

Stuart Cunningham. *In the Vernacular: A Generation of Australian Culture and Controversy*. St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 2008, 300pp.

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In this collection of essays Stuart Cunningham, a public intellectual who has been active from the early 1980s as a researcher, cultural critic and policy worker, provides valuable snapshots of central debates about Australian culture, its economy, its aesthetic value and the politics of its support. Cunningham's ability to recognise unproductive conflicts between different intellectual and political camps and to chart a viable course between them has helped him succeed, as Meaghan Morris points out in her foreword, in the careful work of institution-building realised in Queensland University of Technology's 'Creative Industries Precinct'. *In the Vernacular* demonstrates the intellectual groundwork both inside and outside academic cultural studies that underpins this institutional accomplishment.

In the first section on Australian cinema (essays first published in the mid to late-1980s) Cunningham seeks to do justice to the economic and creative accomplishments of the cinematic texts and contexts which reflect Australia's position as an 'import culture' shaped by the fading legacy of British colonialism and the ascendancy of US cultural influence. He accounts for Australian cinema's 'decades of survival' between 1930 and 1970 by reference to a body of feature films by entrepreneurial film-maker Charles Chauvel, and turns against cultural imperialism paradigms that either celebrate Chauvel in de-colonial terms as the father of a national cinema or dismiss him as the slavish imitator of developments originating in a metropolitan centre. Cunningham finds Latin American 'dependency theory' a more nuanced framework for a reappraisal of Chauvel as a historical actor whose work is ultimately irreducible to a role in a larger story about the coming of age of Australian national cinema. Chauvel's films are presented as distinctive for their combination of a 'high melodramatic' mode of story-telling, at odds with documentary and social realist modes of representing 'ordinary' people in British cinema, with a strong commitment to 'locationism', in contrast to the American 'Western' genres on which he modelled his narratives and action sequences. Comparing Chauvel's treatment of 'South Seas' themes and locations with that of his contemporary, Frank Hurley, Cunningham sees Chauvel's *In the Wake of the Bounty* as a 'reflexive analysis of second order colonialism' while he dismisses Hurley's character-driven *Jungle Woman* as an aesthetically awkward 'spectacle documentary'. In the final essay on the relationship between 'Hollywood genres' and 'Australian movies', Cunningham develops a set of concerns about the fit (or lack thereof) between academic cultural theory and cultural industry policy. He considers the use of Hollywood genre conventions and actors in films like *Mad Max*, *Far East* and *The Man from Snowy River* in view of oppositions between 'Australian' and 'international' and between 'art' and 'commercial' cinemas, which directed government support towards projects that could demonstrate both 'art' and 'Australian' credentials. A close reading of *Star-Struck* through Richard Dyer's account of the Hollywood musical genre provides a persuasive and pleasurable performance of this critique, celebrating that film's reinvention both of the musical and of

the ‘ocker’ genre of Australian cinema preceding it.

Part Two is dedicated to Cunningham’s early work on Australian TV from the late 1980s to the early 1990s and clearly demonstrates the value of a ‘vernacular’ approach to television industries and texts. His analysis of the ‘historical mini-series’ of the 1980s mobilises textual, industrial and policy perspectives to understand these ‘jewels in the crown’ of Australian television largely lost to a present in which tax incentives, cultural nationalism and local financing regimes have declined. The extent of this decline is apparent when Cunningham points out that 50 mini-series were produced by the ABC and the commercial networks between 1980 and 1986 alone! Cunningham argues that the multi-perspectivalism of Kennedy-Miller productions in particular, which afforded shifting points of narrative authority and, in the case of the *Cowra Breakout*, incorporated extensive subtitled dialogue in Japanese, worked to promote an emergent national discourse of multiculturalism as well as exploiting historical events to speak to urgent political issues in the present (with sufficient power for the broadcast of *The Dismissal* to be delayed until after the 1983 Federal election). Arguing that the mini-series is characterised by an ‘epic’ length and structure, Cunningham develops qualitative criteria for discriminating between sets of these texts, divided between themes of ‘war’, ‘politics’ and ‘music’, according to whether their use of the format and approach to historical reconstruction is ‘innovative’ or ‘conservative’.

