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ARTICLE

Unbearable Significance, or: As Australians Put It ...

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I am writing from another country, far away; I no longer live in Australia. Meaghan Morris is partly responsible for this. Let me explain.

At the end of 2011, I found myself reading the transcript of a long interview with Meaghan conducted by a Melbourne-based researcher, Lauren Bliss. In this discussion, Meaghan comments on the move, in the course of her professional life, to Hong Kong:

What I really wanted to do was what lots of students from Asia had been doing for decades, which is go and just live an everyday life in another country, have a job, and not go and study the society there as an academic specialty. Just go and know what it's like to live as a foreigner working in a Chinese society.¹

For many reasons, my life at that time had reached a kind of dead end; I felt that Australia had nothing more to offer me. Yet the thought of relocating elsewhere had never really occurred to me, or perhaps I had merely been successful in keeping that thought at bay.

As often happens to me when reading Meaghan, her words presented me with a nugget of something that was—as screenwriters like to say of plot developments—inevitable, yet, at the same time, surprising, a sudden shock to consciousness. She had articulated something I could immediately relate to, in some way already knew somewhere inside myself, but now, at last, it was evident and irrefutable.

Yes, of course, to 'go and just live an everyday life in another country' is the most normal, banal thing in the world; thousands upon thousands of people are doing it at all times. No big deal. Then I decided, in that flash: so should I.

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So I went off to live a few years in Germany, and now I have settled in Spain—or rather, in the present moment of November 2017, in Catalonia—in order to once again become a freelance writer. Maybe not quite so bold as decamping to Hong Kong in order to teach (as Meaghan did), but a big step for me. Irreversible, too: among the many bridges I had to burn in order to get here, I gave away most of the books, magazines, papers and VHS videos I had assiduously hoarded until the age of 53.

But among the forty or so very large, ring-binder folders I managed to pack into boxes on a slow boat to Catalonia, one is dedicated solely to Meaghan: photocopies, letters, manuscripts she has passed to me down the years, mostly before the era of email and ‘Academia.edu’. I don’t have many folders devoted to individual writers, but Meaghan made the cut.

I have always considered her to be the best writer ever to emerge from Australia. I don’t mean to say best non-fiction writer, best essayist, best public intellectual or any hedging qualifier of that sort; I do mean best writer, period.

Let me be frank: I taught myself to write by studying her, even (in controlled doses, for the sake of experiment and self-improvement) mimicking her. What I learned, in that process, about writing—about how to structure it, control it, build it, guide it to a pay-off for the reader—goes for every kind of creation, every kind of expression, every kind of art. From film reviewing to public speaking, and all types of social rhetoric in-between.

I first encountered Meaghan’s writing in the form of film reviews, published in *Cinema Papers* in the mid to late 1970s. *Asylum*, *Une sale histoire*, *The Journalist*, *Days of Heaven* ... I have an extremely vivid memory of these pieces I read between the ages of fifteen and nineteen.² I found out later they had been tampered with a bit, editorially—but not enough to quash their force and eloquence.

Even then, I was struck by a tone of voice, a style of address and a range of reference and experience that seemed so exotic to me, as a shy teenager stuck in the suburbs of Melbourne: here, hopping from one review to another, were polemics about a stunted, mainstream Australian culture as opposed to a progressive, counter-cultural one, on-the-spot reports from an avant-garde Paris, an all-American film by Terrence Malick treated in the light of Roland Barthes and an account of the anti-psychiatry movement that seemed almost confessional in its overtones ... and yet very far from self-indulgent.

Maybe ten years later, another text by Meaghan clarified for me that unusual and very special affect of a piece of writing that manages to communicate intimately, and yet at the same time retains its rhetorical power to generalise. It’s what she calls, in one of her frequent appeals to Aussie vernacular (and folk wisdom), *spinning a yarn*—establishing phatic contact with a reader or listener by way of a shareable, ‘relatable’ anecdote. ‘Anecdotes for me are not expressions of personal experience, but allegorical expositions of a model of the way the world can be said to be working’.³ Nothing to do, really, with spilling your guts, or holding an audience hostage to some bogus ‘authenticity’ of raw emotion. It’s a lesson that too few writers learn, it seems to me.

