GOING FOR A SONG

Culture has become a political battlefield. Colin Mercer scouts ahead.


When I was in London recently, the Guardian Weekend Magazine ran a feature on political leaders with cultural talent. Along with the saxophonist US President-Elect (who prompted the piece), a clarinettist King of Thailand who jammed with Benny Goodman, and the symphony orchestra-conducting Edward Heath, our boy from Bankstown was given honourable mention for his garage band and pub circuit days in Western Sydney. And then, of course, there was that picture earlier in the year by Juan Davila with Paul Keating featuring prominently in petranimic pose. He has even been honoured by a profile in ALR, and we know what style of underwear he prefers and that he is not averse to a spot of ballroom dancing. Apart from an occasional aristocratic indulgence in pig-shooting, the terms of popular reference for this Prime Minister, unlike his predecessor, are broadly cultural rather than sporting.

And now we have a book by Australia’s most innovative and interesting cultural critic, Meaghan Morris, in which this ambiguous cultural icon, both ‘street smart’ and ‘high flying’ as she puts it, bobs and weaves in and out of the main essay, Ecstasy and Economics (A Portrait of Paul Keating). This essay is prefaced by the poem ‘Watching the Treasurer’ by John Forbes (to whom the book is dedicated), and whose poem assists the author in charting a complex cultural map of contemporary Australia in which this cultural object named Keating shakes, moves and, above all, figures.

And, of course, Paul Keating is not just the ‘object’ of all this cultural stuff; he also has something of an active role beyond his French Empire clocks. Hosting a lunch earlier in the year for the newly appointed Cultural Policy Advisory Panel which will guide the development of a Commonwealth cultural policy, the PM is said to have charged the panel with coming up with ‘ideas that sing’. This was just after he had made a speech to writers in Melbourne about linking cultural development to national growth and, of course, after he had made an earlier mark in the wider cultural debate with his comments on the flag, national history and cultural self-confidence. And then, of course, we shouldn’t forget his very important cultural role and contributions in the reform of parliamentary language. These contributions came after the essays in this book were written but they provide another interesting edge in the ‘Keating as cultural form’ genre.

There are plenty of ideas that sing—and nag and muse and murmur and sometimes mumble—in the two essays which comprise this book. Both skilfully and suggestively try to situate the project of cultural studies beyond the academy and the romantic-aesthetic paradigm in which it has all too often trapped itself. The author puts it in this way:

Both essays nag about class: both argue that aesthetic critics should engage more seriously with the cultural forms in which economic understandings of society have been disseminated for the past ten years; both explore the complex roles of stereotypes and ‘portraiture’ in mediated popular culture; both consider what it means to speak and write as an Australian in a ‘globalising’ cultural economy.
Cultural forms of economic understanding? Isn't culture one domain, or 'level' or discipline, and economics another? That, surely, is what both Marxism and the discipline-bound education and training systems have both taught us. It's also what the format of newspapers, magazines and most journals teach us: culture, normally reduced to the impoverished category of 'Art' has its special place in a curious complicity between even the most 'revolutionary aestheticists' and publishers. Both consider the 'Banana Republic', the 'J curve' and even the religious Jeremiah-like 'Recession we had to have'.

These are not terms of economic analysis but something approaching moral figures or images: they were intended as such by their utterer and exploited as such by that domain which gives or returns to us the fundamental terms of the economic and political lexicons: the media. Just as Margaret Thatcher used to compare (reduce) the complexity of the national economy to the image of the 'housewife's purse', economics is here simultaneously a cultural matter: a realm of evocations, connotations and associations rather than the clear, albeit greyish, light of economic science. Not economics ('the base') first and then culture ('the superstructure') afterwards: but both at the same time.

Recognising that it is predominantly in these cultural and figurative terms that most of us understand or grasp what we can of economics, Meaghan Morris confesses here to the curious emergence of "an entirely new emotion: adulation of a national leader" partly provoked by Keating's skills as a "great describer...eloquent, not hysterical or paranoid, and lyrical, not communicative, in promoting economic reform". Ideas that sing indeed or, perhaps, whistle now more furtively in the dark night of international recession. The adulation is, of course, leavened with a fair deal of outright criticism, but the author owns up to the necessary ambiguity of her reactions here. This ambiguity is partly produced by her own biographical empathy with Keating ("mixed working class and petty-bourgeois Irish-Australian") but also, and much more importantly I think, by the urgent plea which is threaded through the two essays: to make this sort of analysis matter by connecting rather than holding as discrete 'levels', the political, the economic, the historical and the cultural.

Cultural studies has frequently tried to do this but, in the anglo-saxon tradition at least, has more frequently failed because of a tendency to treat politics, economics and history as forces 'bearing down' on culture rather than as cultural phenomena themselves in a broader anthropological sense. The analysis of culture has been sidetracked by an historical tendency to treat it in aesthetic or textual terms, seeing it as a warmer domain of liberation, fulfilment and potential, as opposed to the harder and colder structures of economics, history and politics and their related domains of administration, policy and planning. Even the shift towards 'lifestyle' in
cultural studies has only broadened the critical reader's purview rather than question some of the fundamen-
tal assumptions of critical analysis. Why not (as Morris begins to do in her second essay) take the ordinariness and
everydayness of culture seriously—
stand back from special pleading and recognise that it is there at every mo-
ment, every 'level' and every utter-
ance: from the representation of 'eco-
nomic rationalism' to the characteri-
sation of the Prime Minister's Zegna
suits and John Hewson's Ferrari.
Culture is, in the end, a question
of resources like any other: an issue
nicely summarised by Morris in a quote
from Rey Chow where she stresses
"the experience of consumption and
reception...that store of elusive ele-
ments that, apart from 'wages' and 'surplus value', enable people to buy,
accept and enjoy what is available in
their culture". In other words, stress
shopping centres—favourites of
semiologists, politicians, most people
and an awful lot of women—rather
than cultural centres, visited by only a
few with starkly ritualised gestures and
clothing.
If lifestyle, patterns of living and,
crucially, quality of life are to intrude
effectively on the agenda of cultural
analysis, policy and development, the
patterns of allocation, distribution and
consumption of cultural resources—
from artefacts and images to clothing
and cosmetics—will need to be un-
derstood in much more piecemeal and
in situ. Both of these traditions have at
the core a recognition of the ordinari-
ness and everydayness of cultural re-
sources. But neither—because of their
relevance and force—have been able to come to terms effectively with the
mechanisms and the administra-
tive forms (in short, the governmentality) of cultural resource
allocation—from the Australia
Council through the Department of
Transport and Communications to
governmental and indigen-
ous and non-English speaking back-
ground cultures. (Examples include
access to media resources, fair repre-
sentation of and access to heritage
resources, assistance programs, and so
on, as citizen-rights rather than the
prerogatives of patronage and wel-
fare.) In making this move, contrary
to many assertions in current and
rather sterile debate, cultural studies
does not have to leave critique be-
hind. It will remain a necessary and
constitutive component of a more complex,
more productive and more
effective grasp of the contours of the
cultural domain in Australia and its
comparative geopolitical situation.

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