

# Melissa Gregg

## A MUNDANE VOICE

*This essay offers strategies of speaking and studying 'the mundane' as a means to inaugurate an interventionist politics in cultural studies. Using Meaghan Morris's example of anecdotal and colloquial address, a mundane voice is shown to situate and contextualize our understanding of major concepts circulating in international theory, and broaden the audience for academic debate. Studies of 'everyday life' have been hampered by a too-close affinity with hegemonic structures of knowledge production, requiring further gestures of parochialism to hasten a speaking position aware of its own partiality and limitations. Attention to the singularity or 'this-ness' of a cultural site humbles the tasks cultural studies can perform, introducing some curiosity to what we think we know about the cultures from which we speak. Reflecting on the fate of Michel de Certeau's work in the boom period of cultural studies' expansion, the paper suggests that cultural studies' radical potential can be expanded if we are not inflected by preconceptions about what defines politics, especially against the fashions of intellectual commodification. Morris creates affective connections between past, present and future political concerns: a different temporality for political investment than the cycles of electoral models, or the dictates of commodity culture, afford, and one that cultural studies might still learn to adopt.*

**Keywords** mundane; Meaghan Morris; speaking position; anecdote; cultural studies; politics

### Prologue: bleeding sail (to no avail)

It goes like this: walking to my office, the anti-war outcries on noticeboards, pavements and lampposts multiply in synchronicity with the advancing front line. After a seminar, I wait forever for a bus home, but the latest peace rally has the CBD grid-locked. Flicking on the TV news, the Sydney Opera House screams 'NO WAR' from its highest sail (in a 'terrorist'-wary western capital city, two nobodies scale the national landmark to make their point in blood-red paint). I am feeling useless. With a deadline looming, I have got to work. The protests cannot beckon any more. I am trapped, for the moment, in the mundane.

Isn't everybody? Here I want to contemplate the usefulness of speaking and studying 'the mundane', on the one hand, as a preferable alternative to the

way 'the everyday' gets figured in dominant models of cultural studies practice; on the other, as a means to materialize the potential Massumi (2002, p. 256) lately encourages, from a 'proudly, loudly' political cultural studies. Voicing the mundane is a means to puncture some of the posturing that haunts academic work, a contextualizing measure that can enhance the modest tasks cultural studies performs. I do not want to reject 'the everyday' as a valuable conceptual device (as this issue testifies, it stimulates such a strong body of thought as to survive any such attack), rather my aim is to draw to light some problems with the way theories circulate in an international academic milieu. It is my hope that a consideration of our, and others' mundane dispositions might bring back a kind of parochialism to intellectual debate, and in so doing introduce some curiosity about what we think we know as theorists (Sedgwick & Frank 1995).

My anxiety at writing through a period of international turmoil is a condition so familiar to cultural studies as to be mundane itself – something that Morris, following Tony Bennett, calls the temptation of a 'spiral' form of political engagement: 'always swinging between activist desire and angst about its own effects, it has the form of precisely the doomed circularity that is known in everyday language as running round like a headless chook' (1992a, p. 466). Countering this dilemma in her own work, Morris introduces a different temporality for cultural studies' political goals, and as I will argue here, provides an exemplary method to speak and study the mundane. Her style of intervention invests in a longer time frame for social change than cycles of electoral politics typically afford. At the same time, it remains wary of the use-by-dates and limited spheres of applicability of intellectual fashions. Morris's idiosyncratic techniques – the use of anecdote, an affective tone, a colloquial focus – remind critics of their own place in the culture under investigation, and challenge still prevalent assumptions which extol detached intellectual discourse. It is a speaking position convinced of the unique role cultural studies can play in a democratic society if it takes the task of 'what counts as politics, to whom' as the basis of *its* everyday. At moments like these, when the intensity of political activity around us seems overbearing, and the monopoly on what counts as political is claimed by both Left and Right, this very specific undertaking assumes heightened importance.

Attention to the mundane humbles the tasks cultural studies can perform. It reminds writers to consider questions of audience (who does this work address? who does it leave out? what are the effects?) and reveals the decisions behind sites chosen for study. With the mundane as the origin and subject of analysis, we can recognize when writers neglect bits of culture that seem less interesting, less radical or ill-fitting their preferred interpretive models. Beginning with the aim of rendering legible new political performances – what I claim is part of cultural studies' epistemological and political value (see Gregg 2004) – inverts the practice of applying political theory *to* everyday life. It creates a

means to expand what constitutes politics if we are not inflected by preconceptions. Focused as it is on the places where abstractions (meaning here, imposed ideas of politics) must eventually land, the mundane lends an honesty and concreteness to intellectual work.

Underpinning my concerns here is a belief that structures for intellectual practice must respond to and ameliorate the effects of economic change. In terms of cultural studies' relationship to globalization, I want the idea of the mundane to inject some much needed parochialism into academic work. Now, parochialism has some bad press, especially the kind Morris herself describes as characterizing conceptual debate. 'One consequence of the mundane globalization immediately affecting intellectuals', she writes, is 'the indignant parochialism of assuming that you always already *know* the political import of this or that product or practice' (Morris 1993a, p. 42). I agree with Morris that this kind of assumed knowledge 'will not be very helpful in the future' (1993a, p. 42), and that one of the best ways to counter it is to use the limitations of our situated speaking positions more productively. It is precisely because we seem destined to share a theoretical vocabulary internationally (which is not to say globally) that we need to work harder to explain how particular concepts work in the contexts from which we write and speak. In an internet-wired, international conference-attending, US-led publishing network of interaction, pivotal terms and theories are too often taken for granted in cultural studies' everyday. We need means to habitualize self-reflexivity in our theoretical assumptions and investigative practices, especially if our goal is to widen the audience for these concerns in the future.

