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Book review

# From Ablation to Undergirding

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Stuart Cunningham
*In the Vernacular: A Generation of Australian Culture and Controversy*
University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 2008
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I have always learnt new words from the writings and public speeches of Stuart Cunningham. I retain a vivid memory, from 1982, of needing to look up a dictionary after his Australian Screen Studies conference presentation on Roeg's *Bad Timing* (1980), in order to find out exactly what *ablation* was. (And it wasn't pretty.) Even when I more or less knew the word in question, I had never had the experience of (to embroider a phrase from *Clueless*, 1995) hearing it used in a coherent sentence any time since the mid twentieth century: *gainsay*, *commodious, irredentist*, *undergird*…

I mean this as serious praise, not mocking or ironic. How many writers can teach you new words that then stick in your brain for almost three decades? In fact, from ablation to undergirding, Cunningham's very distinctive prose style wields a scalpel-like precision in sorting, dividing, differentiating and prioritising various categories of cultural phenomena and theoretical thought. Ideas and acts are always carefully returned to the context that best makes sense of and justifies them (as he

puts it at one point of this book, 'different types of cultural content should be assessed against their own terms and conditions of production and reception', xxix). From 1982, again, I recall his response, from the audience, to Robin Wood's keynote lecture at the State Film Centre on *Raging Bull* (1980): where the roughly Marcusian Wood posed Jake La Motta (Robert De Niro) as a tormented soul crushed by the values of a malign patriarchy, Cunningham wondered (via the 'theological structuralism' of René Girard) whether this brutish anti-hero was not, after all, filling a 'sacrificial subjectivity' that was, in its way, entirely fulfilling.

In a strange quirk of intellectual history, Cunningham's bet on Girard (then not at all a fashionable figure in film studies) over the Freudo-Marxism of the time turned out to be eerily prophetic, both of the way of the world and the way of his own research: Girard's theory of mimetic desire ended up providing detailed inspiration for the inventor of Facebook.

*In the Vernacular* provides a wide, well-chosen, representative sweep of Cunningham's work, from key essays on Australian cinema (Charles Chauvel, Frank Hurley, the 'decades of survival 1930–70', Gillian Armstrong's *Starstruck*) to cultural policy debates and creative industries, via local television (mini-series and disaporic video). As he once cheerily noted in public, this progression of topics follows a certain predictable pattern of age and lifestyle changes: away from the big screen, closer to the kids… What falls beyond the scope of the book are Cunningham's fine essays in cinema study pre-1985, on Hollywood melodrama, Fred Wiseman's documentaries, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, Roeg, and Godard's *Hail Mary*. Some intriguing aspects of Cunningham's career (which he discusses in a recent career interview in *Metro*)[1] are invisible here: his own contributions to poststructuralist theology, for example, or his venture into experimental narrative production in the video *One Block From Heaven* (1987) which, like the Godard essay (and closely related to it), was co-realised with Ross Harley. But such exclusions make sense, for this collection of essays is organised to narrate (as per its subtitle) a 'generation of Australian culture and controversy'.

Actually, the determined 'Australianness' of Cunningham's trajectory—although, on one level, it has always been quite evident—came (to me, at least) as the major revelation of this book. It is salutary to consider that, even though Cunningham has a high and well-deserved international reputation as a leading

scholar of culture and communications (Meaghan Morris's razor-sharp foreword notes the uptake of his work 'in China and the Asia-Pacific region', xi), he is not exactly the sort of high-flying fellow we are likely to see on 'continental theory' or philosophy conference panels alongside Alain Badiou or Slavoj Zizek any time soon. Cunningham, it seems, has found his own fulfilling subjectivity—perhaps also a little sacrificial in nature—in defining himself as an 'organic intellectual' and sometimes quasi-governmental player in and of the Australian nation. And perhaps, more than anything else—for this was another revelation of the book—a keen and (in the best sense) proselytising pedagogue, forever militating for a nation-centred curriculum. Cunningham is rightly withering about the kind of 'post-nation' talk that waves away issues in a 'postmodernist flush of audience sovereignty'. (194)

A consistent thrust of Cunningham's work on Australian culture—derived in part from Meaghan Morris herself—has been the unapologetic embrace of the 'positive unoriginality' of the antipodal situation: the often zany 'customising' of cultural templates derived from industrial monoliths like Hollywood has been, for us Australians, the quotidian rule rather than the glamorous, subcultural exception. This theme works its way through Cunningham's magisterial treatment of the Kennedy-Miller television output (his work on the concept and practice of 'house style' in television production blazed a trail that has since been left fallow), and pops up again in the age of YouTube and other such 'user-generated' content addressed in the book's final and most recent chapter, 'What Price a Creative Economy?'. Coupled with this—and persuasively yoked to the eternal nation-building project in the book's editorial introductions (each section of the book has one)—is an intriguing insistence on the evaluation and celebration of artistic *quality*, not something that any of us were terribly concerned with trumpeting back in the 1970s or '80s: 'Media and cultural studies should not shy away from this constitutive normativity but embrace it by making the bases for such judgement explicit and therefore contestable.' (xxviii)

Naturally, the grounds on which anyone can stake such norms are constantly shifting—and they shift quite often in the span of recent history circumscribed in and by this book. Cunningham has always been a remarkable proponent of what Edgar Morin calls a 'theory of the complex'.[2] From the very start, it seems, he has been concerned to fairly summarise and then judiciously weigh up the available,

competing intellectual, theoretical and methodological frameworks on any given subject or field. To take a strong example, 'Approaching Chauvel' (the first chapter of his superb 1991 book *Featuring Australia: The Cinema of Charles Chauvel*), once relocated to the intellectual narrative provided by *In the Vernacular*, becomes an invaluable guide to still-relevant debates of the 1980s on how best to approach national cinemas, film history itself and, finally, the specific case of Australian film history. All current students of film and television could benefit from a study of Cunningham's survey of these options.