Cunningham’s study of Kennedy-Miller ‘house style’ in Australian television continues a focus on the historical mini-series while also exploring the creative traffic between large and small screen productions, which this Australian company has encouraged. His aim is to document how mainstream entertainment industries generated contexts of creativity that reflected and actively constructed Australian culture’s ‘negotiated difference’ from that of the US in particular. Salient aspects of Kennedy-Miller’s industrial practice included a stable relationship with a major commercial network and a collaborative rather than hierarchical production culture with flexible roles; the development of unique theatrical workshops for actors; and an ease of personnel movement between film and television productions. Its ‘signature style’ included a focus on character development; a preference for original scripts over literary adaptations; and emphasis on ‘masculine’ themes in which ‘universal’ narrative tropes were contained in a national frame. Demonstrating how these distinctive aspects positioned the company well for successful international cinema collaborations with Warner, Cunningham persuasively deploys his production house case study against reductive arguments about US cultural imperialism. This strand of intervention is continued in his chapter with Liz Jacka which considers Australian television in the context of world networks, exploring factors that have brought success in Europe to long-form series dramas like *Neighbours*, *Home and Away* and *The Flying Doctors* as well as rapid failure to an extensively pre-sold teen-soap such as *Paradise Beach*.

Part Three presents Cunningham’s more recent research on diasporic media production. He gives an incisive overview of theories of the public sphere that have influenced cultural and media studies before elaborating the concept of ‘ethno-specific media sphericals’ which enables notions of ‘hybridity’ and ‘the progressive text’ to be

reassessed. Cunningham's research on Vietnamese music videos with Tina Nguyen reveals different types of texts, rhetorical address and audiences within a small recording and production industry based in California. They argue that these texts and their social contexts have a unique and sometime precarious relationship to cultural and media production in Vietnam and, as such, need to be differentiated from diasporic media produced by large industries in China and India. Vietnamese music videos stage 'tensions' within their audience between homeland and host countries, older and younger generations and migrants of different economic status and the authors conclude that these tensions require better understanding within multi-ethnic societies.

In Part Four Cunningham revisits the policy debates of the early 1990s which raged partly around the provocation he offered in *Framing Culture: Criticism and Policy in Australia* (1992). As someone who encountered cultural studies 'policy debates' as an undergraduate student, I find Cunningham's introductory reflections on the academic, industrial and political contexts that nurtured them extremely valuable. He describes his aim in *Framing Culture* as contributing to the opening of more productive engagements between academic cultural studies projects which are traditionally suspicious of corporate and state power on one hand and policy discourses and practices on the other. While this is an important project, I am unconvinced by the distinction he draws between a loose alliance of scholars working from neo-Marxist, structuralist and post-modernist theoretical frameworks and the policy oriented scholars with whom he identifies as defenders of the 'central Enlightenment values of liberty, equality and solidarity'. In particular, I read the un-remarked slip from the patriarchal term 'fraternity' to the neutral term of 'solidarity' as disingenuous. The constitutive exclusions of the Enlightenment public sphere have been explored by scholars across a range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences with feminist research identifying a 'sexual contract', critical race theorists considering its racial counterpart and queer theorists developing epistemological analyses of 'homosociality'. I'd contend that the scope of scholarship generated by these (among other critical approaches), in conjunction with more recent explorations of productive intersections between them, are irreducible to 'isms' spawned by an outdated and neo-Marxist-inflected identity-politics. Yet Cunningham's preemptive dismissal of important tributaries to cultural studies' broader social justice projects enables him to stake his claim to the 'inter-discipline's' future in bold terms as he claims, 'Replacing shopworn revolutionary rhetoric with the new command metaphor of citizenship commits cultural studies to a reformist strategy within the terms of a social democratic politics and this can connect it to the well-springs of engagement with policy'. In spite of this polemical example, Cunningham's use of hyperbole is generally sparing and the chapters in this section build a convincing case for academic cultural studies' further engagement with policy and industry stakeholders.

