

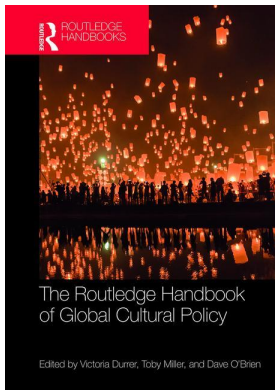
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Fringe to famous

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Fringe to famous

Enabling and popularising cultural innovation in Australia

Mark Gibson, Tony Moore and Maura Edmond

Introduction

If there is any general question that cuts across different national contexts for the development of cultural policy it is the appropriate relation between government and commercial cultural industries. This question has guided most comparative work in cultural policy studies, allowing us, for example, to compare ‘American’ models of film production, broadcasting or the visual arts and ‘European’ models, with their stronger emphasis on active government involvement and state patronage. It also often provides the framework for historical analysis, such as the voluminous work on the implications for cultural policy of ‘neoliberalism’ or the relative withdrawal of government as an active player in the cultural domain, in many countries over the past 30 years.

In this chapter, we take a position on this question in the Australian context. We argue in general terms for a recognition of the essential role that commercial processes and models can play in cultural development while refusing suggestions that commerce and culture will always be harmoniously aligned. This may appear an unremarkable position to take, perhaps even so obvious that it hardly needs an elaborate defence. As we will outline, however, there has been a sharp polarisation in Australia in recent years between ‘pro-’ and ‘anti-’ market positions in relation to culture, which has made the moderate or ‘compromise’ position sometimes difficult to sustain. This situation is not entirely representative of longer-term patterns in Australia, which can be seen in international terms as something of a model for mixed approaches to cultural policy – giving considerable ground to commercial models while also seeing a place for countervailing forces. The best-known example is probably the ‘hybrid’ television system developed, between the 1950s and 1970s, pragmatically combining many of the best aspects of American and European broadcasting systems of the latter half of the twentieth century. However, some work is now required to recover this tradition.

There may be a particular tendency to polarisation in Australian work on culture, policy and economy. The debates occasioned over the last decade by the emergence of a strong pro-commercial position on culture have certain echoes, in form if not in content, of a debate during the 1990s around the so-called ‘policy’ position in Australian cultural studies – and indeed some of the protagonists have been the same. Then, as now, the provocations taken in

these debates have often been seen internationally as somewhat extreme, distilling tendencies found elsewhere only in more qualified forms (Jameson 1993; McGuigan 2004). There is, however, some value in the chiaroscuro quality of Australian debates. They have produced abstract diagrams that can be used to clarify stakes that are otherwise difficult to discern. They have their closest relation internationally with debates in the United Kingdom, but can also be translated to many other contexts.

Fringe to Famous

The reflections in the chapter emerge more specifically from a three-year research project, 'Fringe to Famous', examining the conditions in Australia for crossover of fringe, independent and *avant garde* cultural production and mainstream cultural industries. The project started from the observation of a long tradition of circulation between small-scale experimental initiatives in art and culture and the mainstream publishing, design, film, broadcasting industries, as well as other cultural industries. This exchange between what Pierre Bourdieu (1996) called the markets of 'limited' and 'extensive' production has been particularly fertile since the 1980s and has been an important factor in cultural development and the growth of Australian cultural industries. The key research questions of the project have been: What are the factors that have facilitated or inhibited crossover of fringe/independent/ alternative arts practice and mainstream cultural industries in Australia since the 1980s? What are the policy settings that might affect such crossover? Understanding this process allows us to ask questions of government interventions – how has government assisted in (or hindered) the crossover between alternative and mainstream cultural production in this context?

The project is centred on five case histories covering: the evolution of Australian independent music scenes; the transformation of iconic local surfwear label Mambo into a successful consumer brand; the establishment of a lucrative, aesthetically playful and internationally oriented 'indie' gaming sector in Melbourne; the rise (and recent fall) of global short film franchise Tropfest; and the significance of independent production companies for Australian television comedy. The case histories have been developed through a combination of archival research and interviews with creative practitioners, cultural businesses, media entrepreneurs, curators, journalists, policy-makers and institutional management. The research is still in its mid-stages, so the following chapter reports on some of the findings emerging from the initial round of interviews, focusing in particular on the example of innovation in Australian television comedy.