## Speaking the mundane

In *The Pirate's Fiancée*, Morris (1988, p. 7) describes the matter of creating a speaking position as 'a problem of rhetoric, of developing enunciative strategies . . . precisely in relation to the cultural and social conventions that make speaking difficult or impossible for *women*'. Histories of academic practice, which naturalize particular forms of speech in priority over others, create a legacy that is hard to combat: by definition, disciplinarity renders impotent other forms of speaking and knowing. In de Certeau's (1984, pp. 138–139) estimation, the power of this 'scriptural economy' is its capacity to treat language as 'a disorderly nature that has to be cultivated':

The mastery of language guarantees and isolates a new power, a 'bourgeois' power, that of making history and fabricating languages. This power, which is essentially scriptural . . . defines the code governing socio-economic promotion and dominates, regulates, or selects according to its norms all those who do not possess this mastery of language.

Attuned to this selective discourse, *The Pirate's Fiancée* grapples with, although ultimately rejects, the legacy of European philosophy implicit in Certeau's description, to the extent that it cannot recognize the new framework for knowledge feminism demands.<sup>1</sup> Morris is not content with accommodating gestures:

there is little to be gained from projects to disrupt the discourse of philosophy by inscribing difference if and when such a project comes down to reiterating a single, fundamental thesis held to be always usefully true of all philosophy ('it's phallogocentric . . .') – and to countering philosophical discourse by maintaining, from place to place and text to text, the rigidity of a 'different' *style*.

(1988a, p. 102)

Merely 'allowing' women to contribute to philosophical discourse is not enough. According to this perspective, obeisance to disciplinary convention entails an 'immediate loss of political (and rhetorical) flexibility for feminist interventions in different institutional and discursive contexts' (1988a, p. 102).

With its comparatively loose disciplinary demands, Morris's work in cultural studies explores just these possibilities for feminist intervention. Her chosen methodology renders transparent the assumptions behind her speaking position, cognisant of the conventional ways these factors are elided in the scriptural economy of academic address. Trained in French, and practiced in a number of writing applications, Morris brings a certain formalism to her brand of cultural studies.<sup>2</sup> Explaining her use of anecdotes, what I am claiming is her principal device to voice the mundane, she claims they offer unique properties for argumentation:

They are oriented futuristically towards the construction of a precise, local, and *social* discursive context, of which the anecdote then functions as a *mise en abyme*. That is to say, 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. So anecdotes need not be true stories, but they must be functional in a given exchange.

(Morris 1988/1996, p. 150)

Anecdotes offer a discursive space in which a singular idea can be positioned, offered and demonstrated. As an 'image within an image', the *mise en abyme* corresponds with what Margaret Morse (1998), following Greimas, calls 'the enunciative fallacy'. This is the understanding that a fictitious certainty governs any speech act between an 'I', 'here and now' and a 'you'. In recognition of this fallacy, Morris employs a genre that patently avoids claims to authenticity, but creates 'first-order *simulations* of the speaking subject, and the time and place of

enunciation' (Morse 1998, p. 12). The failure of any attempt to communicate pure intention through discourse is therefore acknowledged, alongside the admission that simulations of such a relationship can be, and are functional.

A common literary device, in philosophy the allegorical mode is generated by conditions in the objective world, rather than the subjective intention of the writer (Buck-Morss 1989, p. 229).<sup>3</sup> In Morris's use, there's a little of both: from a literary point of view multi-layering affords an oblique means to mount an argument. It is a way of creatively figuring what would otherwise appear as a dense and prosaic discussion, to make the complexities of cultural debates more attractive to a broader audience. Yet, the implications of Buck-Morss' assessment, that allegory conveys something of the status of the objective world, suggests Morris's preference for anecdote might respond to the way our experience is shaped in postmodern times. Certainly anecdotes afford a refining mechanism for Morris, they bring down to a manageable level the complexity of culture, so that a specific point can be forwarded. They offer a way out of what troubles her about cultural studies' "fraught space" of ethical grandiloquence': 'in which massive, world-historical problems are debated on such a level of generality that they cannot possibly be solved, and posed in ways which do not, will not and cannot ever connect to agencies by which actual social futures may be given a "definite shape"' (Morris 1992a, p. 466). Anecdotes only pretend to speak from a clearly delimited context. In Morris's case, 'oriented futuristically', they try to create affective connections between those in the past, present and future.

## Uncle Billy's television

A neat example of this speaking position comes in the brief article, 'Uncle Billy, Tina Turner and Me' (1998a). In this piece, Morris relates a succession of anecdotes about watching television. This is one:

TV for me came gently into a way of life that (I now realize) had barely changed since the Depression. By the 1960s, I was living with my other Nanna in East Maitland. She chopped wood to warm the bath, stoked coal to heat the stove, hauled washing through the wringer and fed the chooks before breakfast. Most of our neighbours did. At some stage, my Great-Uncle Billy bought a TV, and Nanna and I would go over the road to watch it.

My main memory of this, however, is not the set or a show but a *smell*. Like our own, Uncle Billy's house was old (my great-grandfather had owned it), dark (blinds were never opened), musty in parts (front rooms where people had died), and it smelt faintly of the flood-mud caked into our ceilings by the 1955 Flood. Uncle Billy sometimes smelt, too – of old age, and ancient singlets. Nanna perfumed her hankie in self-defence and wore

flowery talcum powder. It all mixed in with the sweet scent of coal that drifted in on the breeze every evening.