A discussion of content regulation of advertising in Australian television provides a strong example of the insights that cultural policy perspectives have generated. Cunningham provides a lucid explanation of why cultural studies' synchronic methods such as semiotic analysis and diachronic critiques fail to capture the importance of Australian content rules in advertising, not just for the film industry but also for the creation of national culture. In the early 1990s, when Australian screens displayed three

and a half hours of advertising a day compared to two hours of drama every week, this argument made irrefutable sense. He argues further that cultural studies' neglect of media concentration in 'old' and 'new' sectors comes at the cost of a necessary engagement with questions of 'cultural rights' within social democratic frameworks. At stake for Cunningham is not simply the intellectual coherence of cultural studies but also whether traditional oppositions between national/global and independent/commercial forms of culture are effectively 'de-skilling' our students. In this context, policy promises to build a bridge between cultural studies considered simultaneously as critique, vocation and democratic localism.

In Part Five, Cunningham elaborates his most recent vision for 'creative industries', discussing the salience of the concept in international contexts and considering current and future projects developed under its rubric. He rationalises the shift from policy to creative industries as a search for a 'third way' between 'political economy' and 'cultural economics'. If quality creative content is to be developed on which growing service sectors of our economy depend, the scope and significance of cultural industries needs promotion to harness the kind of public support for R&D which currently exists for science and technology sectors. Rather than hinging calls for support on tired arguments about the intrinsic value of national culture to citizens, Cunningham argues that:

The creative industries are simultaneously cultural industries delivering crucial representation, self-recognition and critique in a globalizing world. They are *service* industries delivering basic information and entertainment services in a converging services environment and *knowledge* industries requiring very significant levels of R&D to continue to innovate and to provide content and applications that "make the wires sing".

Cunningham's final chapter poses the question 'what price a creative economy?', presenting comparative research on the size of creative economic sectors as defined by policy makers in the UK, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and China, and considering how the value of creative work is defined in each. He shows how the Australian Arts Council's strategy of 'creative innovation' moves beyond traditional paradigms aligning arts and humanities with creativity as 'outputs' in a context where science and technology are implicitly associated with innovation and economic 'inputs'. And he argues that new economic models are urgently required if cultural researchers are to cease defending the value of creative work as an 'exceptional industry', and to keep pace with changes encapsulated in the participatory engagement of media users, a process he dubs 'prosumption' generated by 'producers'. Inevitably there is a catch: 'The price to be paid is that the special status attributed to the arts and culture is folded into the need for creativity across the economy and society'. Here Cunningham's passionate advocacy of creativity is powerfully reinforced by the picture he paints of economic and cultural stagnation should academic cultural and media studies fail to understand its value, and legislators decline to support the conditions to ensure its flourishing.

In conclusion, this collection reinforces Cunningham's importance as one of the most interesting and politically engaged cultural theorists working in Australia today. It is as

an advocate of creativity, broadly defined, that Cunningham sometimes seems to thunder against insular cultural debates whose participants are insufficiently attentive to the shifting economic, educational and technological grounds on which media, government and business institutions must establish their viability.

However, his project for renovating academic cultural studies is limited in two ways. First, his preemptive dismissal of critical cultural studies work that seriously questions the political, ethical and intellectual inheritance of the European Enlightenment seems to condemn as fractious or trivial the contribution that ideas and theoretical paradigms from fields such as queer theory or critical race and whiteness studies might make to cultural projects of social transformation. Second, Cunningham fails to articulate the creative vernacular vision he celebrates in relation to Indigenous Australian subjects, corporations and policies. I'd suggest that Indigenous cultural agency needs to be written (or in this case, re-written) into any vernacular account of Australian culture and controversy for the same reason that Cunningham argues a concept of 'creative economies' needs to replace the exceptionalist accounts of the arts sector generated by scholars in 'cultural economics'. Indigenous artists, intellectuals, activists, film-makers and, more recently, television producers (with dramas such as *The Circuit* and documentaries including *The First Australians*), have been active and often controversial contributors to shaping understandings of history, identity and justice within Australia's cultural landscape. This is to not only to see Indigenous inputs and outputs as a constitutive aspect of Australian creative industries with local and international constituencies and markets. It is also to suggest the need for readings of early Australian film and cinema texts that engage with local but globally linked Indigenous sovereignty movements. In this context, further development of Cunningham's comment in the introductory notes to his early cinema essays that early Australian cinema looks different to audiences interpreting it after the High Court's Mabo decision's over-turning of *terra nullius* would have been valuable.

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