'Fringe to Famous' has been concerned both with cultural and economic development. Most of the examples considered in the case histories have made substantial contributions to Australian cultural life. In the area of music, Nick Cave and Paul Kelly are generally considered to be among the most important figures to have arisen from contemporary Australian music over the last 30 years. A more recent generation of musicians to emerge from Australia's cultural fringes – Tame Impala, Royal Headache, Courtney Barnett – have had enthusiastic critical reception at home and abroad. The artists who designed for surfwear label Mambo gave a distinctive expression to a certain surreal eschatology to be found in Australian suburbia. The 'indie' computer game *Antichamber* – developed in Melbourne by a local digital media student – was celebrated for its complex and compelling gameplay and dubbed a 'first-person Escher' by reviewers. The television comedy producers who are discussed in more detail later in the chapter – Steve Vizard, Paul Fenech, Mark Conway and Mike Nayna – reflect and satirise diverse aspects of contemporary Australian life.

But at the same time, these examples have contributed to the development of important cultural *industries*. Despite the well-documented decline in total sales of recorded music, the dollar value of wholesale sales from recorded music in Australia in 2014 was still over AUD\$317 million (ARIA 2014). Meanwhile ticket sales for live performances of contemporary music are growing, with total revenue estimated at over AUD\$628 million (ACA 2014). The combined total is not far short of AUD\$1 billion – not at the level perhaps of iron ore (AUD\$66.7 billion – Reuters 2013), which was, until recently, at stratospheric heights as a result of the boom in infrastructure development in China, but certainly in the same league as other major Australian industries such as wheat (AUD\$4.8 billion), wool (AUD\$1.9 billion) or cotton (AUD\$754 million) (all figures ABS 2012).

The other case studies offer their own examples of economic value. The video-game *Antichamber* became a global best-seller, achieving more than a 100,000 sales in its first two months on the specialist online store Steam (McElroy 2013). The game currently retails for USD\$19.95, putting a ‘back of the envelope’ total retail figure for the game at nearly USD\$2 million, after just two months of sales. For all its surreal designs and tongue-in-cheek company branding, Mambo Graphics also has an important business dimension. Following the 2000 Sydney Olympics, where Mambo was the official designer of the Australian team’s outfits, the company was sold by its founders for over AUD\$20 million (Carson 2008). Tropfest was both a screen industry institution and, for a long time, a highly successful generator of economic value and a significant player in what Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (2008) have called the ‘international film festival economy’. In a confidential audit done on behalf of Steve Vizard’s production house Artist Services in 1994, it was estimated that the company’s successful comedy television programs had generated tens of millions in advertising revenue for the Seven Network. Vizard later sold the company in 2000 for AUD\$25 million (Bedwell 2007, p. 261).

How then should we understand the relation between culture and economy? One of the starting points for ‘Fringe to Famous’ was a frustration with a continuing tendency to dismiss the movement from the ‘fringe’ or ‘independent’ to the ‘mainstream’ or ‘commercial’ as ‘selling out’, ‘appropriation’ or ‘watering down’ of artistic integrity. Since the outset, we have been interested in the much more complex lived experience of creative practitioners transitioning between the two production markets. In finding support for this perspective, the project has drawn on work over the past decade, both in Australia and internationally, that has focused attention on productive links between cultural and economic development (Caves 2000; Hartley 2005; Cunningham 2006; Howkins 2007; Anderson and Oakley 2008; Flew 2012). This emphasis departs from more established approaches to cultural policy that have tended to see cultural and economic value as divergent, such that attention to one will generally be at the expense of the other. The Australian work of David Throsby is a good example here. Throsby (2001, 2006, 2010) has been a pioneer in reviving the field of cultural economics, and his work is remarkable in attempting to bridge economic and cultural analysis. His perspective, however, is generally ‘preservationist’, calling on governments to resist or moderate the influence of markets to ensure the maintenance of cultural value.