To this day, I have yet to actually see all those particular movies Meaghan reviewed in *Cinema Papers* during the 1970s. But that hardly matters. Sometimes, a text can come to mean more than the pretext that occasioned or inspired it. That is something I have often found to be true in Meaghan’s work. She once spoke about this phenomenon (in an interview with the editors of Sydney’s cheeky *Frogger* theory-fanzine in the mid 1980s) as she herself experienced it while reading Jean-François Lyotard: she testifies as to how, in the act of describing or

evoking an artwork, he can ‘light it up, make it seem unbearably significant’.⁴ Meaghan has set many things ablaze, in this way, for me.

I am glad that, from the span of my voracious teenage reading, I caught onto this particular author’s name, Meaghan Morris. Because it was then only a small, fortuitous step, in 1978, to that communist hotbed, the International Bookshop in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, where I bought a copy (which I still have, with the bookseller’s stamp inside) of *Language, Sexuality and Subversion*, edited by Meaghan and Paul Foss for their own small press, Feral Publications.⁵ It was a volume that opened for me a whole world of thinking—‘theory’, but practical theory, put to work in all sorts of volatile contexts—attached to people and movements in France and Italy, and not least in Australia itself. Who knew?

But let’s get back to the writer, the critic, the analyst. I have a pet theory about the relations of most fan-readers to the critics they say they love. Whenever I encounter, socially, a self-proclaimed acolyte of (to stay in the film reviewing world) Roger Ebert or Pauline Kael, I invariably interrupt the diatribe to ask a simple, plain question: can you now tell me—it can be approximate, not verbatim—a single thing that this critic has ever said? At that point I am usually confronted with flustered or angrily defensive reactions—because, of course, they cannot truly recall a damn thing ever said, thought or written by those geniuses of empty, public bluster.

But I can perfectly recall, without reaching for the text, a host of things that Meaghan has written or spoken (because, let’s not forget, she is a truly superb public speaker). There are particular sentences, particular formulations of thought and sentiment that serve as touchstones for me, at many times and in many situations. They sometimes cause me to rethink what I am about to inscribe, or utter, next; to rethink my own cliché reflexes. (This is something deeply Barthesian, in fact, about Meaghan and her work: her expression is always formed in strict opposition to doxa, easy stereotype, banal cliché, thoughtless prejudice—even when she calls these things up, she does so in order to twist them, reverse them, causing them to reveal their ugly, sedimented ways.)

Examples? In her magnificent, early 1980s essay ‘Indigestion’, which I first read in *Filmnews* before its reprinting in various places including her own book *The Pirate’s Fiancée* (god, how many years did it take me to track down *that* film by Nelly Kaplan?), she directly addresses a by-then already tired piece of radical wisdom:

To rework a cliché: commentaries on films are not just personal, they’re political. This is not to argue that the ‘personal’ does not exist, nor is it to argue that the personal is not political. But it is to argue that political is not *only* personal—it’s social and it’s cultural. It defines points of conflict.⁶

The political is not *only* personal—which, in Meaghan’s case, relates intensely to that abhorrence she evokes toward a certain kind of confessional writing—what a brilliant way to encapsulate a knotty problem in public discourse, and untie that knot in the same moment! Once again, it’s the kind of insight that you or I might nod about and say, of course, yes, we knew that all along, too—but we didn’t say it aloud, and in fact we didn’t truly realise it until Meaghan put it in a sentence.

More? In a short, opinion piece for UK’s *New Statesman* in 1987—a piece that makes for fascinating, retrospective reading today—Meaghan coolly intervenes in a running debate about ‘style’ and fashion in popular culture studies, specifically as it relates to the media images of certain politicians. Taking the Australian example of ‘Hawke and the Culture Vultures’

(the title of her text), she writes: ‘Deciding whether the way things look is the way things are depends a lot on what you can see.’⁷ I remember when I first read this, I felt—a very palpable feeling—that all the complicated theories of Althusser and post-Althusser which I had been absorbing and debating over the previous decade were suddenly put into electric connection with a genuine sagacity concerning the way people actually live, and struggle, and fail (sometimes) to get any further. *What you can see*—what better way to understand the aporias of (to use a book title of the period) ‘ideology and the image’?

