

The video years: Stuart Cunningham and screen industry research

Media International Australia

2022, Vol. 182(1) 54–58

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DOI: 10.1177/1329878X211043899

journals.sagepub.com/home/mia**Ramon Lobato** 

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Abstract

This essay explores Stuart Cunningham's foundational contributions to screen industry research. Cunningham's work is grounded in the understanding that industrial and expressive processes are co-constitutive. More than a gestural attempt to articulate opposing fields (industry and culture), it is instead a career-long thinking-through of their mutual constitution. This manifests in Cunningham's close attention to the everyday work of screen industries: distribution; exhibition; promotion; professional training and education; institutional representation and lobbying; regulation. The essay explores Cunningham's thirty years of work on these topics, including his recent studies of online video production and distribution. It also reflects on his intellectual trajectories and his legacies for the field.

Keywords

screen industries, video, streaming, Stuart Cunningham

It is a difficult task to capture Stuart Cunningham's intellectual legacies, which include not only hundreds of academic publications but also institutions and an academic field (creative industries research). Yet there are certain characteristics of Cunningham's work that recur consistently, and which seem to define a particular ethos of intellectual inquiry. In my view, this comes down to a commitment to unpacking the messy co-constitution of culture, industry and governance. The present essay reflects on how this tendency has played out within Cunningham's voluminous work on video industries, and how this work has in turn shaped the field of screen studies.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote. I first encountered Cunningham via his book *Framing Culture* (Cunningham, 1992). At the time (the mid-2000s), I was an Honours student in cultural studies at University of Melbourne, enrolled in what turned out to be a formative seminar – Audrey Yue's Cultural Power and Policy – that probed the fissures between critical and applied cultural research. Cunningham, unsurprisingly, was high on the reading list *Framing Culture*

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was a revelation for me, as it was for others. The book provided an intellectual bridge between criticism, theory, and policy work, showing what cultural analysis could do in practice, and how it could be put to work productively on topics within Australian media policy, such as advertising and pay-TV regulation.

Cunningham's vivid way of connecting culture to industry and policy resonated strongly with me at the time. The book seemed to offer an alternative to the familiar styles of humanistic reasoning, such as distanced critique and hermeneutics. Its provocative (yet poetic) conceptualisation of culture-in-the-world integrated the micro of policy detail with the macro of social and political theory. The book also had an impish wit that distinguished it from much social-scientific policy analysis. It would not be a stretch to say that *Framing Culture* taught me, along with at least two generations of Australian humanities scholars, how to think creatively about the relationship between culture, industry, and policy – and, just as importantly, how to imagine our work as contributing to a larger public conversation about these matters.

Cunningham's subsequent work on international television also made a deep impression. The key books from this period – *Australian Television and International Mediascapes* (Cunningham and Jacka, 1996), *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision* (eds. Sinclair et al., 1995), and *Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas* (eds. Cunningham and Sinclair 1999) – were variously co-authored and coedited with his close collaborators Elizabeth Jacka and John Sinclair. Each in its own way played a vital role in shaping the emerging field of international television studies. Collectively, they foregrounded the multi-directionality of audiovisual flows; qualified neo-Marxist doctrines of cultural imperialism; introduced a novel explanatory theory (geolinguistic regions); and reconciled the agency of audiences with the power of industries in innovative ways. *Floating Lives* was distinctive for how it theorised diasporic communities as actors in audiovisual industries. Comprising field-based case studies of Chinese, Vietnamese, Fiji-Indian and Thai video cultures, it was one of the first works to take seriously the circulatory power of informal distributors – including 'ethnic' video stores and pirate networks – and to locate them in a wider analytical context. It remains a landmark collection: ambitious in scope, rich and supple in its theorisation.

