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## ARTICLE

# Questions of Address: For Meaghan Morris

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In beginning to prepare this tribute to Meaghan Morris's work I went to the bulging folder that contains the letters and postcards and draft papers she sent me over a period of about twenty years, from the early 1980s to the early 2000s (more recently we've communicated almost entirely by email). One of the things that strikes me, looking through these pages with their typewritten text full of crossings-out and handwritten marginalia, is the enormous care Meaghan gives to her intellectual relationships, in my case with someone she didn't know all that well, who lived on the other side of the country, and with whom there were significant points of intellectual difference. One of the letters I'm going to quote from is ten closely typed pages long, and to write it she would first have to have read, closely and carefully, a dense and abstruse paper of mine, set in what looks like 8-point font and to me today almost unreadable. Now consider that I was just one of Meaghan's correspondents. I don't know how many people received letters like this from her, but I'm pretty sure she had ongoing written conversations with a number of other people in Australia and elsewhere. Meaghan was and is a teacher: she takes intellectual debate as seriously as anyone I've ever known, and she conducts it with care, with tact, and with passion.

But let me start with another letter, this one written in 1986 when Meaghan was a fellow in residence at the Humanities Research Centre at the ANU, directed then by Ian Donaldson. The letter is built around a running joke about smoking:

So far I've been taken out to dinner three times, no less, by nice old friends—and had a wonderful time BUT my problem is that two out of those three times I have SMOKED! (I suspect part of my Bundeena *fuite* has been about admitting that I can only be a non-smoker when alone or with other non-smokers). All the people round here smoke enormously. Whatever shall I do? ... Some more women are arriving next week, but most of them SMOKE!

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But the bigger theme of the letter is the nature of the intellectual environment she has entered, an old world of patronising male scholars and of ritualised morning teas announced by a gong:

More serious is the HRC ambience, quite as DIRE as one might expect but it's always a surprise to come across academics again who talk about 'the mindless millions' and boast that they don't have a TV. I'm an early arrival for the girls' year: most of the others here at the moment are old, male, and overbearingly non-Australian. Feminism (which I believe quite a few people are nervous/suspicious about) has so far never been mentioned. The gentlemen lecture me about the way the world works, and as far as I can tell most of them don't know very much about anything that's happened for at least a decade. Especially the one without a TV.

Meaghan was an outsider in this academic world, never having had more than casualised positions in it until her appointment in 2000 to a chair at Lingnan University. But she was never fully an outsider: she had visiting academic positions in Australia and the United States (at Cornell, Duke and Illinois), her work was taken up in the academic world and at those points where it merges with the larger world, and she was actively engaged in disciplinary struggles around French theory, feminism and cultural studies. She was, let's say, an inside outsider, and her disdain for the gentlemen who lectured her on how the world works is part of a sense that the academic world could be very different: that feminism, for example, could make a difference to it (although Meaghan has always resented being typecast as a feminist), and if people took TV, for example, a little more seriously as a part of the real world.

What Meaghan and I had in common in those years was a commitment to developing cultural studies as a discipline, not necessarily in the form it had taken at the CCCS in Birmingham, and to working out the intellectual and political implications of the work of Michel Foucault, in particular, but also of Deleuze, de Certeau and others. My own energies in the early 1980s were given to developing a post-Althusserian Marxism, partly under the influence of Foucault, in order to make Marxist theory a workable analytic tool; it was, I now understand, a project that was divorced from the political realities of Australian life, and although my own position was strongly hostile to the 'actually existing' Marxisms of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, it was also divorced from a full understanding of the repressive uses to which those state ideologies had been put. Meaghan was, I think, clearer-eyed about the political worth of Marxism in Australia, in part because of her intellectual formation in Sydney libertarian circles which had always been hostile to the perceived authoritarianism of the various Australian Marxist parties.

The second letter I want to quote from, at some length, is a detailed and considered response to an article I'd published in the first issue of the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* in May 1983. Titled (after a John Tranter poem) 'Foucault at Forest Lodge', the article was an extended review of a volume of essays, *Theoretical Strategies*, published in the Local Consumption Series in 1981. My article was critical of the rhetorical radicalism of many of the essays and of what I took to be their superficial understanding of Marxism. One of Meaghan's points of entry into my article is its rhetorical stance, and she's wittily revealing about the way her own work is always polemically situated, always a *prise de position*:

I'd prefer it to be self-revealing rather than a criticism of your text if I say that I think the trouble in the first part is that in your anger, you haven't been VICIOUS enough. (My own current working problem, in fact, is that the essays I've written in the past

few years have induced a procedural habit of first working out which jugular I'm after, and then the best way to go for it—with the result that now I'm trying to move away from polemic and back to research, I find that I've practically forgotten how to think productively without reference to a particular opponent position.)

