THE VERNACULAR REPUBLIC

Meaghan Morris' work skates between the popular and the academic, between the metropolis and the antipodes. Ken Wark explains.

Meaghan Morris writes essays that are at once international and uniquely Australian. Most high theory written 'from the antipodes' ends up being a provincial imitation of what is going on elsewhere. Morris has found a way to be local without being provincial.

Over the last 20 years academia has 'imported' a staggering amount of foreign theory. In the 70s it was mostly continental marxism; in the 80s, French 'poststructuralism'; now in the 90s, British cultural studies. This internationalism in the flows of academic work is part of a wider trend. All types of cultural product are now increasingly being drawn into global marketing strategies, from world music to TV coproductions. This phenomenal increase in the volume and velocity of transborder cultural flows is making all of us into 'cruising grammarians' (to borrow a phrase from Morris).

Unlike a lot of now rather academic poststructuralist writing in Australia, however, Morris stays true to the problem of reinventing a form of writing suitable to the political, economic and cultural situation. In particular, her work is a process of creating spaces in which feminist voices can be heard (and can listen), somewhere between the popular and the academic. This is no simple task. Academia is all too often a place where specialists speak about the 'masses', everyday life, popular culture and so on as if they were in some way removed from it. On the other hand, one cannot just insert the speech of the oppressed or the marginalised or the trivialised into academic discourse. This either ends up being dismissed by academia as 'not serious', or is so utterly transformed in the process of being made the subject of 'serious' discourse that it no longer has anything to do with its origins.

Morris writes with an acute awareness of these problems of the 'place' from which one speaks. Without claiming to solve in writing what are really questions of institutional power, she does have a tactics and a style for negotiating a way through them.

Take, for example, a passage from a classic Morris essay, 'Panorama' in the book Islands in the Stream (Pluto Press). The subject is quintessentially popular cultural text, Australia Live, the 4-hour transcontinental 'celebration' which appeared as television's contribution to the Australian bicentenary. Morris' first move is to place Australia Live in the genre of 'panorama'. She then distinguishes two variants of the panorama, the imperial and the touristic. These two sub-genres of the panorama have a particular resonance in the Australian context, as both have been popular ways of recording the antipodean experience of landscape.

Many criticisms of Australia Live drew attention to its lack of historical depth and blamed this on television when, as Morris explains, in fact this was simply a feature of the panorama as a genre. Panorama always sacrifices historical continuity in favour of spatial grasp. Morris thus sidesteps conventional rhetoric by defining the object differently: the 'Australia Live effect' is not an effect of television, but of panorama—a genre which has both a current televisual form but also prior ones to which it can be compared.

Panorama is a genre through which Morris makes us see changing forms of power. If the imperial panorama presented the image of the dominions as a possession to its imperial administrators, the tourist panorama shows off the acreage to potential real estate developers. This relation to the land is fundamental, for it is at the centre of both the fragility of antipodean political-economic power and the culture of the antipodes as a lived relation to that power.

Lest this seem overdrawn, compare Morris' attitude with this straightforward remark from The Financial Review: "It all sounds a trifle cold and calculating but facts are facts: one Japanese tourist is equal to 10 tonnes of wheat or 15 tonnes of coal, 5 tones of sugar, 7 tonnes of alumina or 60 tonnes of iron ore in real dollar terms." In other words, Australia is a site for the most primary and most tertiary of industries, for the extraction of raw rock and the manipulation of pure allure. Imports—and practically everything in this country is imported, from cars to cultural theories—have to be financed on the back of these precarious activities.

While in London or Paris or New York one can treat culture as separate from economic issues, Morris is keenly aware of how intertwined they appear when viewed from Sydney, Australia. The antipodean relation is one where no such separation is possible. As is evident in her recent book Ecstasy and Economics (EmPress), for Morris the national always hinges on a problematic relation to the international, and the cultural to a crisis-prone antipathy to the economic. Morris finds a solution to this tight coupling in the antipodes of what the metropolitan discourses keep distinct by making a vir-
tue of necessity. Having established the local event as the minor, antipo­
dean pole in relation to the theory, Morris has nevertheless established a
relation, and can write along a line
which might work back in another
direction, from the antipode back
again.

Morris says of Australia Live that it
enacts a certain critical dilemma which
is not at all unique to high theory:
"There is no single 'source' making
sense of the world in communication
with a captive audience. Complaints
about collapsing standards (in aesthetic
quality, in reality values, or in degrees
of critical distance) are side effects of
this process. It is not that aesthetic
standards cannot be stated, historical
reality asserted, or distance maintained
(critics do these things all the time)—
but that there is no guarantee of 'a'
public who will care to validate the
outcome, or be 'mobilised' by the re­
sult. This experience of a lack of
common narrative, central authority, unity
of place and time is an antipodean
experience as much as it is a
postmodern one.

'Postmodern' critical theories al­
ways problematise the relationship
people have to their culture. Morris
finds something uncannily similar in
Australian experience: "If it is now
conventional for feminist essays to
begin by questioning the place from
which one speaks; it has also been
customary for Australian essays to pose
the question of speaking of place." By
discovering in Australian experience
something which prefigures a more
general experience of postmodernity,
Morris produces a unique take on it.

In antipodean experience, all au­
thority is either too close and too shal­
low or too distant and too obscure to
have any real effects. One either wor­
ships imperial power or resents it—
both relations at a distance. In Morris’
theses there is an ironic version of the
whole antipodean neurosis about iden­
tity. Morris writes in a manner which is
self-consciously antipodean but which
does not necessarily have anything to
do with being an Australian. It is an
antipodean in the sense that Morris writes
from the perspective of the minor term
in any relation.

What she does not do is position
herself as the great other, the great
excluded, oppressed, unloved, un­
washed, or any other term which re­
sents and berates the master discourse.
Her essays are premised on the assump­
tion that there are always a great number
of possible trajectories. Not all of these
positions are equally possible or equally
effective. This is no vague call to plu­
ralism. It is a will to use whatever
resources are to hand to outwit the lazy
ways of authoritative discourse.

For instance, in "Politics Now"—a
paper originally given at a conference
with a decidedly 'political' flavour—
Morris positions herself as a petit bour­
geois intellectual, pitting her faint
personal pole in relation to the theory, Morris
cultural identity to its external bearings
collapses into the time of the televisual
edit. What becomes of cultural identity
when the breathing spaces which regulate
the paranoid reaction of cul­
tural identity to its external bearings
collapses into the time of the televis­
al edit? What becomes of meaning when
there are no shared codes and conven­
tions? The answers, I think, ought to
come from the antipodes. From the
antipodean point of view, Morris gives
us a way with the other's grammar in
which to phrase a response other than
silence, resentment, paranoia—the
dominant styles of what remains of the
old new Left. Our condition predi­
cates a new mode of inquiry. It requires
that we write differently.

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much longer version of this article
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ies in October.