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## Pretentious? Moi?

Does anyone – apart from fashion designers – talk about their work as inanely as actors?



**Hadley Freeman**

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Sienna Miller . . . 'I just try to put myself emotionally in a very dark place'. Photograph: Ray Tamarra/Getty Images

Last weekend, with my brow raised high, I attended the New Yorker festival which was full of people talking, very earnestly, very cerebrally. In other words, it was like stepping right into the magazine, *Purple Rose of Cairo*-style. Perhaps because I got so carried away on this cloud of cerebralism, I did something I vowed never to do: I went to a talk by some actors.

I have always been interested in what I call actor-speak – and when I say "interested", I mean "intrigued in the way you might be by a man talking to himself, without having any desire to go over and engage him in conversation". However, while I continue to march past muttering men on park benches, I am, thanks to my job, an unwitting expert on actor-speak, having spent many hours of my life listening to actors bang on about their "love of the craft" and "the thing about [insert name of director] – he takes you on an emotional journey".

Some may call this argument prejudicial, but those who do have never spent a morning with Helen Hunt, listening to her expound on her skills. This has nothing to do with lack of respect for actors; just a lack of respect for the language they learn – perhaps at acting school – to describe what they do.

The New Yorker event sounded promising: its panel of pleasing scene-stealers included John Turturro and Joan Cusack. But when – just 10 minutes in – panel member and actor Richard Kind (you'll know him, look him up), said actors do theatre "to nourish themselves", I knew I'd made a grave tactical error. The verb "nourish" should only be used in a culinary context, and even then with restraint.

And, lo, they kept a-coming: there was "our craft" and "the journey one goes on". To finish, actor Christine Baranski announced that "acting is like creating life". Considering this comment came straight after the clip showing her in the sitcom *Cybill*, that seemed a pretty awesome claim. Shrieking onset at *Cybill* Shepherd v being God – I guess it's six of one, half-dozen of the other.

Does anyone else on the planet talk about their jobs like this? Well, having spent eight years reporting on fashion, I can assure you they most certainly do. Designer Miuccia Prada, for example, said that her collection for Miu Miu next season was about "questioning innocence". This should be translated to the layman as: "I decided to do cat prints."

There is a very clear correlation between the comfort of a person's job and the levels of pretension with which they describe it. And while authors, in my experience, are less prone to this kind of verbal garbage, when they do slip, they slip faster than most, propelled by the motor of their own eloquence.

My favourite moment about the whole Julie Myerson debacle this year – when some suggested it was perhaps insensitive of the writer to announce her son was a drug addict to pad out her book – was when she insisted that "my writing comes from a place I don't have total control over". It may be difficult for less gifted folk to resist replying, "Yes, Julie, but the delete button on your keyboard is in a place you have complete control over."

But let us stick with actors, for whom this blight is most common. The day after I learned that being an actor was like being God, the God-like Sienna Miller was interviewed in the *New York Times* about her forthcoming Broadway role and, bless her, she seemed to have swallowed a dictionary of actor-speak on the flight from London: "I just try to put myself emotionally in a very dark place. After that, I trust a lot in the writing." In other words, she pretends to be the character and then she recites the script.

But what do I know? These people earn millions and I do not. So I've decided to go to a new place this week. My oeuvre has always helped me grow as a person, but it's time to take my craft to a new level. I've been on a journey inside, and put my trust in my laptop. I can only hope that readers experienced the emotional journey we took together.

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**If this is what swine flu means, bring it on!**

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Now we come to an occasional series entitled, How to Make Swine Flu Work for You. In a very solemn front-page story, the New York Times claimed all sorts of activities have been rendered too perilous by the porcine plague, under the sonorous headline "Flu Fears Crimp Life's Rituals".

For example, a man got out of jury service because the judge feared he might catch flu from his wife. Yoga teachers are no longer placing guiding hands on their pupils' inflexible bodies. Businesses are cancelling their annual parties. Hospitals are restricting visitors from the dirty outside world, and some churches have done away with collection baskets so as to minimise inter-congregational hand contact.

In short, swine flu means you can get out of jury duty, you shouldn't go to the gym, you no longer have to endure office parties, you shouldn't feel guilty about not visiting sick relatives, and you can't give money in church. How to cope without these glorious life rituals? Here, piggy piggy piggy.

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