

Lingnan University

The Public Lecture of
Vincent Woo Distinguished Visiting Scholars Programme 2023

by
Professor Meaghan Morris

on
“Heroes: Credibility, Community and Social Aesthetics”

Friday 13 October 2023
3:00 – 5:00 pm

at FHKa Seminar Hall, 2/F, Xiqu Centre
West Kowloon Cultural District
(Presentation in English)

Abstract

In a South China Morning Post cartoon from June 2003, a bureaucrat promotes a new tourism strategy: take a “Breath Taking Adventure Holiday” in “The SARS Triangle: Macau, The Ultimate Gamble; Guangdong, Dangerous Cuisine; Hong Kong, Extreme Shopping”. In bad taste, the cartoon identified a draining aspect of life in that outbreak: the sense of being bombarded by media disaster clichés that were scripting real events. Twenty years later, as SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) faded to a chronic risk, extreme natural disasters (fire, flood, earthquake) ravaged the world with a similarly uncanny sense of familiarity (*déjà vu*) mixed with foreboding about worse realities of climate change to come.

How do we understand the role of aesthetics today in relation to crisis situations? For example, it is common for local service workers to be heralded as the “ordinary heroes” in whom the people have trust, even in age of incredulity: the firemen, nurses and doctors, care providers, rescue crews, cleaners, and volunteers who step in if government resources fail. In this way they inherit the role that the Marxist aesthetician Gyorgy Lukacs once accorded to the “average” heroes of the historical novel, connecting popular strivings to the collective dramas of the age. Yet it is also common in many countries for these workers to be poorly paid and in precarious living situations; the romance of their heroism quickly fades. Action cinema (in particular, the disaster movie) has generated stories from this contradiction since the 1970s, but what is the impact of such recognition in a stream of media posts and memes? In this lecture I discuss Ben Highmore’s concept of “social aesthetics” as involving the study of feeling to ask what it can teach us about living through climate change with media *déjà vu*.

Professor Meaghan Morris

Meaghan Morris is Professor of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney, and former Chair Professor of Cultural Studies in Lingnan University, Hong Kong (2000-2013). Her books include *The Pirate's Fiancée: feminism reading postmodernism* (1988), *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture* (1998) and *Identity Anecdotes: Translation and Media Culture* (2006), and she has co-edited *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (2005), *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005) and *The Year's Work in Showgirls Studies* (2024). The founding Chair of both the Association for Cultural Studies (2004-08) and the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society (2012-15). A Fellow of both the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Hong Kong Academy of the Humanities, Meaghan received The Inaugural Stuart Hall Award for Lifetime Achievement in Cultural Studies in 2016.