Throsby’s argument is not a naïve one. He is by no means a simple opponent of the global expansion of capitalist market relations: ‘There is no doubt that [this expansion] has brought enormous benefits to many, in terms of improved consumption choices, employment prospects, lifestyle patterns and so on’ (Throsby 2001, p. 156). Throsby also accepts that there are areas of culture that could be seen as provided for by the market: there is a profit-making domain in supply of the arts, which ‘embraces popular entertainments and cultural forms where demand is strong’ (2001, p. 116). It is nevertheless clear that the function of cultural

policy, for Throsby, is to offer a countervailing influence to the dominance of economic priorities in government decision-making. This means that his focus remains very much on the subsidised arts. The profit-making areas of the cultural industries fall outside his policy vision. They are classified as ‘media and entertainment’ and implicitly distinguished from culture proper.

Beyond preservationism

The starting point for ‘Fringe to Famous’, by contrast, was an interest in areas of consistency or complementarity between commerce and culture. An important point of reference for the project has been the perspectives that emerged from a particular moment in cultural studies and cultural policy in Britain in the 1980s. A major influence on the project has been Simon Frith and Howard Horne’s (1987) classic *Art into Pop* on the role of art schools in the explosion of popular music styles in Britain from the 1960s. Frith and Horne’s study exemplifies the open and reflective representation of the relation between culture and the market to be found in the best work of the period. It shows a depth of appreciation for the cultural qualities of the art and popular music that emerged in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, from the pop art of Richard Hamilton to the Sex Pistols and David Bowie. The culture is viewed as having important things to say about image, identity and style, youth, sex, capital, institutions and organisations – as much more, in short, than a simple economic commodity. At the same time, Frith and Horne are sensitive to the ways in which much of this culture was born on the currents of capitalist market relations. It had a fluidity and dynamism that would not have been possible within state-funded institutions and to which policy programmes merely of ‘preserving’ culture would not be attuned.

The approach can be seen as carrying forward the tradition of work in cultural studies of taking seriously, as culture, the products of commercial media and entertainment systems. In its original formation in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, this tradition developed as a counterpoint to the then dominant form of cultural preservationism in Leavisite literary criticism. The Leavisites were trenchantly opposed, in particular, to popular commercial fiction, which they saw as offering cheap ‘compensations’ and ‘distractions’ luring all but a committed minority from the ‘great tradition’ of serious English literature (Leavis and Thompson 1933; Leavis 1939). British cultural studies reacted first against the elitism of this perspective, drawing attention to the patterns and structures that gave meaning to the everyday lives of ordinary people, particularly the working class (Hoggart 1957; Williams 1958). But as the field developed, it increasingly found cultural value not only in ‘folk’ traditions and everyday life, but also in popular media and commercial cultural forms that were expanding rapidly in the latter half of the twentieth century (Hall and Whannel 1964; Fiske and Hartley 1978; Hebdige 1979).

The clearest expression of this perspective at a policy level was the cultural industries policy of the Greater London Council in the mid-1980s. The key aspect of this policy, and the reason for its subsequent influence, was its attempt to embrace the commercial cultural industries – the sector produced the culture that the majority of the population actually consumed (Bianchini 1987; Garnham 2005; O’Connor 2009). It was not that it was *opposed* to the more established models of the subsidised arts; it was rather that it attempted to break down the boundaries between state-funded and commercial culture, seeing them both, together, as part of a complex ecology of cultural provision. It is a sad irony that the policy was never in fact implemented, as the GLC was disbanded by the Thatcher government in 1986, but it left a substantial legacy nonetheless, with a number of its ideas being taken up in other

local governments in the United Kingdom and eventually in national policies, both within the country and abroad.

Australia has a parallel history around these questions, one that is by no means simply derivative. The first national cultural policy fully to embrace the commercial sector was in fact in Australia. While the most *influential* example has been the Creative Industries initiative of the Blair government in Britain in the late 1990s (DCMS 1998), the latter was preceded by Creative Nation, launched by the Keating government in 1994:

This cultural policy is also an economic policy. ... Culture adds value. ... It is a valuable export in itself and an essential accompaniment to export and other commodities. It attracts tourists and students. It is essential to our economic success.