(1998a, p. 116)

A sense of warmth guides this description. Safety and contentment seem to underwrite the scene, conveying the knowing satisfaction of a childhood world just big enough to comprehend. This is a rural culture of self-reliance. Nothing here is touched by an 'outside', whether it's Nanna's routines, Uncle Billy's singlets or the cloistered house. The words used have particular impressions. TV came 'gently' into this space, as if one is caressed by experience, time is of such a negotiable pace. Note the different ways events are individualized: the enumeration of tasks, the various smells. Morris notices the different ways they each watch TV: 'Nanna and I were into narrative: we hated missing the dialogue, and shared a passion for analysing character even on spectacle shows like "Bandstand". Uncle Billy was a raging formalist. All he cared about was "snow", and he'd lumber up every five minutes to play with the reception' (1998a, p. 116). Details offer recognition of so many micro-histories: the length of time the house has stayed in the family, the passing of ancestors, the legacy of natural disasters (major moments in local history) and the Depression (significant to broad-scale history). Combined with this is the smell of coal wafting in, a signifier for a representative kind of working-class town and a culture soon to be surpassed with the kind of technological advances television represents. These densely packaged recollections provide a way of figuring a commentary on the increased temporalities of the present. True to her claim, Morris's anecdotes are oriented futuristically – returning to the moment of television's introduction highlights the disrupted, multiple times and stimuli currently surrounding us.

To this end, Morris's anecdotes accord with Massumi's challenge to cultural studies, of moving away from abstract assumptions to do with an aspiring collectivity (the 'constituency' on which conventional political theories rely) towards the potential offered in writing 'singularity'. It is what Massumi (2002, p. 222) calls 'this-ness': 'an unreproducible being-only-itself'. In the more approachable terms Morris herself offers, it is 'a historical analysis attuned both to socio-economic contexts and to the individuating local intensities' (Morris 1992a, p. 4). These 'local intensities' come out when we attend to the mundane. Anecdotes figure a singular instance of how 'this' happens *here*, which does not preclude other experiences, but acts as an example of 'how the world can be said to be working' in this context. It is a voice that does not pretend to speak for others, conscious of its status as a simulated enunciative act.

Morris presents a difficult argument in the 'Uncle Billy' essay. Against dominant theories of communication – that see viewers either as 'passive, uncritical sponges', or instead claim 'that no one is ever mesmerized, fooled or drugged by watching television' (1998a, p. 118) – Morris shows the insufficiency of blanket condemnations or celebrations of television. People come to the

medium with different histories, hopes and agendas, she claims: ‘Watching TV is a volatile business, insignificant at times and intensely emotional at others’ (1998a, p. 118). A later anecdote sees Morris driving down a local street on Grand Final Day: listening to Australian sports satirists Roy Slaven and HG Nelson call the Rugby League Grand Final on radio, she recollects the code’s latest TV advertising campaign, in which American singer Tina Turner appears as the new face promoting football for a more diverse audience.<sup>4</sup> Despite an early love of the game, until this point TV football’s dominant discourse had seemed ‘too White and Male and Ugly’ (1998a, p. 118) for Morris to enjoy – its dominant imaginary ‘an ocker in an armchair with a sixpack’. But with Tina Turner as mascot, what can be imagined for the code is re-articulated: coupled with Roy and HG’s tongue-in-cheek commentary, TV football now seems keen to incorporate and encourage more histories and interests than one, overly masculine target market. This snapshot of a moment, related by anecdote, gives Morris an overwhelming ‘desire for other people’s stories’: she wants to hear other narratives, of people’s pasts, their families, their lounge rooms – how all these lives have been impacted by social change. Morris craves histories that brush against the ones that mainstream accounts allow (accounts of television’s penetration give her a ‘sense of a vaguely faulty memory’ (1998a, p. 115) – as if her experience should somehow be different to what it was). This is an urge to hear how cultural changes land in the context of people’s everyday, what I am calling a desire for the mundane. As a ‘set of events mediating relationships between people in particular situations’, television here figures a different approach to narrating history: an approach that speaks and studies the banal ways people negotiate their lives in meaningful ways. Hearing the football commentary drifting from other people’s car stereos that day makes Morris wonder ‘why passages of joy and humour between diverse strangers can’t also be creative of “history”’. Roy and HG remind Morris of Tina Turner on TV and, in turn, that initial moment when television ‘gently’ entered her life. For the first time since those nights in the lounge room at Great Uncle Billy’s, Morris concludes the essay wondering ‘what *he* saw’ (1998a, p. 119).

Anecdotes allow Morris to create a subtle analysis of the multiple temporalities and different histories people bring to their uses of culture. Morris argues that we need to hear the mundane stories behind people’s approaches to media, to counter the celebratory rhetoric that often inflects broad-scale histories of cultural change. Cultural studies provides a way to find these counter-histories, to make theoretical appraisals more inclusive and reflective of reality. Mixing personal, anecdotal and colloquial material, Morris brings us in contact with people, making us curious about their different experiences. Her ability to mobilize an affective connection between strangers, families, the present and the past is a key part of her interventionist style.

‘Exemplification activates detail’, Massumi writes, ‘The success of the example hinges on the details. Every little one matters . . . Each detail is like

another example embedded in it' (Massumi 2002, p. 18). In the Uncle Billy essay, each successive anecdote unveils another instance of how the world is working. When a 'cognitive map' (Jameson 1991) for orientation is increasingly elusive, each simulated recollection contributes to a greater project in sense making. The essay brings to mind Benjamin's sense of allegory, identified by Buck-Morss 'as the activity of the ponderer, whose reflective attitude is one of recollection':

The memory of the ponderer holds sway over the disordered mass of dead knowledge. Human knowledge is piecework to it in a particularly pregnant sense: namely as the heaping up of arbitrarily cut up pieces, out of which one puts together a puzzle . . . The allegorist reaches now here, now there, into the chaotic depths that his knowledge places at his disposal, grabs an item out, holds it next to another, and sees whether they fit.

