

Thomas 'Tom' O'Regan FAHA

1956-2020



University of Queensland

Tom O'Regan was one of the genuine pioneers of the study of film and television in Australia. He was integrally involved in the development of cultural policy studies, cultural studies and screen studies in Australia and internationally. His specific research interests included production studies of film, television, and new media, audience measurement of broadcasting, and cultural institutions..

His research is exemplary for its interest in maintaining an awareness of history, an understanding of the functions of textual representation, and a recognition of the need for scholars in this field to properly understand the industrial and regulatory conditions within which media texts were produced. There are very few scholars in this field, in Australia or internationally, whose work has the breadth and depth of research and analysis that Tom routinely produced over a career of forty years.

Tom was in the first intake of students to Griffith University in Brisbane in 1975, graduating with a BA (Hons) in 1978 and a PhD in 1986. His PhD pioneered, in the 1980s, the application of discourse analysis to film studies. This study, along with several major articles, had a lasting influence on the field, and culminated in the international research monograph *Australian National Cinema* (1996). It was also during the 1980s as a young scholar that O'Regan helped define the field of Australian film, cultural and media studies through such editions as *An Australian Film Reader* (with Albert Moran, 1985) and *The Australian Screen* (with Albert Moran, 1989), and through his co-founding and long term editorship of *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media and Culture* (1987–95).

He was the co-author of *The Future for Local Content* (with Ben Goldsmith, Stuart Cunningham and Julian Thomas, 2001) *Cinema Cities/Media Cities* (with Ben Goldsmith, 2003) *The Film Studio: Film Production in the Global Economy* (2005) *Local Hollywood: Global Film Production and the Gold Coast* (with Ben Goldsmith and Sue Ward, 2010) and *Rating the Audience: The Business of Media* (with Mark Balnaves and Ben Goldsmith, 2011). He co-edited *Mobilising the Audience* (with Mark Balnaves and Jason Sternberg, 2002) on audience development strategies in the arts and media sectors and also edited several thematic journal issues on cultural and media policy topics.

Tom O'Regan held a series of leadership roles throughout his career, beginning at Murdoch University where he held positions as Lecturer (1986–92), Senior Lecturer (1993–97) and Director of the Centre for Research in Culture and Communication (1996–98). He became Associate Professor in the School of Media, Communication and Culture at Murdoch (1998–99) before taking up positions as Director of the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy and Professor of Film, Media and Cultural Policy at Griffith University. From 2002 to 2003, he was Australia's UNESCO-Orbicom Professor of Communication. He moved to the University of Queensland in 2003 where he was Professor of Media and Cultural Studies, Associate Dean Research (2010–2020) and the Head of the School of English, Media Studies and Art History (2005–08). He held visiting Fellowships and Professorships at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; La Trobe University; Dublin City University; the University of Wales, Cardiff; Methodius University, Macedonia; and the University of Natal, Durban.

Tom was a cultural nationalist, but of a particular type. Like everyone who lived through the popular cultural renaissance of

the 1970s and 1980s, he enjoyed the leave pass we all got from the 'cultural cringe'.

The 'cultural cringe' was as accurate a description of the state of Australian humanities as it was of popular attitudes and popular media. Key shifts in the humanities from the 1960s onwards played a major role in reversing this trope. Building on the development of stronger attention to Australian literature that occurred in the 1970s, Australian versions of the 'new humanities', especially cultural and media studies, turned their attention to elements of Australian popular culture that had hitherto been ignored in order to understand how they contributed to a distinctive Australian culture.

Significant works by Graeme Turner AO FAHA, Meaghan Morris FAHA, John Tulloch, Tim Rowse FAHA, Albert Moran, Susan Dermody and Liz Jacka, Lesley Johnson AM FAHA—and Tom O'Regan—generated new fields of research, analysis and understanding of Australian film, television, radio, arts and popular culture.

It is reasonable to say that this body of scholarship contributed significantly to the Australian cultural renaissance. It also generated a distinctively Australian voice in the emerging discipline of cultural and media studies internationally as Australian scholarship went on to play a leading role in the consolidation of this field of teaching and research. It provided evidence, analysis and advice that contributed to the expansion and democratisation of arts and cultural policy nationally, especially in popular forms such as film and television, which was Tom's bailiwick. These were not only changes to the academic landscape, but also to the broader cultural landscape in Australia. Tom's voice contributed to how what counted as Australian culture changed, for the better.

O'Regan's major work, *Australian National Cinema*, published in 1996, was then and

remains a category breaker. The book isn't quite a history of Australian cinema or the film industry. Nor is it a study of the dominant themes and styles of Australian movies, an attempt to define what Australian cinema is, or a critical demolition of the myths and stereotypes it circulates.

It's all these things and something else again. Its interest is in describing the structural and institutional 'conditions of existence', the ecology or economy, of Australian cinema; concretely, in terms of industry, economics, policy, production, distribution and reception, and conceptually, in terms of how our different ideas of a national cinema are 'made operational'.

An account of Australian cinema must attend to all these different dimensions, from texts to taxes, but not to produce a neat totality, if this were possible, or to 'clean up' its messy relations and project their ideal form. On the contrary, it unravels the disparateness of film-making and film reception projects—mainstream and minor, local and antilocal, arty and trashy—and the 'antagonistic, complementary and simply adjacent' relations between them. The study is structural and always relational in its sense of the nation, its internal and international co-ordinates. Tom's critical disposition in this book might be described as agnostic, generous, pluralist, modest and sceptical.