Sometime later, I came to work with Cunningham through the ARC Centre of Excellence in Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI), which Cunningham founded with John Hartley and other colleagues at QUT in 2005. As an early-career postdoc working in one of the CCI nodes (Swinburne), I observed Cunningham's distinctive way of working, in both a research and organisational sense. Cunningham was a mentor to me, as to many others who came up through CCI at the time. I recall his support for early-career researchers at CCI and his dedication to his own PhD students at QUT. I also recall what I understood to be a kind of democratic professionalism. Unlike many academics, Cunningham was cheerfully committed to the hard yakka of everyday collegiality: writing letters of recommendation, sitting in on this or that committee, mentoring grant applications. This is partly about Cunningham's famous work ethic: he is known for his boundless energy, and his ability to get things up and running, and to see them through to completion. But it also reflects a commitment to ideas and their soft infrastructure. Cunningham saw academic institutions as precious things that require creativity, energy, attention, maintenance and repair. During my time at CCI I learned a great deal from Cunningham's commitment to the messy detail of institutions, and to the unglamorous work required to build things up and keep them running, and to care for the people working within them.

This is, perhaps, the defining feature of his intellectual legacy: a passion for ideas, alongside a commitment to the real-world institutions, industries and policy systems through which those ideas travel. This is the spirit that informs both his long career as both a research leader and a leading scholar. It is also, we might say, the underlying philosophy that runs through his work on screen industries.

1. From screen studies to creative industries – and back

C.P. Snow wrote in the 1950s of what he called the “two cultures” – arts and science – and the associated dispositions of their practitioners (Snow, 1959). Disciplines and subdisciplines often host their own micro versions of this drama. Screen studies, for example, has a small branch of critical industry research in the humanities tradition which parallels a larger body of applied research on screen industries, markets, and organisational structures from the social sciences. A few scholars, producing the most powerful work, have the ability to transcend sectarian schisms and produce work that speaks across the divides, producing work which prompts new thought about both the cultural and industrial inputs into screen industries. Equally rare are those scholars who are genuinely passionate about both industry *and* culture, without a prior epistemological commitment to one over the other.

It is worth noting that Cunningham’s doctoral training during the 1980s was in film studies, even though he would later become more closely associated with creative industries research (a field Cunningham played a key role in establishing in Australia). Cunningham studied for a PhD at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under the supervision of David Bordwell and finished it at Griffith University in 1988. This led to the publication of his first book, *Featuring Australia: The Cinema of Charles Chauvel* (Cunningham, 1991), which integrated historical, critical, cultural and industrial analysis of Chauvel’s work. During these formative years of screen studies in Australia, Cunningham published regularly in film journals and magazines including *Australian Journal of Screen Theory*, *OnFilm* and *FilmNews*, exploring a range of topics in film history and theory.

Cunningham – like Bordwell and his Madison collaborators Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger – always displayed a unique ability to think in materialist terms about cinematic production and distribution. He is one of the few people in the field who can unpack the detail of a film policy or industry structure – and who can then thread the needle all the way back to what it means for cinema as a socio-textual system. This is one of the reasons Cunningham’s work endures: because it is grounded in what seems to be a paradoxical commitment to the possibilities of screen media and to pragmatic reformism of screen policy. We might even say that Cunningham has always been a (closet?) critic, cinephile, and textualist, notwithstanding his parallel career as a policy reformer. It is no accident that he spent years deep in the weeds of culture – years of thinking deeply about films, their histories, their aesthetics, their possibilities – as a basis for his later work on policy and creative industries. This dual commitment gives Cunningham’s writing its force.

What can we say about how Cunningham understands this relationship between screen industry and screen culture? His work has consistently been grounded in the understanding that industries matter because of their implications for expressive culture: because they shape conditions of possibility, delimit horizons of reception, and both restrain and enable access to cultural works. More than a gestural attempt to articulate the two fields, Cunningham’s work is instead a career-long thinking-through of their mutual constitution. This manifests in his close attention to the backstage processes that constitute screen industries: distribution; exhibition; promotion; professional training and education; institutional representation and lobbying; regulation. It also shapes the methods Cunningham uses. He is never afraid to talk to filmmakers, or to audiences; to shoot the breeze with policymakers; to be a fly on the wall (or, more likely, an active interlocutor) at industry events.