(Buck-Morss 1989, p. 241)

In the contemporary intellectual climate, however, this appealing project is more difficult to manifest. There is simply no time for pondering in an academic job; sound bite demands and e-mail overload thwart the possibility of a reflective attitude. Morris takes seriously the difficulty and responsibility of producing cultural theory under these conditions. In this vein, and against Massumi's (2002, p. 18) encouragement of 'inattention as a writing tool', Morris's anecdotes are concerted responses to the difficulty of creating a speaking position in today's intellectual environment. Inattention might be a fruitful option when wedded to a book contract, but Morris's work remains mindful of the many ways others are still struggling for a space from which to speak.

It is this mindfulness that contrasts more celebratory models of cultural studies politics evident in the 'boom' period of the 1980s and 1990s (Morris 1992a). Here I want to clarify Morris's mode of speaking and studying the mundane as an alternative to the way theories of everyday life land *in* cultural studies of this period rather than emanating *from* the culture being studied. As Morris's 'Banality in cultural studies' (1988/1996) shows, incorporating a few terms from a writer's broader concerns enacts a further metonymical shift when what is assumed of the theory is then used to make arguments about whole societies. Employed in the service of long-term projects, I will venture that Morris's own theoretical forays survive the publishing boom due to their recognition of the shortcomings of any number of selective discourses when positioned in a mundane context. Taking the fate of de Certeau's work as an example, I then want to highlight the still pressing problem of reification in cultural theory: the way that 'commonsense' interpretations of major concepts come to substitute for an entire *oeuvre*. To me this remains a fundamental issue in the international dissemination of theory, not the least because of the exorbitant market for 'readers' in themed areas and 'introductions' to key thinkers.

These trends in marketing and dissemination require strategic methods of response to counter the now evident trend towards commodification even in intellectual work.

## Postmodern problems

In her widely cited essay 'Banality in cultural studies', Morris critiques postmodern theory and cultural studies' absorption of its political tenets for silencing other versions of political performance which might threaten the hegemony of postmodern diagnoses. Neither project 'leaves much place for an unequivocally pained, unambivalently discontented, or *aggressive* theorizing subject' Morris writes:

It isn't just negligence. There is an active process going on in both of discrediting – by direct dismissal (Baudrillard), or covert inscription as Other (cultural studies) – the voices of grumpy feminists and cranky leftists ('Frankfurt School' can do duty for both). To discredit such voices is, as I understand it, one of the immediate political functions of the current boom in cultural studies (as distinct from the intentionality of projects invested by it). To discredit a voice is something very different from displacing an analysis which has become outdated, or revising a strategy which no longer serves its purpose.

(1988/1996, p. 160)

Morris's affective address brings an urgency to her complaint. She intervenes to pinpoint a moment when feminism, as one instance of an alternative politics, gets written out of the picture. The trouble postmodernism poses for Morris is that it can exist as an intellectual debate without reference to feminism, a political intrusion that might question its assumptions. The sheer ease with which such a radical and important historical movement can be forgotten reveals the manner in which intellectual histories are constantly subject to contestation.<sup>5</sup> For Morris, feminism in 1980s cultural studies is not an unfortunate casualty of history so much as a threat written out of a jealously guarded academic conversation. The political practices postmodern theories do recognize and celebrate – 'resistance' and 'subversion' in the face of a monolithic, globalized system of capital – are therefore argued to have gained inflated precedence in cultural studies. As such, the discourse gaining legitimacy with cultural studies' publishing success contributes to the process of disregarding feminist approaches. Taking the work of Chambers and Fiske as representative, Morris questions the way that these writers reinscribe the distinction between 'participant' and 'observer' that feminist cultural studies previously helped dissolve. In Chambers' and Fiske's models, she argues, the writers immerse

themselves within a culture in the spirit of ethnography, and apply cultural studies theories (often formulated in a foreign context) to make sense of the practices they observe. However, Morris detects a sense of mastery attending the use of maxims like ‘pleasure through resistance’, the political ambivalence of youth and the subversive consumption practices of urban subcultures. What is problematic is the way the critic here ends up the conduit for some pure and relatable intention of the subjects being studied – in Chambers’ case, metropolitan youth; in Fiske’s, the wider public of whatever country he happens to be in during his ‘intercontinental wanderings’ – as if the writer is somehow able to distance himself from the culture he is describing.<sup>6</sup>

The critical significance of Morris’s allegorical mode here becomes evident. In her words, allegory is a ‘convenient way’ to ‘frame a critique of a narrowly *metonymic* argument quite prevalent in cultural studies today, whereby a singular form in the built environment (“*the*” tower) is taken, by a process of inflation and conflation, to be emblematic not only of a general condition of culture . . . but also of a historic intellectual “place” of enunciation’ (1992b, p. 3). It is the self-consciousness lacking in these studies of space that is objectionable: the subject of analysis, coupled with the form of address that authorizes its epistemological value, cannot recognize the selectivity at the heart of each project. Both naturalize a detached and exclusionary means of speaking and studying culture while claiming to relate others’ practices as subversive. This playfulness, which changes nothing in either the academic or ‘everyday’ culture being studied, is for Morris inadequate ‘to the problems of committed intellectual practice in the places that I, at least, inhabit’ (1992b, p. 3).