Among Meaghan's own most influential teachers were Ross Chambers (now sadly gone from us) and Anne Freadman, and what she learned from them, I think, was that talk and writing always come from and address a position, actual or implied; that language is shaped by the genres within which it works and by the structures of address that are built into them. Meaghan is self-consciously and masterfully a rhetorician (her public presentations always shape their arguments around first-person anecdote, the foregrounding of address), and in this letter she works out some of the implications of my speaking position:

The problem for me reading this is not 'is that true?', but 'for whom is this written and why does it matter?' Either it is written to a position which would deny it, and would insist on some (ruptural) Foucauldian originality—in which case you would need to provide a very substantial demonstration indeed to prove your point—or it is written to a position which accepts its accuracy already, in which case it functions as a bonding device of a quasi-theological order. On the other hand, if it is read from a position assuming that the originality and/or siting of a statement as in or out of Marxism is really neither here nor there, then it tends to emerge as a non-functioning bonding device—thus constructing the writer as one needing to defend a territory, and inviting some morally-superior psychoanalytics of the text. In all three cases, it fails to persuade anyone of anything—and in fact is probably a factor in producing (against the argument of the text as a whole) the mirage of a unitary, *solidaire* Marxism which the hostile reader is already only too happy to discern.

This is, very tactfully but very deliberately, a way of telling me that the rhetorical structure of my argument undermines the argument itself: that I haven't thought through the assumptions I'm working with and haven't figured out who (that is, what kind of position) I'm writing for. These are questions of genre, and Meaghan names the operative mode as the "defence of Marxism" genre', with its mobilisation of 'a historically inappropriate allegiance morality via the brandishing of "obvious" values'.

What I want to emphasise here is the tact with which Meaghan's critique is enunciated. She manages this in part by switching it from me to a figure whom I invoke as part of my working out of the implications of Foucault's conceptualisation of power (and of whom I'm also rather critical), Peter Dews. After citing Dews's article on Foucault and the *Nouveaux Philosophes* (published in *Economy and Society* in 1979) at some length, Meaghan sums up with 'My dear John Frow, I think this is NONSENSE'. The attack on Dews is based on a close analysis of his rhetoric, but it concludes with a more detailed set of readings of his attempt to derive a model of causality (power/resistance) from Foucault's work:

If I were to venture here into matters of substantial disagreement rather than rhetorical criticism with both Dews' and your text, it would be that I'm not convinced that Foucault does produce or imply any model of causality at all, and I'm certainly not convinced that power is in any sense accorded the status of an 'origin'. I suspect it's rather a matter of putting the causality/origin questions to the texts, and then producing one's own answers—whereas for me, what makes thinking 'politics' difficult d'après Foucault is

rather the constitutive absence of both notions/models from his work, and that's also what makes doing that thinking so important.

And 'that thinking' is then applied to the question we began with, the way the various essays in *Theoretical Strategies* import a body of theory to underpin a rhetoric of radicalism that remains disengaged from the real institutions of Australian politics:

the gulf between T[heoretical] S[trategies] and, say, the Foucault-fiction from which they draw their authority: no, that's wrong, I mean plainly the gulf between TS and Foucault's work; is one of their respective relationships to Politics in the traditional sense. The absolute difference between these is that while one can always cite a specific set of opponents implied in a Foucault text (especially his essays)—eg particular Party and governmental interests and policies at any given time in France—TS (overall) inscribes no relation whatsoever to the sphere of public politics except perhaps a bit of spitting at Marxist academics. It's no doubt a banal thing to say, but it seems to me to define the political difference between French non-Marxism and Australian anti-Marxism. The former always has quite clear engagements with the world of government, parliaments, party politics etc (perhaps most intensely in the very moment of trying to displace analytical energies away from these); while the latter rarely addresses anything other than the academy, and doesn't even do that from a perspective assuming that the academy has any concrete relation to other structures. What then gets lost, of course, is any sense of the specificity of Australian cultural/political institutions and their history; so that I suspect it simply would not occur to most TS writers to compare their positions to those of Australia's effective intelligentsia (Hawkes, Chipps, faceless bureaucrats and policy makers), let alone then think through any problems that might arise from such a comparison. If one borrows from a country like France the posture that to be 'left' is to be to the left of the PCF, then it follows that in Australia one simply IS left by living the inner-city lifestyle.

That seems to me to summarise something essential about Meaghan's writing: its engagement with the particularities of political institutions, the close lines of connection she draws between those institutions and the complexities of theoretical work, and the passion with which she teaches by building dialogue. I don't know whether I've taken in the lessons she has taught me over the years; but I've always listened with close attention to that witty and generous voice that we're honouring today.

## About the author

John Frow is Professor of English at the University of Sydney and the author of many articles and books, including most recently *Character and Person* (2014). *On Interpretive Conflict* is due to be published later in 2018.