Third example. This one, I cannot correctly recall whether it was something I read, heard in a lecture—or, indeed, if Meaghan related it to me herself in conversation. So this one may be more of a Meaghan Myth that I’m conjuring—but, all the same, I insist that it must be true.

The scene that forms in my mind takes place at a conference or panel event in the United Kingdom, probably sometime in the 1990s, where Meaghan is analysing Australian news and current affairs clips concerning Indigenous politics. At the end of her presentation comes the inevitable, boorish, dour question from a militant in the crowd: ‘What right do you, a white Australian, have to speak about this?’ Meaghan’s answer: ‘My right as a TV viewer.’ Subsequently, variations on this response have served me well in many political debates concerning film and media representations.

Since Meaghan’s work has regularly devoted itself to giving us, as listeners, readers or students, a different way to see something or a different angle from which to see it, I will relate a UK travel tale of my own that provided me with a ‘defamiliarising’ perspective on her work.

At an event for academic exchanges between staff from Warwick and Monash universities, I struck up a random conversation with a Philosophy professor employed there. Without any prompting or priming from me, she went into an enthusiastic spiel about what she called the ‘school of Australian philosophy’. Australian philosophy? What school is that??

She then proceeded with a litany of fine names, with which I was quite familiar: Elizabeth Grosz, Paul Patton ... and Meaghan Morris. Although Meaghan may blanch at being labelled a philosopher, what I was told that day resonated with me.

Australian philosophy—it was explained to me—is all about *images*. It doesn’t simply use images as illustrations of an argument, or helpful explanatory metaphors; the images *are* the argument, its very substance. Nobody other than Australians, I was informed, really does this to the same extent—and the notion delighted me. Not least because I have always found Meaghan, in particular, to be a stunning writer-in-images.

I’ve said I learned to write by studying Meaghan’s texts. The images have a lot to do with this special art of hers. Meaghan can introduce an image—usually from the word go, in the title or subtitle—and then take it through all kinds of inflections, twists, intensifications, debunkings and epiphanies. Just like a good film does. The register of this key image (which becomes, in the course of the text, associated with an ever-shifting cluster of minor images) keeps changing: at one moment, it’s grand melodrama; at another, some mundane (but very necessary) chore.

Take, for instance, her magisterial piece on *Crocodile Dundee*: it’s called ‘Tooth and Claw’, and the subtitle promises us ‘tales of survival’. All throughout, bloody images of war, struggle, battle and death (partly derived from Elias Canetti’s 1960 masterpiece *Crowds and Power*) accompany—with a fine but wholly appropriate aura of comical discrepancy—her reading of Paul Hogan’s mediatic life and times as Dundee. But, after all this drama—not only on screen, but in the discourses of cultural and media studies—Meaghan utterly flips the image in

her final, wonderful, devastating sentence: ‘Radical criticism needs today to invent, as well as appropriate, a few good gardening tools.’⁸

At the last, she brings us down to earth, where we ultimately need to be: the claw of a wounded animal or a soldier at the warfront suddenly becomes a homely rake or shovel. Have I mentioned already that Meaghan is Australia’s greatest writer?