For Morris, the ‘consumption-as-resistance’ line of thought is a poor substitute for the intellectual richness of immersing oneself within a study. This is the significant difference cultural studies brings to the academy, the realization that acknowledging one’s own partiality and attraction to the culture being studied can bring new insights to cultural thought (see CCCS 1978, McRobbie 1980, Frow & Morris 1993). However, ‘the choice of the term “ethnography”’ in Chambers’ and Fiske’s models ‘emphasizes a possible “ethnic” gap between the cultural student and the culture studied’ – suggesting the observer is somehow not implicated in the same processes as the study’s participants. ‘The “understanding” and “encouraging” [writing] subject may share some aspects of that culture,’ argues Morris, ‘but *in the process of interrogation and analysis* is momentarily located outside it’ (1988/1996, p. 157). Such a perspective brings paternalism to cultural studies’ assumptions. It reinforces a hierarchy of the academic-as-expert, and the punk youth, the beach goer or the housewife as the subject in need of explanation. The adamant distancing Chambers and Fiske bring to the task of relating others’ everyday pleasure serves to discount the value of feminist studies, which demonstrably benefit from situating one’s ‘self’ squarely within the analysis (Probyn 1993, 2004; see also Steedman 1986, 1997).

## The fate of de Certeau

Yet the tendencies manifest in Chambers' and Fiske's work are only symptomatic of a broader problem Morris identifies in cultural studies of the same period, which is the way European theory is used to denote 'signs of theoretical-ness' and 'signs of audience' rather than contributing to the epistemological usefulness of a study (see Morris 1992a, p. 477).<sup>7</sup> The concepts of 'resistance' and 'subversion' significantly impacted cultural theory as de Certeau's work became available during the 1980s. They offered radical critics the means to read ordinary citizens' use of public space as filled with implicit political potential against the rigid grid of experience imposed by dominant discourses. De Certeau emphasized the many coping strategies, the empowering art of timing behind people's efforts at practicing place. However, by the end of the 1980s, certain sentences from *The Practice of Everyday Life* were increasingly invoked towards uncritical, politically ambivalent ends, shorn of the sensitivity and breadth of cultural examples evident in his own writing.

Morris is not alone in her suspicion of a cultural studies politics heavily dependent on European theory. Bennett also sees 'the limitations of rummaging through the past for aspects of carnival whose mutated echoes can be made to be heard in the present' (cited in Barcan 1995, p. 83). More recently, Barcan claims that 'if the detection of subversive moments became a frequent analytical endpoint, especially in analyses of "the popular", it also eventually begged the question of the ends or purposes of such subversions, and indeed of cultural analysis itself' (1995, p. 83). De Certeau's broader methodology was disregarded by those willing to sustain a burgeoning publishing market for cultural studies.<sup>8</sup> One element of his project became overly inflated, so that the idea of 'consumption as resistance' became a principal signifier for the field of cultural studies itself.

This is a pivotal moment in which the definition of politics becomes dangerously tied to the symbolic power of one concept. 'The everyday' is seen as *the* definition of the political, which not only barbarizes de Certeau – not to mention Lefebvre – but it also closes down cultural studies' potential to include so much more than this. Furthermore, and this is where Massumi's latest work is instructive, 'Where has the potential for change gone? How does a body perform its way out of a definitional framework that is not only responsible for its very "construction", but seems to prescript every possible signifying and countersignifying move as a selection from a repertoire of possible permutations on a limited set of predetermined terms? How can the grid itself change?' (Massumi 2002, p. 3). Contentment with 'the everyday' as the necessarily subversive limits the possibility of more radical demands from cultural theory. Thinking back to Morris's use of anecdotes to orient a project futuristically, projects that relate theory *to* culture do little to intervene in its reproduction. This particular use of de Certeau's 'praxis as enunciation' appears to be 'a sign of ethical consent to the political *status quo*' (Morris 1992a, p. 466).

In the repetitive studies of the boom period, cultural sites and subversive practices are invoked without the broader intention of seeking to change culture for the better:<sup>9</sup>

To me there's something unpleasant about the picture of safe, happy, beaming academics spotting signs of subversiveness here and there, and patting 'the people' on the head. *Myths of Oz*, by Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner is a local book that seems to me to partake of this kind of normalizing paternalism, in part because the direct transportation of the critique of 'high culture' from Britain (where it matters a lot) to Australia (where I don't think high culture matters much at all) skews the rhetoric of the text towards a defence of, indeed an apologia for, the kind of mainstream white male culture . . . I've always experienced as massively dominant, and sometimes oppressive.

(Morris 1990, p. 475)

The assuredness of the male academic speaking position assumed in the work of Chambers, Fiske, Turner and others of the period is troubling because it can't adequately recognize its own complicity with the hegemonic culture under investigation. While their sites for analysis may reflect local experience (such as the pub, the beach or the home in *Myths of Oz*), what is equally important to analyse are unacknowledged factors such as the gendered and racialized relations these same locations yield. It is the extent to which the experiences of women differ in these sites, precisely the factors leading to women's exclusion or exceptional treatment, that warrants interrogation for Morris. Her argument asks whether an elegy for these sites constitutes the most necessary task for cultural studies at this point in history. A project centred on those places most implicated in perpetuating the male dominance of so many leisure practices serves to silence feminist insights (a criticism that, unfortunately, Graeme Turner's response to Morris still does not appreciate, when he reads her critique as anti-populist).<sup>10</sup> The popularity of leisure practices does not make them, or discussions of them, egalitarian. Morris's interventions make considerations of audience a matter of due process when speaking and studying everyday life, so that in multicultural and post-colonial societies like Australia, cultural studies avoids the trap of speaking on others' behalf (see Morris 1990, p. 479).