2. The online video years

Let’s consider how this spirit of pragmatically engaged research has informed Cunningham’s work on online video – a topic of consistent fascination. Over the last decade Cunningham has worked

with a group of close collaborators – including David Craig, John Silver, Dina Iordanova, and Jian Lin – to produce a corpus of research that engages the topic of online video along that rich vein of industrial and cultural analysis. His books during this period trace several interconnected themes: the rise of powerful new players in the global screen ecology (Google, Netflix, Amazon); the rapid churn of start-ups and business models; the blurring of boundaries between professional and non-professional producers; the geographic diversity of production, distribution and reception; and the formal and informal governance systems that shape the conditions of possibility for online video.

The first of these books was *Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World* (Cunningham and Silver, 2013), co-authored with Jon Silver. It documents a remarkable period in the long history of video – 1997 to 2013. This was a time of shifting spectatorial norms and panic-stricken industry responses. *Screen Distribution* provides a fascinating history of these years, and of the industrial conditions that led to the rise of today's video giants – Google, Apple, Amazon, and Netflix.

While *Screen Distribution and the new King Kongs of the Online World* is perhaps best known as a work of media industry analysis, it also offers a rich contribution to debates about media historiography. The authors' middle-range theory – a third-way approach designed to reconcile the opposed polarities of presentist innovation hype versus the cynical realism of *plus ça change* political-economic analysis – enables a focus on change and continuity. The book does the hard work of documenting the many video services that crashed and burned along the way – including Ifilm, Cinemanow, Movielink, Moviebeam, Joost, Sightsound, Pop.com, and other long-forgotten websites. Cunningham and Silver take seriously the losers – the failed firms, business models, and visions of the streaming future – as well as the eventual winners in online video, and their account provides an important resource for future scholars seeking to reconstruct this industrial history.

Cunningham's collaborations with David Craig have focused on user-generated video content. *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley* (Cunningham and Craig, 2019) is a panoramic study of YouTube and its global cultures of production. Based on 150 interviews with creators and other players in nine countries, the book describes the vast generic diversity of YouTube production – from gameplay and unboxing videos to activist vlogging – as it unfurls across global space. At the same time, the book diagnoses the growing coherence of a quasi-professional creator identity that integrates grassroots creativity with an entrepreneurial mindset attuned to the monetisation possibilities of product-placement, embedded advertising, and promotional network-effects within the YouTube ecosystem. Here we see, again, Cunningham's fascination with the intertwined cultural and industrial dimensions of video.

Social Media Entertainment is pragmatic about the commercialisation of UGC while also being enthusiastic about its progressive possibilities. In this sense, the book is somewhat bolder in its claims than *Screen Distribution and the new King Kongs of the Online World*, because Cunningham and Craig diagnose a clear paradigm shift:

the emerging shape of screen industries in the twenty-first century shows established players, norms, principles, and practices ceding significant power and influence to powerful digital streaming and social networking platforms. (...) Creators have harnessed these platforms to generate significantly different content, separate from the century-long model of intellectual property control and exploitation in the legacy content industries. This new screen ecology is driven by intrinsically interactive technologies and strategies of fan, viewer, audience, and community engagement. Combined, these factors inform a qualitatively different globalization dynamic that has scaled with great velocity, posing new challenges for established screen companies, creatives, and regulatory regimes – not to mention media scholars. (Cunningham and Craig, 2019: 4)

Social Media Entertainment is unabashedly optimistic about the potential of this paradigm shift. This theme also runs through their follow-up anthology *Creator Culture: An Introduction to Global Social Media Entertainment* (Cunningham and Craig, 2021), a collection of essays by leading digital media and screen scholars exploring creator culture in China, the Middle East, Spain, India, Chile and the United States. Cunningham has also recently published a new book, co-authored with Craig and Jian Lin, on Chinese *wanghong* (online celebrity) video culture – a fascinating exploration of an emergent star system, which locates this phenomenon within its regulatory and technological contexts.

Each of these books is ambitious in scope, globalist in its approach, and big-hearted in its enthusiasm for emergent creative movements. And here we come full circle, back to the fascinations of Cunningham-as-screen-scholar. Industries. Cultures. Policy. Globalisation. Their intersections and mutual constitution. The business of screen culture. The culture of screen business. Ideas and their infrastructure. Cunningham's work on these topics is far from complete. But like the video industries he has studied, his thinking continues to evolve in surprising ways – and to provide a powerful set of tools for scholars who come after.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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