(DCA 1994, p. 7)

More recently, this approach interweaving cultural and economic value was updated for the digital age in Creative Australia, the national cultural policy of the Gillard Federal Labor Government unveiled in 2013 just before it lost office. On the one hand the policy explicitly recognised, 'our culture defines us and we're unique in the richness of our Australian identity'; on the other, we should also recognise an economic dividend: 'A creative nation is a productive nation' (Crean 2013). Australia has also had its own cultural studies tradition, giving serious attention to the cultural significance of popular commercial forms (see for example, Fiske et al. 1987; Morris 1988; Martin 1994; Wark 1998). In both policy and cultural studies, there has been a complex series of exchanges between Australian and British developments. There are resources in both for a cultural policy framework sympathetic to commercial culture and moving beyond the perspective of cultural preservation or conservation.

The conception for 'Fringe to Famous' came initially from work by Moore (2012) on the history of Australian bohemian traditions. Drawing inspiration from the British work of Frith and Horne, but also on lessons from Australian cultural history, Moore draws attention to numerous points of intersection between cultural development in Australia and the development of commercial cultural industries. The case is made particularly in relation to the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the major figures to emerge during this period in experimental work in avant-garde theatre, satire, literature and underground film were profoundly influenced by mass media forms such as Hollywood film noir, gangster and western movies, television and of course rock 'n' roll – not just as a negative 'other' to be resisted, but as a positive creative inspiration. They also fed back into these forms in their creative practice, moving between more esoteric work for small audiences or readerships and roles as journalists, publishers, television broadcasters, filmmakers, advertisers and music industry entrepreneurs.

A further input into these arguments has been the work of Pierre Bourdieu, – not so much his analysis of taste in *Distinction* as his sociology of literary and artistic production in *The Rules of Art* (1996) and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993). 'Fringe to Famous' takes from Bourdieu a scepticism about claims for the 'autonomy' of art from surrounding fields of material interests. It is not that such claims should be entirely dismissed: writers, artists and other cultural producers often make sacrifices, taking risks and foregoing immediate and obvious material rewards for their art. It is rather that the relation between artistic autonomy and art is a dynamic one. Autonomy, once achieved, acquires a material value. Precisely at the point where it appears to transcend the ordinary sphere of material relations it becomes an object of desire and is drawn into the sphere of economic calculation. This means that any attempt to 'preserve' culture from the market is inherently paradoxical. The attempt itself can often serve only to promote its market value.

Australian culture as an innovation system?

If this sets a general background, 'Fringe to Famous' has also been formed by an encounter with a more rigorous and theorised account of the relation between culture and economics around the idea of 'innovation systems'. The main proponents of this in Australia have been associated with the Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI), which was funded by the Australian Research Council from 2005–2013 and centred at the Queensland University of Technology (Cunningham 2006; Hartley 2008; Potts 2008, 2011). In its early development, many believed the CCI was only taking forward the general trajectory of a cultural policy 'beyond preservationism', which we have sketched above. It was also quite catholic in reach, involving a range of figures who had been part of the broad histories of cultural studies and 'post GLC' policy development. Significant examples here included Kate Oakley, Graeme Turner and Justin O'Connor. In the later phase of the CCI, however, it developed a sharper, more refined, theoretical position. This has been highly controversial and has seen a significant breakdown of an earlier consensus on general directions for progressive cultural policy.

At the centre of this development has been the adoption of Schumpeterian economics and a reframing of creative industries around its capacity or otherwise to contribute economically through 'innovation'. This has opened up interesting lines of dialogue with management and economic theory on processes of industrial development, particularly around the ideas of 'open' or 'distributed' innovation (Chesborough 2003; von Hippel 2009). As the CCI authors have pointed out, there are a number of ways in which cultural or creative industries might be seen as exemplifying conditions that increasingly affect all areas of industrial production – the difficulty of maintaining proprietary control over intellectual inputs to innovation; the role of consumers in the creation of value; the volatile 'network' character of the field in which regimes of value are disrupted by high levels of feedback. This opens a heady prospect for the creative industries not only of gaining a place at the table of industry and economic policy, but of *leading* the conversations that might occur there.