As an alternative to the way everyday life is appraised in these (admittedly select) examples, Morris's example of speaking and studying the mundane deploys a colloquial voice that tries to respect the reader by not talking down or censoring ideas that might be too hard. Following Foucault, she offers a 'specific' intellectual function for the varied demands of intellectual work in Australia (Foucault 1980; see also Hall 1992, p. 291).<sup>11</sup> For Morris, it's 'no good talking about the local, the specific, the different and the heterogeneous if we do not know how to address constituencies other than or merely beyond our own

professional and academic milieu' (Morris 2000, p. 229). 'It is when we presume to speak publicly *as* critics and theorists of other people's fears and anxieties', that, in her view, 'we need to be able to find the words and the levels that work' (2000, p. 229). It should be clear that I am in favour of 'the mundane' as an exceptionally productive level from which our studies might arise. It is a grounding mechanism, a gesture of honest and humble beginnings, from which our speech might depart and, necessarily, land. As an example of such a strategy, and against the sense of mastery or abstraction hindering other models of studying everyday life, Morris situates herself squarely within the site for analysis. In each case, she begins with what she calls 'a pressing, wordless feeling that I must work to render sociable – by writing out of it a cultural history that may *serve* a political struggle' (1992c, p. 79). Rather than acceding to the fashions of intellectual disciplines, Morris's work always starts as 'a way of answering questions that arise for me insistently in the course of my everyday life' (1992c, p. 78). This, to my mind, is the key strength of studying the mundane: it is focused on the new experiences emanating *from* the everyday, rather than imposing upon it a second-order, and often foreign, hermeneutic.

## New heights

As an example of Morris's practice, and against the ways de Certeau is deployed in other cultural studies models to gain popularity, 'Great moments in social climbing: King Kong and the human fly' is a key interventionist text in the quest to overturn discourses governing everyday experience. In the essay – one of a number that investigate the spatial economy of notable sites in the Australian mundane (Morris 1988b, 1993b) – Morris reveals the gendered assumptions of a particular tourism economy that, like the cultural theory that attends it, discounts 'this-ness' in favour of overarching master narratives of consumption/resistance. Morris seeks new paradigms to recognize the agency and critical reflection in people whose actions are otherwise considered subject to proscriptive spatial formulations. Her means of countering the inadequacies of postmodern theory is 'to study instead the everyday, the so-called banal, the supposedly un- or non-experimental' (1988b, p. 202) – what I am calling 'the mundane'. Morris asks how dominant theories 'fall short of women's modernity' (1988b, p. 202), and in doing so writes from a place where the lives studied are often untouched by the privileges theoretical distinctions, like postmodernism, harbour.

Acknowledging the importance of de Certeau's work in expanding cultural theory's reckoning with popular uses of space, the essay reads Chris Hilton's unprecedented scaling of Sydney's Centrepoint Tower to draw out a more complex consideration of de Certeau's theories than celebrants afford. Morris approaches the aura of a tell-all theory with great scepticism, attuned to the

derivation that begins once a theory leaves its singular enunciative context. If de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* offers evidence of the political agency denied by other postmodern theories, his influential 'Walking in the city' chapter still relies on a hierarchical view (a God-like eye) to read New York as an open narrative full of tactical uses of space. 'In fact', Morris writes in this essay,

de Certeau's visit to the World Trade Center is a way of mapping all over again the 'grid' of binary oppositions within which so much of the debate about structuralism was conducted . . . 'The tower' here serves as an allegory of the structural necessity for a politics of resistance based on a bipolar model of power to maintain the imaginary position of mastery it must then endlessly disclaim.

(Morris 1992c, p. 13)

In one sense, de Certeau redresses our critical outlook from the oppressive model of contemporary power in American (Jameson) and French (Baudrillard) postmodern theory to one in which spaces and openings for unrest and conditional adaptation are possible. Still, 'blockages' in the theory appear (Foucault & Deleuze 1977): as my previous section describes, the very means by which resistant practices can be observed through de Certeau's model relies on a certain mastery or separation which necessarily takes the observer outside (above and beyond) the culture being studied. Nonetheless, Morris seems to take to heart Daryl Slack's motto, whereby '[s]uccessful theorizing is not measured by exact theoretical fit but by the ability to work with our always inadequate theories to help us move understanding "a little further on down the road"' (Daryl Slack 1996, p. 113). Using strains from Certeau's work underutilized by others, in combination with what is observable in popular culture, Morris takes productive 'tools' from the theory to create an even more intricate model of political participation (Foucault & Deleuze 1977).

The Australian ABC documentary *A Spire* is the source material used for Morris' analysis.<sup>12</sup> The programme captures a day in the life of ordinary bloke Hilton who decides to climb the tallest tower in Sydney's CBD. In her reading, Morris claims the act unhinges so many problematic assumptions in the theories of space and politics dominating cultural studies: the still detectable distinctions between elite and popular practices, the (masculine) voyage and the (feminine) home, notions of public opposed to private space, and simplistic formulations of the difference between radical and reformist politics. Against these tendencies, Hilton's climb is shown to enact an exemplary performance for feminist cultural studies to hold dear; a valuable 'case' and model for future use.<sup>13</sup> As part of a decade-long investigation into property development's gendered interests (collected in *Too Soon Too Late*), the piece begins by describing Centrepont Tower as a site almost insurmountably oriented towards consumption. The manoeuvrings of real estate speculation, the capitalist motives behind the