I remember (as I’ve said) when I first read Meaghan; and, equally, when I first heard her talk in public. It was the 1981 *Foreign Bodies* conference in Sydney, where I met several people who are still my friends and comrades today. I didn’t properly meet Meaghan until the following year, at an Australian Screen Studies Association conference at La Trobe University,⁹ but I retain a vivid memory of her in 1981 uttering (during a dual-presentation delivered alongside her brilliant friend, Anne Freadman) the immortal ‘Laconic statement, SYDNEY SUCKS.’¹⁰

By sheer chance, many years later, I stumbled upon a cheap copy, in a second hand bookstore, of the encyclopedic tome to which Meaghan and Anne had contributed the survey of ‘Semiotics in Australia’ they described on that 1981 panel—‘an American book with the hilarious title, *The Semiotic Sphere*’.¹¹ It is indeed an odd artefact, a relic from a mercifully lost moment when the then-reigning Titans of semiotics fancied themselves as being set to rule the entire, organised world of knowledge. But, in it, our local authors make what, again, seems to be a very Australian distinction, ‘between *method* and *strategy*’:

To say about one’s method that it is a strategy is (a) to locate it in the field of political effectiveness, rather in that of academic disciplines, and (b) to declare one’s agnosticism with respect to its epistemological status, or the truth of the theory which may be claimed to subtend it.¹²

That’s the type of statement that, back in the 1980s, immediately buzzed the sensitive antennae of those who were paranoid about the invasion of a supposedly ‘relativist’ or ‘anything goes’ sensibility into the humanities: what, no ‘truth’? However, I (among many other of her fans) always understood Meaghan’s insistence on tactics and strategy to have a sturdier orientation, and a surer sense.

Now I can leap ten, twenty, thirty years forward in Meaghan’s CV, to the field of a very pleasurable rendezvous between her and me: action cinema. Looking back, once more, over Meaghan’s texts in recent years, I have come to see how such movies afford her the perfect terrain to expose, and test, all her long held hunches about strategy—strategy in discourse, in art, in culture, and in real-world politics. It’s not only that action films (especially in the Hong Kong tradition, but also elsewhere) mix, so freely, the most fantastic and outlandish situations with the daggiest, everyday detail (like boarding a crowded bus at the Utopian end of *Shaolin Soccer*). What these movies mean to Meaghan is, precisely, the formulation of grounds for *action*—the conditions under which it is possible to make a transformative move.

Mad Max is much better cinema than *Long Weekend*; the formal qualities that make it better cinema also give it utopian force. In spite of the setting of all the *Max* films in a (post)-holocaustal future, it is the contemporary vision of films like *Backroads* and *The F.J. Holden* that should be called, I think, *dystopian*: in spite of their sympathetic mapping of social conflicts of sex and race, they construct political worlds that are worse than ours because no-one in them can effectively act.¹³

Effective action: Meaghan was always been on about elbowing out some room to move in any given context or situation; not abandoning it, not blowing it up, not ‘transgressing it’ per se—but not simply reinforcing its status quo, either. This eventually feeds—especially in the context

of her Hong Kong years at Lingnan University, and her participation in various, professional associations—into the positive emphasis she places on what she calls ‘institution-building’. That was something which I, as a trusty individualist by temperament—someone who tends to flee institutions as something, *a priori*, bad, dangerous and repressive—at first found hard to swallow in Meaghan’s later work.

But who, finally, can resist an argument phrased like this?

I will focus on something that strikes me (more so with every passing year) as profoundly important in practice, namely: the pragmatic, survival-oriented, and world-changing energy of being ‘festive’, or, as Australians put it, of ‘having a good time’.¹⁴

About the author

Adrian Martin is an arts critic based in Vilassar de Mar, Spain. He is the author of eight books on cinema, most recent of which is an essay collection titled *Mysteries of Cinema* (2018); and his ongoing archive website of film reviews, covering forty years of writing, can be found at: <http://www.filmcritic.com.au>.

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2. These reviews appear in, *Cinema Papers*, respectively issues 4 (1974), 16 (1978), 22 (1979) and 23 (1979).
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4. Rex Butler and David Messer, 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction: An Interview with Meaghan Morris', *Frogger*, no. 15, May 1985, np.
5. For the background to this publication and related adventures, see the interview with Meaghan by Stephen Muecke in *Outside the Book: Contemporary Essays on Literary Periodicals*, ed. David Carter, Local Consumption Publications, Double Bay, 1991, pp. 57–78.
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9. I tell this story in King and Williams (eds), p. 209.
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