



In The Vernacular

A Generation of Australian
Culture and Controversy

STUART CUNNINGHAM

With a foreword by Meaghan Morris



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UQP

First published 2008 by University of Queensland Press
PO Box 6042, St Lucia, Queensland 4067 Australia

www.uqp.com.au

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Typeset by Post Pre-press Group, Brisbane
Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

National Library of Australia

Cunningham, Stuart.

In the vernacular : a generation of Australian culture and
controversy/Stuart Cunningham.

ISBN 9780702236709 (pbk.)

ISBN 9780702241161 (PDF)

Culture – Study and teaching – Australia.

Social sciences – Study and teaching – Australia.

Australia – Social conditions – 20th century.

Australia – Cultural policy.

306.071094

To Jo Clifford – always already amore

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Foreword

As leading academics and policy advocates go, Stuart Cunningham is a cheeky bloke. When I agreed to write a few words for this book, by a scholar well-known in recent years for his passionate and flamboyant use of creative industries jargon, I had no idea that a volume called *In the Vernacular* would land on my desk. Startling! For in one of my favourite memories of Stuart as a public speaker, I heckle him a little for informing an assembly of Humanities professors that cultural production and consumption are blurring into ‘prosumption’ in today’s participatory techno-culture: why, I ask (as a friendly adversary), does he have such a cheerful fondness for these obsolescent ‘weasel words’ of globalising policy-speak? With a fortitude befitting one of Australia’s most effective institution-builders and activists for cultural education, he replies that, ‘weasel’ though such words may sometimes be, during what is often their relatively short shelf-life as markers and definers of an area of policy concern, they establish spaces of opportunity in which it is possible to make things happen that might not otherwise come to pass. Having also fought, on occasion, to affirm the exuberant life-force that is neologism against the puritanical word police of our public media

culture, I thought this a wonderful answer – so much so that the moment is still vivid for me. But I would not have described Stuart Cunningham’s personal contribution to a generation of Australian culture and controversy as being ‘in the vernacular’ – as performing, as well as participating in, a local and popular cultural idiom.

Within a few pages of the Introduction to this intellectually gripping book, the rightness of the word ‘vernacular’ to define its approach, as well as its theme, became clear. Ranging across many topics in Australian cultural history – from the work of Charles Chauvel and other filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century ‘survival’ to television production in the golden years of the 1980s, on to Vietnamese diasporic media practices and to debates about the role of cultural criticism and education in the ‘creative economy’ today – this is also a book about the historically shifting grounds of a long-term struggle to create and sustain Australian modes of popular cultural expression. It is a book about how this struggle has been shaped, as much in Chauvel’s time as in the heyday of the Kennedy-Miller television mini-series, in the current formulation of creative industries policy, by Australia’s relative economic as well as geo-political dependency on larger and greater powers, and by the condition of openness to competing international forces and currents that follows in culture from this. Consistently, too, *In the Vernacular* is a book about those moments in our cultural history in which artists, producers, policy-makers, entrepreneurs and academics, as well as local cultural communities, have been able to make transformative *use* of ‘imported’ materials in a such an idiomatic and innovative way that an imaginative sense of nationality is nourished by their creativity – and is sometimes, if not always, both embraced by Australian audiences and exported to find acclaim elsewhere.

In this respect, the multi-faceted, entrepreneurial and aesthetically ‘weird and wonderful’ career of Charles Chauvel remains, with all its avowed colonial baggage, an enabling historical model for Cunningham’s way of thinking about how Australians might

best make use of the always challenging, always changing conditions in which we go about making vernacular culture. Bringing the globalising rhetoric and concepts of current thinking about a broadly creative economy (as distinct from an economy in which cultural and creative industries remain a special sector) into a dialogue with this deeply *national* enabling model is one of the inspiring achievements of this book. Reading, in sequence, these essays written over a generation of Australian critical debate about culture has allowed me to see how the value of the rhetoric and concepts for Cunningham is all about, once again, their vernacular *uses* in and for a country which has, over the past twenty-five years, raised the policy-based approach to producing and administering culture, and to academic thinking about culture, to a fine art by international standards, which has seen accompanying levels of recognition being accorded (especially in China and the Asia-Pacific region) to the scholarly work and institutional experiments of adventurous pioneers such as Stuart Cunningham. Having read this book, when I hear the word *prosume* in future I will immediately think ‘vernacular!’ instead of reaching for my revolver.