There have also been costs, however, and the innovation systems perspective has attracted substantial criticism (see for example, Miller 2004; Oakley 2009; O'Connor 2009; Turner 2011). It has been more radically and uncompromisingly opposed to the preservationist assumptions of traditional approaches to cultural policy than the earlier departures from these assumptions sketched above. A future-facing, market-oriented approach is no longer proposed merely as a *complement* to established policy positions such as those represented by David Throsby. It appears rather as a comprehensive framework in which alternative approaches are systematically displaced. Value within the framework is associated, following Schumpeter, with disruption and change, so that the 'heritage' aspect of culture comes to be seen as merely residual, contributing to the present only as 'infrastructure'. More importantly, the framework appears to cede the possibility of a discourse around cultural value, as distinct from economic value, of the kind that can be found in older work in cultural studies such as Frith and Horne. As Justin O'Connor (2009, p. 389) has argued, the model is one of a seamless integration of the market and culture: the two converge as a single complex mechanism for generating novelty and economic growth.

Our response in 'Fringe to Famous' to the innovation systems perspective has been frankly conflicted. If approached in a piecemeal fashion, it can be appreciated as generating some interesting and productive ways of deepening an analysis of the economic dimensions of culture. A notable example is the attention it has brought to the role of audiences, readers or consumers in processes of creative development. In each of the case studies for the project,

this appears from our initial research to have been an important factor: small, dedicated followings, in particular, have played a significant role in providing feedback and contributing to the growth of creative concepts or ideas. This is one area where the model of ‘social network markets’ is an illuminating one in understanding the dynamics of contemporary culture.

The provocative, activist character of the innovations systems perspective also holds some attractions in disrupting tired or complacent assumptions, which often take form around a view of culture merely as something to be preserved. It is relevant, for example, to our engagement in ‘Fringe to Famous’ with Australia’s public service broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). Our starting position in relation to the organisation is sympathetic: we believe from long observation – and indeed, for one of the project team, from a previous career within the organisation – that it has often played a fundamental role in nurturing emerging talent and allowing it to find broader audiences. We are critical, however, of a frequent tendency – exemplified, for example, by the citizen’s lobby, *Friends of the ABC* – to adopt a reactive position in which market-based processes are simply cast as the enemy. Some of the most important and adventurous programming by the ABC over the last 20 years has resulted from the organisation’s embrace of a complex hybrid economy, including the outsourcing of production, co-productions and other forms of partnership with commercial players, especially small scale emerging cultural cottage startups that form around artists and projects.

It is difficult, however, to disagree with critics of the innovation systems perspective about the costs of following it systematically to its logical conclusions. Kate Oakley (2009, p. 413) lists these costs acerbically as ‘a thin notion of cultural value, declining cultural sectors and a crude version of innovation, which conflates it with novelty.’ ‘As such’, she argues, ‘it seems a fairly high price’. The members of the project team have all had long investments in cultural creation and/or appreciation and are not about to renounce aesthetic discourses for a purely economic point of view. One has been a long-time director of an art museum, another has been a television program-maker and all have had a longstanding interest in the specifically cultural qualities to be found in music, art, film, television, literature and other media.

Going to the empirical

‘Fringe to Famous’ might best be described, therefore, as adopting a ‘soft’ innovation perspective. There is, admittedly, a pragmatic aspect to our approach. ‘Innovation’ is a term that currently opens doors with government, enabling advocates for culture and the arts at least to get a hearing. In Australia’s case, the Federal Government conceives of its research and development program as developing a ‘National Innovation System’. Similarly, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull made his vision for an innovative Australia an essential part of his pitch for leadership of the Liberal Party.