shopping arcade development, the exploitative mindset of the tourism industry are all revealed as the historical conditions now limiting people's prospects for movement and experience within this building. But rather than producing an orthodox Left critique, painting the patriarchal and money-hungry investors as backing the building for the benefit of their own hip-pockets, Morris depicts Hilton's climb as a literal uprising that deconstructs traditional ways of figuring space through performance in cultural theory. 'What happens in *A Spire* is more like a polemical expansion of the public space of the street to include the top of the Tower, and an extension of the temporality of "home" to incorporate the voyage', writes Morris. So already two fundamental components of feminist cultural theory are inaugurated in Hilton's act: dismantling the public and private distinction and, with it, the separation between home and voyage in matters of politics. In terms of movement, he 'follows a "smooth" trajectory' through space:

into a bus, up the Tower, down the stairs, into a taxi – that, far from defining a *break* from the setting everyday life, extends the hours of labor inventing and testing homemade tools, talking with friends, practicing in the backyards, the cliffs, and the car-parks available around the city. The logical consequence is that since the concept of 'home' now subsumes 'adventure' (dynamism, change, thus time as well as space), it is no longer interiority and closure alone, but also exteriority and surface . . . 'Home' in this sense does not mean a state of 'domesticity,' nor does it signify 'ownership.' It is a version of the active principle that de Certeau calls 'practicing place'.

(Morris 1992b, p. 48)

While the act of climbing the Tower is on its own (on the face of it) an act of transgression against notions of private property, Morris sees in the very conceptualization of the act evidence of a more fluid popular understanding of space than current discursive descriptions allow or suggest. Pointing out the number of traditional distinctions to be made (the private backyard, the public terrain of the cliff face, the shared space of the bus, but the not-quite private safety of the taxi on escape, and, fascinatingly, the open stairwell where Hilton expected to be arrested after executing the climb, but was not), Morris shows how this amazing physical feat rearranges accepted notions of what and where concepts central to radical politics apply. Hilton confuses our sense of where a protest should take place, indeed what constitutes protest: what aims and objectives should be served, and who should be at the receiving end of our demands. Morris sees the performance as sympathetic with feminist objectives, for the way that all of these concepts crucial for male-dominated political diagnoses are irrevocably messed up.

The essay conveys how Hilton's act is a political intervention directed towards those it speaks for: the people rendered silent by the discourses that decide politics and govern our experience of space. This kind of performance has

more significance for Morris than complaints that serve only to reinscribe the phallic power of the site attacked:

Chris Hilton made a spectacle of himself, and then helped make a film about it. He produced a social analysis with an act of exhibitionism and then exhibited his analysis in public. In practicing this mode of (very athletic) effeteness, he brought down the Tower not by renouncing the heights, but by reaching them instead. In this way, he invented a form of vernacular criticism which does *not* miss the point about the kind of wealth and power invested in urban towers – but rather, makes a spectacle about that very point.

(Morris 1992b, p. 51)

Morris conveys here the spirit of de Certeau's project, the 'vernacular criticism' he tried to trace following the footsteps of 'the ordinary man' (de Certeau 1984). Thinking through the significance of Hilton's achievement, Morris reads the climb as truly 'popular' in the sense Certeau adduced: 'a way of doing things characterized by an art of *timing*, rather than by a topological relation to some other "zone" (whether "high", or "elite", or "mass") of cultural space' (1992b, p. 2). But Morris's use of popular evidence in the more colloquial sense, as the actions *of the people*, avoids the trap of importing whole models of cultural theory to foreign contexts. It is in the analysis of a singular 'event' that she sees cultural studies as most effective, those moments that freeze 'diverse temporal and social trajectories' just long enough for us to see something new is happening (Frow & Morris 1993, p. xv).

## Conclusion

In this, and other investigations of the Australian mundane, Morris's ambivalence to the orthodoxy of cultural studies practice fuels a determination to expand the scope of, and participation in, the field itself. Her approach considers people's actions and involvement in events as significant historical exercises in themselves, a democratic political vision with the openness to recognize how people act in dissonance with theoretical models. By beginning with a context that warrants its own attention, Morris's initial parochialism strives outward from the mundane to find connections with other sites and experiences elsewhere. It is a step that identifies the limitations of its partiality from the outset, nonetheless hopeful that a new condition might be significant enough to risk being shared.

When competing emphases for political engagement dictate the terms on which intellectual debates take place, this project of studying the mundane can at times seem irrelevant and far from glamorous. However, if our goals as cultural critics resemble 'whole-field modulation' and "radical" intervention',

as Massumi baits, this more humble and protracted critical task is, I think, necessary. Reflecting on her work, Morris writes that it is

always open to the unanswerable charge of doing nothing to stop the Antarctic melting or to mend the hole in the ozone layer. True. I none the less feel that I am more usefully employed in using as much imagination as I possibly can to change the cultural climate in which ideas for doing so are formulated and in which they circulate than I would be in elaborating 'whole new' futures with – at least in my case – rather dubious practical value.

(Morris 1993a, p. 34)

In our current context, as plans unveil for the destiny of a 'whole new' Iraq for instance, the kind of modest and prolonged political project Morris engages seems preferable to the dangers of imposing our own common-sense cultural ideologies. While there may be 'a certain commodity boredom' amongst cultural critics 'with the slow, incremental temporality endured by any struggle with serious designs on the future' (1993a, p. 34), I think we need to recognize that this is the terrain of cultural studies' *becoming* (Massumi 2002). As Morris writes:

Cultural critics work primarily as mediators – we are writers, readers, image producers, teachers – in a socially as well as theoretically obscure zone of values, opinion, belief, ideology and emotion. This is slow work, and whatever political effectivity we might claim for it can only be registered, most of the time, by gradual shifts in what people take to be thinkable and doable, desirable and liveable, acceptable and unbearable, in their particular historical circumstances. In more peaceful or settled times, this can be cast by its enthusiasts as an intrinsically splendid endeavor. In fearful or turbulent times, it is easily denounced as trivial.