A more serious way to put this is that I see *In the Vernacular* as defining a profoundly coherent and generative intellectual project that will resonate both in and beyond Australia. As rapid technological change combines with a deep transformation in the worldly conditions in which governments must define their role in relation to culture and education, scholars and cultural activists in many countries are confronting the *imaginative* challenge of what to do with their own national histories of cultural aspiration and experiment. In the developing and post-colonial worlds, as well as in ‘strange dominions’ like Australia, these histories are often still only partially written, or, if they are written, then they are not always taught and passed on with honour for future generations to transform; the conditions of colonialism shade easily into those of globalisation when it comes to the institutionalised forgetting of vernacular enabling traditions in cultural and intel-

lectual life. From my point of view, Stuart Cunningham's special achievement in editing and reframing the work of many years into a single volume is most strikingly to show us how to produce a sense of emotional as well as intellectual continuity (that is, a sense of belonging) between the projects of the past and those of the present, while pragmatically taking scrupulous account of all the things that are changing and have changed. His eloquent work in Part 3 on the 'globalisation from the margins', that can be grasped by studying diasporic media use, is fully consistent with this.

Cunningham narrates his own journey in other ways throughout the course of this book, preferring often to present himself as moving 'away' from one activity (say, writing the authoritative critical texts in Australian film and television history that appear in Parts 1 and 2) and 'towards' another (the moment of cultural policy advocacy, revisited in Part 4) and then yet another (creative industries) which must generate in turn another 'beyond' (Part 5). In the heat of controversies gone by, I have called Stuart an incurable dialectician and a diehard avant-gardist; no longer wishing to annoy him, I still affectionately think this to be the case about his ways of telling a story and putting an agenda on the table. What really matters, though, is the power of the story to give true stimulus and encouragement to new ideas, and the usefully provocative force of the agenda put forward. With *In the Vernacular* he has excelled himself in both of these respects, most significantly for me when he calls in his Introduction for an 'anchoring' of cultural and especially screen history through 'consistent attention on Australia as a primary object of study, over time and despite changes . . . which can demand attention to the international to the exclusion of the local'. The great achievement of this book is precisely to bring this quality of attention *consistently* to bear on a wide range of problems, cultural materials, historical contexts and vernacular idioms of Australian public life, in such a way that others are given tools and precedents to help them both to extend and to extrapolate, dissent, and deviate from Cunningham's own account.

In this, as in other respects outlined by the essays which follow, Stuart Cunningham is the very model of a serious cultural critic working as an ‘engaged advocate’ of particular positions and directions in contemporary cultural life. This happens to be a deeply ingrained, institutionally rational, and imaginatively enabling tradition of how to make a difference as an intellectual in Australia. At the level of ‘big book’ production, where valuable scholarly essays and controversies of initially small circulation can reach new and wider publics, that tradition has sometimes appeared to be fading in recent years. It has been, shall we say, a long time between drinks, but the state of my spirits after reading this book is most definitely festive. Three cheers for cultural history, policy advocacy and fruitful public controversy – with an extra toast for cultural prosumption!

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Acknowledgments

In preparing these essays for publication, I have sought to retain them as complete texts, except where repetition, redundancy or confusing signs of datedness make it necessary to edit for readability and clarity. I have not sought to modify views that I no longer hold. In all this, I have been assisted greatly by the editorial ministrations of Harvey May, who has worked with me to prepare these texts for contemporary consumption and, I hope, enjoyment.

Given the spread in time of these essays, this is a wonderful occasion to acknowledge the debt of friendship and the concourse of ideas I owe to many colleagues. This is the short short list. My early encounters with Australian film and TV were greatly enhanced by Albert Moran, Tom O'Regan and Liz Jacka. The stimulus of encountering Toby Miller at that time has not abated. My experience of working as a policy analyst and public interest advocate was made possible by the support of Kate Harrison and Cathy Robinson. The stimulating engagements during the 1990s were often focused around the ARC Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy and crucial to those collaborations were Tony Bennett and Graeme Turner and, again, Tom O'Regan. Working

on major projects at the same time occasioned the deepening of the collegium with John Sinclair and, again, Liz Jacka. The most recent collaborative environment during the 2000s, with the formation of the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT and the research centres that I have led (Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre) or do lead (ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation) have depended on the good offices of John Hartley, Terry Flew, Greg Hearn, Brad Haseman, and more recently Terry Cutler and Jason Potts. To all these colleagues, and many, many more, I owe a great and continuing debt of gratitude.

My thanks to my employers over this period, Griffith University, the Communications Law Centre and Queensland University of Technology, for their strong support and encouragement.