In his first press conference after a successful leadership challenge in September 2015, Turnbull stressed, “The Australia of the future has to be a nation that is agile, that is innovative, that is creative” (Turnbull 2015). These are terms that provide opportunities for the cultural sector. As Tom O’Regan pointed out in the course of an earlier debate over directions for cultural policy in Australia, policy frameworks are always in part rhetorical. While their authors may imagine them to have pure origins, such purity is rarely maintained at the level of implementation. It is not necessary to use the language of innovation to subscribe to a fully theorised position from which it may appear to be authorised. This is not to say

that 'Fringe to Famous' is merely cynical in its use of this language. The project is serious in attempting to identify areas of innovation, in an ordinary sense of the word, in Australia's cultural and media systems.

From the perspective of the project, the recent polarisation around creative industries and innovation systems theory has been unfortunate. The general program of seeking to understand and support cultural development in hybrid commercial and state-funded systems remains, in our view, as important now as when it emerged in the 1980s. But it is a program that has become increasingly difficult to sustain. On one side of the argument over creative industries and innovation, the innovation systems perspective has become increasingly abstract, theoretical and focused on arguments at the level of high economic policy, losing touch with the lived circumstances of cultural practitioners and organisations. Its proponents have sometimes voiced frustration that their efforts are not more appreciated. As Stuart Cunningham (2008, p. 3) has lamented, those in the cultural sphere have been their 'own worst enemy in many ways', showing little interest in the innovation agenda and foregoing the opportunity to make claims over resources available for R&D. As Cunningham wistfully remarks, it is as if they existed in 'parallel universes'.

On the other side of the argument, there has been a significant loss of the earlier hard-won openness to commercial processes in the cultural domain. In seeking to puncture the blithe optimism of the 'win win' proposition of the innovation systems perspective – in which, as Jason Potts (2011, p. 21) puts it, 'culture and economy co-evolve' – the critics have been driven to produce evidence of contradiction and divergence. A good example is the theme of 'precarity' of employment in the cultural and creative industries – the reality for many artists and cultural practitioners of exploitation, stress, overwork and financial insecurity (see for example, Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2001; Murray and Gollmitzer 2012). The literature that has developed around this theme has certainly succeeded in highlighting negative aspects of employment conditions in the cultural, media and communication fields. There is also a serious purpose in documenting these aspects in highlighting the exploitation of cultural workers and promoting policies to foster greater equality (Hesmondhalgh et al. 2015; McRobbie 2015; Oakley and O'Brien 2016). But it sometimes seems that the motivation is to rain on the parade of the innovation systems boosters and cheerleaders (as they would be seen by the critics).

From the perspective of the earlier, more nuanced, work on the commercial infrastructure for popular culture, the basic proposition in the literature on precarity would have been taken for granted. Most of those involved in developing this work had backgrounds in Marxism and socialist politics; the idea that there is much about employment relations under capitalism that is less than perfect would have appeared as obvious. However, the object in view for Frith and Horne, for the architects of the cultural industries policy in the Greater London Council, for many of those involved in cultural studies and in progressive cultural policy in the 1980s and 1990s, was larger than simply critique. It was to understand the ways in which cultural forms – or more particularly cultural forms that *matter* – can emerge and develop within complex market-oriented economies and to find ways to support them. Many would have preferred *not* to have found that commercial processes were an important medium for culture, but restrained their critical reflexes in recognition of the reality. It is this openness that risks being lost in the recent critical turn in debates around the relation between economics and culture. And it is this openness and complexity to which we seek to return by 'going to the empirical', the early results of which are recounted below.

The research team has so far conducted more than 50 in-depth interviews with leading Australian creative practitioners, cultural entrepreneurs, cultural policy-makers,

commissioning editors, content producers and institutional staff. What we have discovered so far is a diversity of attitudes and approaches to the relationship between economic forces and cultural ones. Few of the interviewees occupy positions as polarised or entrenched as those expressed by recent scholarship on creative industries and innovation systems. Instead, the interviewees share an active and often self-conscious negotiation of market conditions, even while many remain deeply wary, cynical or critical of the possible impacts of commercial processes on creative work.