(1992c, p. 79)

It is at the level of the mundane that political interests ultimately land. Situating the mundane as the site for analysis forces us to grapple with the concrete ways political discourses shape experience. The particular focus Morris initiates for cultural studies – the gendered and consumerist interests of political and economic imperatives – remain key places in need of cultural studies' attention, given that these discourses patently influence people's experience of space, their land, and especially now, their country. A cultural studies that invokes 'the everyday' without intervening in its reproduction is not enough: seen in the Foucauldian perspective Morris adopts, it puts limits on 'the undefined work of freedom' (Foucault 1984, p. 46). Cultural studies should take confidence in its own objects and methods of enquiry to work through the times of fear and turbulence that surround us. Following Morris, it has mechanisms to recognize the subtle and determined ways people forge responses to social change.

Noticing these, and relating them, we might broaden the reach of our mundane work, continuing to spark a 'desire for other people's stories'.

## Notes

- 1 This is why Morris finds the philosophy of Michèle Le Doeuff such an exception in the context of feminist practices available in the 1980s: 'Le Doeuff's practice as a woman writing philosophy is one which precludes the ventriloquy of the dutiful daughter, since it demands a different articulation of philosophy's relations to women (thus, a different philosophy)' (Morris 1988a, p. 76).
- 2 As a freelance writer, Morris's fluency in a number of disciplinary knowledges and writing styles during the 1980s and 1990s is important to recognize in contrast to other cultural studies figures in Australia, the USA, the UK and Canada at the time, whose training typically fell in the disciplinary fields of English literature, history, sociology or communications.
- 3 Reading Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*, for instance, Buck-Morss describes his allegorical style as 'imposed upon the subject as a cognitive imperative, rather than the artist's choosing it arbitrarily as an aesthetic device'. The subjectivity modernism encourages impels Benjamin to allegory, in this formulation, making 'visibly palpable the experience of a world in fragments' (1989, p. 18).
- 4 Australia has a number of distinct football codes. Rugby League (played predominantly in Queensland and New South Wales) differs from Rugby Union, although both privilege passing the ball by throwing to team mates who surge forward in lines to score a 'try' (a touchdown). Both of these codes differ again from 'Australian Rules' (played in other states), which uses the same-shaped oval ball but is premised on running with, bouncing and kicking the ball, eventually through goal posts. All of these are separate again from 'soccer', which is the term for European football. That my editors did not know these distinctions is exciting and encouraging for my argument that an outreaching, rather than inward-looking parochialism might breed curiosity amongst intellectuals and the cultures from which they speak.
- 5 Elsewhere I argue that progressivist histories of cultural studies contribute to a similar forgetfulness of the radical potential the field offers (Gregg 2004).
- 6 The term 'international wanderings' is Fiske's own, from the preface to *Reading the Popular*, where he writes: 'One of the advantages of being an academic is that theories travel well, with only a touch of jet lag . . . These essays . . . are a bricolage of frozen moments in my thinking about popular culture, a series of snapshots taken by an academic on his intercontinental wanderings in the 1980s' (1989, p. ix). It is precisely this mode of address, which flaunts the privilege and value of detached reflection on local specificities, that Morris's project seeks to unhinge.
- 7 Seigworth and Macgregor Wise (2000) call this 'window dressing', when cultural studies deploys philosophy in an attempt to add theoretical weight to

- an argument – see their introduction to the *Cultural Studies* special issue on Deleuze and Guattari. To my mind, such practices often seem to stem from an inadequate knowledge of, or confidence in, cultural studies' own unique objects and modes of enquiry, which is an absence this paper tries to fill.
- 8 The sales figures for subculture studies led some commentators to suggest cultural studies could attribute its 'international dissemination – if not the whole of its existence – to a successful publishing strategy' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, in Striphas 2002, p. 440).
  - 9 The repetitiveness captured in Morris's biting speculation: 'I get the feeling that somewhere in some English publisher's vault there is a master-disk from which thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption are being run off under different names with minor variations' (1988/1996, p. 156).
  - 10 Turner misses the broader point, that the white male academic voice is rarely modified in any way other than in an effort to sell more books. Morris further clarifies her argument, in response to his response: 'whatever the determinants of the book's wider reception, my own criticism of *Myths of Oz* are, rightly or wrongly, *feminist* criticism. They are not attacks on its popular status, or its playful approach, *per se*. It is true that more "serious" versions of the method of analysis used by *Myths of Oz* are available in academic Cultural Studies. I don't agree with those, either'. So one general issue I want to raise is whether it is always useful to assume that criticism of a 'popular' work necessarily involves an assertion of 'academic' territorial imperatives (Morris 1991, p. 33).
  - 11 For an extensive discussion of the way the specific intellectual differs from Gramsci's model of the organic intellectual, see Lewis (2000). I would like to acknowledge the importance of Lewis's work in stimulating my own thinking about Morris.
  - 12 The choice of film review is symptomatic of Morris' broader belief in the need for cultural critics to make use of the skills and disciplines in which they are trained. As a writer competent in a number of applications – film critic, translator, publisher, editor, freelance writer and teacher – Morris is especially aware of the ways different genres can be employed to better or worse effect.
  - 13 In her opening chapter to *Too Soon, Too Late*, Morris articulates the relationship she sees between cultural studies and history in this way: 'My preference is to turn to history for a context prolonging the life of the ephemeral item or "case": saturating with detail an articulated place and point in time, a critical reading can extract from its objects a parable of practice that converts them into *models* with a past and a potential for reuse, thus aspiring to invest them with a future' (1998b, p. 3).

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