies'.
21. See 'Introduction' to Meaghan Morris and John Frow (eds), *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1993; and Meaghan Morris, "'Doing" Cultural Studies: Chua Beng Huat on Popular Culture', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2016, pp. 272-87.
22. Meaghan Morris, 'Introduction' to *Identity Anecdotes*, Sage, London, 2006.
23. Meaghan Morris, 'On the Beach', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, Routledge, New York, 1992.
24. Morris, 'History in Cultural Studies'.
25. These are not the same. For a discussion of the difference, see Lawrence Grossberg, 'Cultural Studies in Search of a Method, or Looking for Conjunctural Analysis' (forthcoming).
26. Michel Foucault, 'Questions of Method', *I & C*, no. 3, Spring 1978.