In this final section of the chapter, we focus on the emerging findings from the case history on Australian television comedy, highlighting in particular the work of Steve Vizard, Paul Fenech, Mark Conway and Mike Nayna. Spanning a period from the late 1980s to 2015, these comedians reflect a variety of approaches to Australian comedy, each in his own way responsible for ushering in culturally significant ‘soft innovations’ in the format of screen satire. They also reflect a diversity of approaches to the value of commercial processes and ‘mainstreaming’, from Vizard’s enthusiastic embrace of the challenge of ‘smuggling’ progressive content into the living rooms of everyday Australians to Fenech’s much more pragmatic, yet overtly transgressive sensibility in which fast, guerrilla filmmaking is a financial decision put to aesthetic and comedic ends.

Like all the interviewees in the project, the examples discussed here began in the market of limited production: Vizard in university revues and Melbourne’s theatre restaurants; Fenech via entries in Sydney’s then small-scale Tropicana Short Film Festival, while working as a jobbing trainee in the Indigenous Unit of the ABC; and Fancy Boy working in Melbourne’s live comedy performance rooms. The project’s focus has been on cultural producers who have crossed over from small-scale to popular markets, or are on the cusp of doing so – and in this sense has looked mainly at those who might be seen as ‘successful’. This is not to minimise the difficulties of many in making a living in the fringe. Indeed, most of our interviewees have experienced significant setbacks at various stages in their careers and empathise strongly with those who have struggled to establish and maintain their careers. But this is tempered by a sense of the opportunities that have been made available for cultural practitioners at different times, such as outreach and encouragement of experimentation by mainstream public and commercial broadcasters, or potential for audience reach afforded by online digital platforms. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are taken from the transcripts of ‘Fringe to Famous’ research interviews conducted in 2014 and 2015.

Steve Vizard – smuggling the avant garde into the mainstream

Steve Vizard was a successful IP and patents lawyer by trade but began his comedy career performing while an undergraduate in university student revues and later working Melbourne’s inner city cabaret venues in the late 1970s and early 1980s, before transitioning to television sketch comedy. He is best known for the shows he produced (and often wrote for and starred in) for the commercial Channel Seven network during the late 1980s and 1990s. Australia’s free to air television landscape consists of three commercial networks, and public broadcasters the ABC and the multicultural Special Broadcasting Service. In 1988 Vizard was commissioned by Channel Seven to come up with competition to *The Comedy Company*, a character-driven sketch show skewering the Australian suburbs, which was a huge ratings success for Channel 10 and had made stars out of many of Vizard’s fellow Melbourne comedy circuit colleagues.

The result was *Fast Forward*, a fast-paced sketch comedy that tackled contemporary media, lampooning not just local media personalities and the media profiles of Australian politicians,

but also the structure, formats and consumer habits associated with 1980s television (most memorably in the show's use of channel surfing, abrupt changes, fast-forwarding and re-winding). Initial reviews were positive, often pointing out that *Fast Forward* seemed like the first Australian television comedy show that was not carrying over old approaches from theatre or stand-up; it was made entirely for television and by a generation raised on television, re-inventing sketch comedy around what Raymond Williams discerned as the inherent 'flow' of the medium. The ratings for *Fast Forward* started solidly and grew impressively over the first season's eight-week run, and its popularity helped to launch the careers of Australian comedians such as Magda Szubanski, Gina Riley and Jane Turner (of *Kath and Kim* fame), colleagues of Vizard from student revue and the inner-city comedy fringe.

On the back of the success of *Fast Forward*, Channel Seven offered Steve Vizard a lucrative role hosting and producing *Tonight Live*, a David Letterman-style late-night variety show. Steve Vizard and Andrew Knight's company, Artist Services, became one of the largest production houses in Australia and went on to develop *Full Frontal*, which helped advance the careers of its stars Eric Bana, Shaun Micallef and Kitty Flanagan. It also produced successful television shows like *SeaChange* and *Big Girl's Blouse* and later experimental content for the Comedy Channel on subscription television (introduced in 1995) and feature drama films.