Tom also made much of his contribution to these trends from a passionate regional and a highly innovative international perspective, from outside the canonical and expected, and from surprising angles.

Tom was a country boy, born in Gayndah, spending his early years on the family's properties near Gayndah and Rockhampton, and attending school in Armidale. Despite the metropolitanising tendencies that are endemic to our profession, he never modified who he was: he remained the country boy

who was not at all overawed by the urban elite he had to deal with.

His commitment to his adopted home state of Western Australia from 1986 to 1999 saw him immersed in what became a major effort to map film and television in that state, in *The Moving Image*. He wrote one of his most important papers 'Towards a high communications policy: Assessing recent changes within Australian broadcasting' from Western Australia. In it, he reflects on the criticality of space-binding communications efforts to address the radically unfinished national project. With state border closures and constitutional powers in play at this time of writing, during the Covid pandemic, rereading 'High communications policy' has been a very timely lesson in cultural and communications history.

And it was from Western Australia that he started, with Brian Shoemith, the journal *Continuum*, which occupied so much of his time and energy because it was done as a bespoke desk top publishing enterprise reliant on Tom and Brian not only for their editorial expertise and their networking skills but also for technical and marketing enterprise. No one in academia could make those kinds of commitments now.

His biggest volume of output on a focused topic was the research, often conducted with Ben Goldsmith and Susan Ward, into understanding international or 'runaway production' in terms other than as the global cultural dominance of Hollywood and their subservient satraps in the peripheries like Australia. Their book *Local Hollywood* is a nuanced account of globalised screen production in what was the much-maligned but, they argued, creative hotspot of the Gold Coast. This was a rolling, decade-long, project of reframing the international debate which took him across the world, where he established connections with new colleagues in new fields such as cultural geography.

His contributions in cultural and screen policy were extensive and impactful. His Professorial Address as Director of the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy—succeeding Tony Bennett— and Professor of Film, Media and Cultural Policy at Griffith University in 2001 was ‘Cultural Policy – Rejuvenate or Wither?’ In that address, he made the all-too-prescient argument that ‘cultural policy making faces a number of important challenges and is being transformed in ways which are increasingly in others’ hands. ... it is a victim of its own success in convincing governments, firms, and movements of the central importance of culture. Culture is becoming too important a field—socially, culturally, economically—to be left up to cultural policy making institutions’.

Equally impactful was what he did on ratings and audience studies, often with Mark Balnaves, combining serious technical understanding with in depth, qualitative feel. He understood and sharply analysed business models, cultural geographies, screen technologies and data analytics, challenging media and cultural studies while extending it in new directions.

His sense of occasion and remembrance was especially sharp. What Tom did academically to commemorate Eric Michaels—the American anthropologist who came to Australia and made such a dramatic intervention championing the Aboriginal Invention of Television at Yuendumu and who died an untimely death in the midst of another pandemic, the AIDS crisis, in the 1980s—was exemplary. He edited and published a special issue of *Continuum*, ‘Communication & Tradition’, dedicated to his work. He wrote a long essay, ‘TV as cultural technology: The work of Eric Michaels’. A bibliographic ‘partial guide to his written work’ was co-produced with Eric’s American thesis supervisor, Jay Ruby. He talked passionately about Eric long after he’d gone.

At the personal level, Tom will be greatly missed by the host of colleagues who have benefited from their encounters with him. What was most notable about Tom was his inexhaustible curiosity, and his willingness to fully engage with the ideas presented to him and that he presented to others. He brought to that engagement a depth of knowledge and theoretical sophistication that made him a productive interlocutor and an outstanding mentor to early career researchers. It is hard to think of a scholar in our field more uncompromisingly committed to the sharing of ideas than Tom was. Tom took the vocation of professing his discipline and the struggle for shared truth as a calling: this was the task that was his first priority. He defended his discipline and his colleagues in media and communication and mentored young scholars with passion and with considerable success. In all these ways, Tom O’Regan was a reminder of what a university professor should be, and the value they can generate.

Tom was fully engaged in sometimes pathbreaking work even as he became sick in the second quarter of 2020. His paper ‘Past and Future of Public Value’, written with Anna Potter, wrestled with the ‘creation of public value in a vastly and rapidly transforming screen media landscape’. A final major paper, ‘Paul Lazarsfeld and Facebook: Re-Reading Personal Influence in an Age of Social Media’ draws out the relevance of the theories of a major figure in communication studies from the mid-century for the current dilemmas posed by the power and influence of social media. In Tom’s own words, ‘It uses Lazarsfeld’s classic argument about the power and precedence of interpersonal communication, informal groups, and influencers (aka “opinion leaders”) with respect to any other media to argue not that “media have no effect” but that social media have “effects” far more consequential than any other media (and need to be regulated as such)’.

Tom had the staggering intellectual breadth, boundless curiosity, emotional intelligence and the presence of mind to make the greatest sense of any moment in cultural and media history. He leaves behind a legacy of exceptional research and scholarship, and the memories of many appreciative and grateful colleagues. He will be much missed.

He is survived by his wife Rita Shanahan and his children Lucy, Matthew, Dominic, Joseph, and Liam.

Stuart Cunningham AM FACSS FAHA

Graeme Turner AO FAHA

David Carter FAHA