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Citation: Hardie, M. 2018. Meaghan Morris Thing. *Cultural Studies Review*, 24:1, 39-43. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v24i1.5962>

ISSN 1837-8692 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/csrj/index>

ARTICLE

Meaghan Morris Thing

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5130/csr.v24i1.5962>

Article History: Received 10/03/2018; Revised 13/03/2018; Accepted 14/03/2018; Published 20/04/2018

Certainly, when people say to me, as they often have done, ‘I can’t remember anything afterward,’ I think, Great, that’s the point! The work is not there to be repeated or identified with, but something works on you.

Adam Phillips¹

‘Ironically,’ Meaghan Morris writes, ‘no text is more bleached of cultural particularity than the one which relentlessly theorizes “difference” without ever once stumbling over some stray material fact—a poem, a press photo, a snatch of TV news—that could, in its everyday density, take “theory” by surprise.’² *Ecstasy and Economics* itself pops up as a ‘stray material fact’ that took me by surprise as a student more than two decades ago, and it still does. First, consider its surprising contents page: it dedicates what it terms ‘American essays’ to the late Australian poet John Forbes, a pairing at face value as surprising as the pairing of ecstasy and economics. That surprise extends to the pun of its cover photograph, a parody of Max Dupain’s 1937 photo *The Sunbaker* by Anne Zahalka, an image which recalibrates the photograph’s late Modern complexion by substituting a bleached and blurry beach surround for the deep shadows of the original. This image feels as historical now as the Dupain’s earlier subtlety of tone; *Ecstasy and Economics* analyses that ‘bleaching’ itself, the ‘stumbling’ into theory (as John Mowitt would say) where the unexpected ‘stray material fact’ renews analysis against sheer stultification.³ In the case of its cover photo the stray fact is hue, shade, distinction: a head of red hair whose capacity to surprise installs difference as surprise.

Small press Australian theory books, along with Australian theory journals like *On The Beach* and *Art & Text* were at the time objects of considerable glamour to me, and none more so than *Ecstasy and Economics*, published by EmPress, ‘a press dedicated to the memory of Eric Michaels’, and alongside Michaels’ posthumous *Unbecoming: An AIDS Diary* (1990).⁴

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

The quality of these publications at the time is scintillating in retrospect: they married some of the urgency of the samizdat with the aesthetically savvy cachet of the quality paperback and parlayed design as a seduction into theory. They were slick. *Ecstasy and Economics* was a departure here from, for instance, *Language, Sexuality and Subversion*, edited by Meaghan and Paul Foss for Feral Publications in 1978, and a reconciliation of that collection's artisanal feel and the clout of *The Pirate's Fiancée*, Meaghan's 1988 Verso book. I remember it being on the shelves of Gleebooks, of course, but also most vividly on display at Ariel bookshop, a stray material fact jostling among the prestige middlebrow fictions and large format cookbooks that were early 1990s Paddinghurst staples.

The *signal* surprise of *Ecstasy and Economics* was, of course, Meaghan's work on Paul Keating, which constitutes in its own terms a 'feminist study of Keating discourse' and which was at that time as surprising a turn of events as any could be.⁵ Until that point I think a certain silent minority (by which I might mean at least me and some friends) was perplexed by the fact of their complex and 'incorrect' excitement over Paul Keating at the same time as broadly speaking he was an avatar of everything that was wrong about the politics of the moment. Meaghan's analysis of that excitement, a 'Keating thing' as she renders it in the vernacular, made such phenomena as 'Keating things', and, lets say, 'things', visible and readable in very distinct ways in 1992:⁶ no one, here, was doing the work to bridge local, suburban, regional and vernacular sensations and facts and the hyperbolic reaches of theory at that time, and as a consequence some of us identified our own Meaghan Morris 'thing', and that's what brings us all together today, each with our own particular itineraries, here, and abroad, all recognising a shared experience in Meaghan's capacity to inculcate not only surprise but also respect for the 'stray material fact'.

Re-reading—this core practice of literary criticism—discloses the peculiar operations of memory in unpredictable ways. While re-reading *Ecstasy and Economics* recently I was beset with memories of earlier readings and equally surprised by what I didn't remember about it. On this reading I was struck most by its (prose) economy, and its marriage of extreme perspicacity and extreme readability, a characteristic effect of sharpness and smoothness that come to resemble each other as the essays proceed. I recognise changes in myself calibrated by these newer perceptions—mostly the feeling of respect for someone who always writes well and with pertinence that one has when one has moved decisively into the breadth of a writing life. But other changes are augured. In *Ecstasy and Economics* the surprising assemblages brokered by its essays settle into something to do with the relationship between cultural studies and literary studies that feels to me perfectly contemporary and so a fruitful divination of what would be a contemporary question nearly twenty-five years after its writing. In retrospect, when she posed it, the conditions could have hardly been less propitious and yet the reader was to enjoy its amazingly productive turns and insights; these the prose rarely dwells on and sometimes just remarks upon before moving along. The pace of the book, like the pace of the 1990s, in retrospect, was dazzling, too.