Last, and most, thank you to my family, who have cared for and about me – Jo, Hugo, Ben and Vivien.

Sources

Permission was obtained from the following publishers for reproducing the essays from the original works: Allen & Unwin, the Australian Centre for Photography, the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, Oxford University Press, Routledge, Penguin, *Arena*, Currency House and the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. While all reasonable efforts were made to secure permission, where necessary, for the republication of these essays, the publisher would be glad to hear from anyone we have been unable to contact.

Part 1 Australian film

'The Decades of Survival: Australian Cinema 1930–1970', in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds), *The Australian Screen*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1989, pp. 53–74.

'Approaching Chauvel', in *Featuring Australia: The Cinema of Charles Chauvel*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, pp. 5–29.

'Apollonius and Dionysus in the Antipodes', *Photofile*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1988, pp. 41–6.

'Hollywood Genres, Australian Movies', in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds), *An Australian Film Reader*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1985, pp. 235–41.

Part 2 Australian television

‘Style, Form and History in Australian Mini-Series’, in J. Frow and M. Morris (eds), *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993, pp. 117–32.

‘Kennedy–Miller: House Style in Australian Television’, in Elizabeth Jacka and Susan Dermody (eds), *The Imaginary Industry*, AFTRS, North Ryde, 1988.

(with Liz Jacka), ‘Australian television in world markets’, in John Sinclair, Elizabeth Jacka and Stuart Cunningham (eds), *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1995.

Part 3 Diasporas and media use

‘Theorising the Diasporic Audience’, in Mark Balnaves, Tom O’Regan and Jason Sternberg (eds), *Mobilising the Audience*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2002, pp. 266–82.

(with Tina Nguyen) ‘Actually Existing Hybridity: Vietnamese Diasporic Music Video’, in Karim H. Karim (ed.), *The Media of Diaspora*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, pp. 119–32.

Part 4 The cultural policy debate

‘Cultural Studies from the Viewpoint of Cultural Policy’, in G. Turner (ed.), *Nation, Culture, Text: Australian Cultural and Media Studies*, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 126–39.

‘Re-Framing Culture’, *Arena Magazine*, issue 7, October/November 1993, pp. 33–5.

Part 5 Creative industries and beyond

‘The creative industries after cultural policy: A genealogy and some possible preferred futures’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2004, pp. 105–16.

What Price a Creative Economy?, Platform Paper series, Currency House, Sydney, July 2006.

Screen title availability

There are welcome developments in the availability of Australian screen content that support the publication of studies that bring them back into the general and student readership 'frame'. Many historical film classics as well as much of the big-budget, 'quality' end of television drama from the 1980s and 1990s have been released on DVD and are readily available. Vietnamese music video, as Chapter 9 suggests, is available only through specialist Vietnamese language outlets.

Part 1 Australian film

The following films are available for hire for educational use from the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA): *Captain Thunderbolt* (in a 16 mm version), *The Back of Beyond* (DVD), *Eureka Stockade* (VHS and 16 mm), *Jedda* (DVD), *In the Wake of the Bounty* (16 mm and VHS video), *The Overlanders* (16 mm), *Walk into Paradise*, *The Restless and the Damned* (under the alternative title of *The Dispossessed*), *Forty Thousand Horsemen* (16 mm and VHS video), *Pearls and Savages* (16 mm and VHS video), *The Jungle Woman* (VHS video), *Starstruck* (16 mm and VHS video),

The Man from Snowy River (16 mm and VHS video), *Mad Max* (16 mm).

The Back of Beyond Collection – 50th Anniversary Edition is available to purchase as a two-DVD set from ABC Shops. The following films are available for sale as a VHS video from the distributor, ScreenSound Australia: *Jedda*, *Mike and Stefani*, *The Rats of Tobruk*, *Forty Thousand Horsemen*. *They're a Weird Mob*, *The Man from Snowy River*, *Mad Max* are available for sale on DVD from Roadshow. *Phar Lap*, *Mad Max 2*, and *Mad Max 3: Beyond Thunderdome* are available for sale as DVDs from Warner Bros. *Starstruck* is available as a DVD sale from AV Channel.

Part 2 Australian television

Against the Wind, *Melba*, and *Shout!: The Story of Johnny O'Keefe* can be accessed by authorised institutions and individuals via the NFSA. *Against the Wind* is available to purchase as a DVD boxed set from EMI. *1915* is available for sale as a DVD from Roadshow. *Shout!: The Story of Johnny O'Keefe* is available for sale as a DVD from AV Channel. *The Petrov Affair* is available for sale as a DVD from Shock.