I have long valued Cunningham's skills as a critic from the semiotic age of 'textual analysis'—and I am certain not to be the only reader who regrets that this practice seems to take up little of his time and energy today. In fact, it is the specific mode of analysis frequently undertaken (once upon a time) by Cunningham that gives us the best image of his work as a whole: to borrow the words from the title of his 1981 programmatic piece on Hollywood's melodrama genre, what matters to him is the gauging of the *force-field*, the tension of diverse and opposing forces, that is in play—whether on the textual or contextual levels. When it comes to analysing films and television miniseries Cunningham has a fine feel for the drives (of every kind) that wax, wane and clash in a work. His comparative piece on Hurley and Chauvel (originally written for a special issue of *Photofile* guest-edited by Ross Gibson), for instance, ends this way:

> It can be seen, then, that, in terms of libidinal investments, a capacity for the complex aesthetics of documentary-drama, and a reflexive stance towards second-order colonialism, our Antipodean Apollonius and Dionysus are two very different cases in point in any essaying of the Australian cinema's appropriation of the South Pacific. (60)

One can note, within these pages, an intriguing start-and-end point to the analytic vein in Cunningham's work. Even if this is, ultimately, a kind of 'optical illusion' generated by the current selection of pieces, it would seem that he 'abandons' detailed analysis of films or other mass media content in 2003, when the piece (co-written with Tina Nguyen) on 'Vietnamese diasporic music video' recasts 'aesthetic value', via the cultural studies paradigm, as something more like 'use value for consumers' (and hence something that is better described than ranked or evaluated). On the other hand, does not the earliest-dated piece in the book,

'Hollywood Genres, Australian Movies' from 1985, already anticipate such a 'dissolution', via the appeal to Richard Dyer's idea of how socially embedded spectators 'mine' particular, desperately needed, emotions and ideas from the film musical? I will be keen to see whether, in future, Cunningham returns to the still vexing questions around 'popular aesthetics'.

Although I eagerly purchased Cunningham's controversial proposition on cultural policy studies, *Framing Culture*, when it appeared in 1992, I must confess that—as opposed to ablation and undergirding—I retained little of it. Not only was it of little immediate use to me—and that is merely a statement of my own limitations rather than the author's—but I was also vaguely distressed by what seemed to me an excessive *abstractness* in the argumentation. Although Cunningham has written much more in this area than we can survey in *In the Vernacular*, I once again came away with the same feeling. In these essays, the careful juggling and comparing of methodologies comes over more as a slightly defensive spectacle of academic *positioning*—what Thomas Elsaesser recently referred to, on a conference stage, as the 'temptation to metalanguage' likely to, at some point, assail every professional intellectual employed by a university—rather than a handy tool-box for urgent analysis. In particular, the case studies in these policy essays are few and far between—although the moment Cunningham takes up the situation of content regulations for Australian television (especially in the pay-TV era), for example, the rhetoric comes to life for a little while.

I found myself wondering, all over again, just who is this writing was *for*, exactly: governmental agents, special-interest lobbyists, cultural producers, theorists? Although charged up with many claims about its own *realpolitik* relevance, the policy debate appears, in retrospect, to have inhabited something of a vacuum. The earnest attempt to 'articulate' governmental policy with intellectual work remains—in the bad sense—merely academic. It comes over as an odd smokescreen, with something obscure at its centre (just as Paul Willemen has described the discourse of cinephilia).[3]

What may be finally and lastingly at stake in these policy discussions is only fleetingly asserted in *In the Vernacular*: that the real terrain of all this talk is the ongoing contestation over pedagogical curricula (in media, communications, film and television studies) at the tertiary level—not to mention the 'target audiences'

and professional uses or destinations envisaged for such curricula. A book by Cunningham specifically on media pedagogy—disentangling its stakes and its histories, as he does so well so often for other force-fields—would be timely and exciting to read today. In the meantime, beyond all its theoretical ablating and methodological undergirding, *In the Vernacula*r gives us plenty of rich material for (in the words of Freud) 'remembering, repeating and working-through'.

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[1] Stuart Cunningham interviewed by Noel King, '"Everyone's Got Their Favourite Periods of Cunningham's Career, and it's Always Something Before the Present!"', *Metro*, no. 158, September 2008, pp. 126–30.

[2] Edgar Morin, *Seven Complex Lessons in Education for the Future*, UNESCO, Paris, 2001.

[3] See Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, Indiana University Press and British Film Institute, Bloomington and London, 1994.