For Meaghan, questions of method—as they structure in remembered and forgotten ways the vexed relationship between literature, cultural studies, close reading, institutional and elite traditions—must be weighed against an evaluation of the danger of installing forms of correct and incorrect critical methodology, and alongside a survey of the way the debate inflects attention to Australian texts in particular, and with a need for more. More reading, more methods, more historical and practical insights. Critical practices should produce more not less: the drive of the book, perhaps of the more optimistic spirit of those times, was for a generative plurality of objects and styles of reading that were not aiming for an exquisite

precision because the aim is always in the other direction: to interrogate the ways in which political and other practices were means to exclude and that exclusion often unseen folded into disciplinary practices, institutional formalities, unexpected consequences or emergent properties. So while the project is relentlessly (tirelessly, it seems) critical, that is, not in service of an elite division of labour into distinct disciplinary quarters but precisely to ensure exclusions are never settled and always open to revision. I want to say both that this has made cultural and insitutional life infinitely richer for having Meaghan Morris around to dispute and unsettle our ways of thinking, but also that the project comes in many ways to feel against the tide of the changes to the intellectual lives of Australian cultural theorists. To revisit it is therefore to remind oneself of what has been lost to sight in the decades of academic reforms. Institutional acceptance and centring of cultural studies work has had many benefits, for instance, but relentless radical eccentricity that aims to unsettle received wisdom isn't always centred alongside it.

I reread *Ecstasy and Economics* while passing two emotionally labile months in the United States, deep in the heart of Indiana, across the 2016 election cycle. As is often the case with an ambition to review an *oeuvre* I've found myself somewhat stuck with one particular book that won't leave me. In doing so I've realised that this book will unexpectedly help me think through the last few catastrophic months in the political and cultural life of the United States: not just Trump, but Clinton, too, and why there hasn't yet been, at least as far as I know, a feminist analysis of her shortcomings and virtues on a par with Meaghan's virtuosic analysis of Keating. I guess that's because Meaghan hasn't done it, and probably wouldn't, but we need it. My own contribution to Trump Studies, as I try to encompass the enormity of what's happening in US politics right now, has been to turn to the novels of Ivana Trump (I read them so you don't have to, as one journalist said).⁷ Her first, a thinly disguised *roman à clef* about its plucky heroine's romance with a real estate tycoon, is called *For Love Alone*. There's a 'stray material fact' of special enjoyment for fans of Australian Literature, but also a critical methodology or oblique point of entry whose terms reverse but preserve that curious ideation that Meaghan notes in the introduction to *Ecstasy and Economics* where ways of thinking about America and reconciling a sense of estrangement from it were facilitated by reading Forbes' poetry; how to 'deal', as I think she might say, when teaching 'Australian cultural studies to people with whom ... [she] shared, on an everyday basis, very few assumptions about the way the world works, not much tradeable humor [*sic*], ... and no common sense of the history soaked into our usage of ordinary words.'⁸

That expression, 'tradeable humor' signifies a way of encountering the particular estrangement of cultures that seem alike but are anything but, that dissimilarity around which pivots the central query of *Ecstasy and Economics*, where Keating and then opposition leader John Hewson are exactly alike and yet quite different, and it is work of great subtlety as well as skill to read them so as to read them apart. To experience the rarity of that skill and subtlety I'll turn briefly to Meaghan's work on the anecdote in *Identity Anecdotes*, where she first mentions but then returns to and complexifies an identified distinction between two definitions of anecdotes: an Australian definition—'short narrative of a particular incident'—from the Macquarie dictionary, versus the Oxford English Dictionary's, 'narrative of a detached incident'.⁹ There's a symptomatic typo when these two definitions are repeated eight pages later, where 'short narrative of a particular incident' is given as 'short narrative of particular incident', a parapraxis that neatly abbreviates the argument that follows.¹⁰ This ambiguity is scalable against the contrasting definitions between Australian and UK usage, which in an inspired parsing Meaghan opens to explore the distinction between the

particularity of anecdote in Australian usage versus the dissociative digressive anecdote ghosted by the OED definition. So in turn my exemplary anecdote concerns the haze that arises when we consider the distinction between ‘a particular incident’ and ‘particular incident’. A while ago I was reading a biography of Georges Perec and was surprised to read a description of an encounter between the French author, in Australia in 1981 for a residency at the University of Queensland, and Meaghan. David Bellos writes:

Perec also pursued poetry in Sydney and got in touch with John Forbes and Mark O’Connor. They met at The Courthouse in Newtown, with the writer Meaghan Morris and a translator, Julie Rose, acting as linguistic go-betweens. Perec talked to Forbes about his poetry, about Magic Sam, and about the work of Ken Bolton. Whenever one of the two women spoke, Perec would direct his answer to Forbes. They formed the view that Perec was the most ungallant Frenchman they had ever met and surmised that he was gay. It did not occur to them then that the winner of the 1978 Médicis Prize was just terribly shy.¹¹

This extraordinary excerpt from the Perec biography situates Morris and her female friend as, explicitly, ‘linguistic go-betweens’, crude vessels deposited there for the purpose of facilitating masculine exchange. Worse, when Perec’s discourtesy is mentioned their interpretation of it is given—but not by them—in a crude and wholly implausible accusation of narcissism that merely demonstrates the homosocial panic embedded in the encounter as it is described. We are told both what they thought and what they were incapable of thinking

Meaghan, by contrast, tells an anecdote of the encounter whose interest lies in the way it has become token of something for others, a ‘detached’ incident, in salutary and measured ways. I sent Meaghan a Facebook message asking her about this encounter and received an amusing reply:

I do know about it, though i haven’t read it, because every couple of years some Perecophile emails me about it and send me the passage. It’s...nuts. I met Perec for like 5 minutes in a crowded pub (the Courthouse in Australia St) where I was trying to talk to my friend Julie Rose. John Forbes took us there. Pub banter was going on and Perec was really rude, I forget why. So i walked away. Duh.

The Courthouse Hotel, at the top of the metonymically names Australia St in Newtown, here stages two anecdotes: the untradable Australian encountering an other in role of linguistic go-between, and a glimpse of the ‘material fact’ of the intellectual rapprochement with Forbes that gave us *Ecstasy and Economics*. There’s a kind of conceptual cross-hatching over the event itself, where its intrinsic forgettable-ness—in Meaghan’s terms—is contrasted with her gestures to familiarity: pub banter, friendship, conversation, and the appearance of a stray material fact: the place of anecdotes of the particular, rather than the set apart. These are the forms of the vernacular that allow us to enunciate our Meaghan Morris things.

I’m sure that the immense contribution Meaghan Morris has made to Australian intellectual life and to the intellectual life of our disciplines is given short shrift by focusing on the associations that gather around *Ecstasy and Economics*. At the same time, its capacity to crystallise such a set of associations only arises precisely because of the work that Meaghan was doing in it, and the work that reading her has done on me in the processes Adam Phillips describes: ‘something works on you’. For all that we are conscious of the genealogies of our own intellectual lives, and the ways in which different intellectual traditions cluster to dominate and then recede from our attention, Meaghan Morris’s work exemplifies to me

the kind of text that works on you outside the labour of identifying and administering the discourses of intellectual history. That kind of work feels to me most urgently political and is ours due to the remarkable generosity with which Meaghan has given us some things to think with and talk about.

About the author

Melissa Hardie works in the English Department and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney. She has recently published articles in *Angelaki*, *Novel*, and *Modernism/Modernity* and is researching sexual adventure in late mid-century film, the closet and the novel's material lives.

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Notes

1. Adam Phillips, quoted in Sameer Padiana, 'Adam Phillips', *Bomb*, 1 October 2010, <<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/adam-phillips/>>.
2. Meaghan Morris, *Ecstasy and Economics: American Essays for John Forbes*, EmPress, Sydney, 1992, p. 12.
3. John Mowitt, 'Stumbling on Analysis: Psychoanalysis and Everyday Life', *Cultural Critique*, no. 52, Autumn 2002, pp. 61–85.
4. Eric Michaels, *Unbecoming: An AIDS Diary*, EmPress, Sydney, 1990.
5. Morris, *Ecstasy and Economics*, p. 24.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
7. Kelly Faircloth, 'I Read Ivana Trump's 1992 Romance Novel So You Don't Have To', *Jezebel*, 2 November 2016, <<https://pictorial.jezebel.com/i-read-ivana-trumps-1992-romance-novel-so-you-dont-have-1758483428>>.
8. Morris, *Ecstasy and Economics*, p. 9.
9. Meaghan Morris, *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture*, Sage, London, 2006, p. 9.
10. *Ibid.*
11. David Bellos. *Georges Perec: A Life in Words*, Harvill, London, 1993, p. 696.