The early Kennedy–Miller film corpus has been covered above. *Dead Calm* and *The Witches of Eastwick* are available as DVD sales from Warner Home Video, *Babe: Pig in the City* is available as a DVD sale from Universal. *Happy Feet* is available as a DVD sale from Roadshow. Most of the Kennedy–Miller mini-series of the 1980s are now available in commercial DVD form for sale from Roadshow Entertainment. The six main mini-series: *The Dismissal*, *Bodyline*, *The Cowra Breakout*, *Vietnam*, *Dirtwater Dynasty* and *Bangkok Hilton* are a 'Great Australian Stories' boxed set.

Introduction

This book brings together a selection of writings over a period of twenty years focused on Australian screen production, criticism and culture, allied with broader policy concerns that run right through to the present and beyond. It ranges from the neglected heritage of Australian cinema before the ‘revival’ of the 1970s, through to the 1980s–90s golden age of television drama, both domestic and export quality, across the vibrant margins of the multicultural of the country, to the policy controversies that have animated academic and broader debate for many years and helped to define directions in cultural, media and communication studies.

You might immediately ask: what relevance does such a historical run of work have for contemporary readers? The short answer is simple. Australia doesn’t seem to have much sense of its cultural history – in many of its particularly popular manifestations – and this might be getting worse, not better. And the varieties of critical engagement with it – fandom, serious journalism, scholarship of both a critical and an archival bent, and curriculum materials and teaching – do not complement or reinforce each other. The culture wars of the last decade have chilled the enthusiasm and

confidence of creative people; and the waning of cultural nationalism from its high points of the late 1980s (especially around the bicentennial of European settlement) and the ineluctable integration and globalisation of cultural expression have all contributed to this situation.

There is a second answer which traces a history of the present: the industrial and social trends in media, communications and culture are outstripping the academic frameworks that have been erected to deal with them. Media and cultural studies have to run to catch up with these developments. This leads to a third purpose, which is to reconnect disciplinary debates about Australian media, communications and cultural studies to the future of the disciplines, which is to say the students who study them. I have built this introduction around these three propositions.

Tom O'Regan, in *Australian National Cinema*,¹ talks of three competing personae for the critic: the cinephile or fan, the critical intellectual and the cultural historian. To these I would add the engaged advocate. In some ways, the field of cultural, media and communications studies has fractured around these different forms of address and around different approaches: there are those who focus variously on textual analysis, or genre coverage of popular culture, on the politics of media representations, or on policy. Each of these voices, and the knowledge claims they invoke, are legitimate practices of education and research in the cultural, media and communications space. The structure of this book, and the progression of the essays in it, embodies the movement of my critical persona from the cinephile and historian and my practice of textual analysis and cultural history to that of engaged advocate for policy change.

It might be assumed, from the controversies that have been engendered by these shifts, that I seek a normative realignment of the disciplinary field. However, as argued in the next part of this introduction, the horizons (or what used to be called the 'available discourses') of critical sense-making are foundational. Without a

robust critical climate, enriched by the discourses of the enthusiastic fan and the historian, and seriously engaging with the actually existing situation of culture in the country, there is little for the policy-minded to advocate for. You will notice a kind of recursion to the need for critical understanding in the latter stages of this book, where, in Chapter 13, the explosion of user-created content and the related affordances of web 2.0 are traced and it is suggested that industry and policy makers need to run to catch up with what fans, peer-to-peer dynamics and innovative cyberati are producing in terms of both the content and the structure of communication.

Cultural, media and communications studies thrives on a healthy pluralism; it also needs constant reappraisal of its methods, its relevance, the contributions from other knowledge fields and the world out there – with all the speed with which it poses new questions to a field of inquiry that wants to understand – in the words of two leaders in the field fifteen years ago – ‘the whole way of life of a social group as it is structured by representation and by power’.²

Generations of popular culture: reclaiming the past

In 2007 there was a high-profile campaign around the decline of teaching of Australian literature in our universities. With the retirement of Professor Elizabeth Webby at Sydney University, there was no longer an occupied chair of Australian literature. Rosemary Neill, in a series of articles in *The Australian*, used this as an occasion to chart the decline of OzLit teaching in both school and higher education.³ An Australian Literature in Education Roundtable was organised by the Australia Council in Canberra and, in an unusual move for the Howard government, which rarely tired of saying the university sector had never had it so good, then Education Minister Julie Bishop announced

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