As mentioned briefly in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, there is also an important economic dimension to Vizard's oeuvre. The initial comedy and variety programs, *Fast Forward*, *Tonight Live*, *Full Frontal*, were some of the highest rating comedy television shows in the history of Australian TV. In 1994, Artist Services hired a media analyst to estimate the value of the shows they were producing for the Seven Network. According to those reports, in 1989 through 1994 the advertising revenue created for Seven Network by Artist Services programs *Fast Forward* and *Tonight Live* was quoted at "between approximately \$130 million and \$140 million over a five year period, yielding a surplus to the network of between \$65 million and \$75 million" (Bedwell 2007, p. 173). Steve Vizard later sold the company to British production house Granada in 2000 for AUD\$25 million (Bedwell 2007, p. 261).

For Vizard, there is little contradiction between culture and commerce. All artists, whether they are aware of it or not, are engaged, in his view, in negotiating both creative and business decisions. As he put it in the interview for 'Fringe to Famous', "I don't understand what it is that people are talking about when they say, 'I'm doing art' – 'I'm only doing art'... We talk about art and commerce – it's convenient – but actually you're talking about art and life, and commerce – money – is just a part of life". Art and commerce are inseparable, and so for Vizard the real measure of creative success is how well you can translate a new or challenging idea for a broad audience, that is, how well you can transition from a sphere of 'limited' to 'extensive' production. It is not as exciting, for Vizard, to make culture solely for an audience of likeminded peers, to "play to an audience that is already receptive to risk, and to a certain cultural framework":

If I take an audience that were already largely there, and I leave them largely where they were, that's an interesting exercise ... but to me it's not nearly as valuable as taking that audience – a bigger audience – and saying, "have you thought about looking at things this way?" [...] What is the internal structure between the familiar and the challenging? Between mainstream and fringe? ... this is why I reject the idea of the polarities as being offerings that should exist at one end or the other ... I'm interested in places that woo people in and challenge them – blur all that.

This he believed could be accomplished on a commercial network, which in Australia has much larger working class and suburban audiences than the more highly educated loyal ABC audience. For Vizard it is harder and ultimately much more satisfying to “smuggle in some more challenging ideas” into the mainstream (a skill and a creative drive he honed early on, working Melbourne’s cabaret scene where the audiences were a mix of inner-city bohemian types and couples in from the suburbs for a night out on the town). By gradually introducing audiences to what might have been *avant-garde*, or cutting edge concepts, bit by bit Vizard says “I can... actually inoculate people, as to what might have been contentious, by the end of a season, becoming mainstream. I can educate an audience”.

Paul Fenech – ‘Wogsplotation’ and Guerrilla television

In stark contrast to Vizard’s efforts to gradually ‘woo’ mainstream audiences, Paul Fenech’s comedy of the 2000s and 2010s is loud, lewd and wilfully offensive. Fenech is the CEO of his own production company, and the creator and star of several popular and long-running ‘ethnic’ and ‘bogan’ comedies (‘bogan’ being Australian pejorative slang for the Anglo-Celtic proletariat and underclass). Fenech hails from a working-class and mixed Maltese and Indigenous background and got his start in the television industry as a stagehand, sweeping the floors at the Australian Broadcasting Commission, before securing a place with their Indigenous training program, an innovative initiative of the late 1980s. Ultimately Fenech says he found the ABC too staid, too bureaucratic, too middle class and subsequently found a platform for his fast-paced, bad-taste, ethno-comedy at the Special Broadcasting Corporation (SBS), keen to find local variants of their successful US import South Park.

SBS television was inaugurated as an ethnic broadcaster, governed by a charter to provide multilingual and multicultural programming, but over the past 20 years, its art house reputation and government permission to take advertising has seen it transformed into a cutting edge network, similar in style to Channel 4 in the UK. SBS local production was turbo-charged by the Keating Government’s Creative Nation cultural policy, which provided funds for the establishment of SBS Independent, charged with commissioning and developing diverse innovative projects from independent producers. SBSI operated as an autonomous unit within the broadcaster from 1994 to 2007, providing opportunities for a new generation of comedy, documentary and feature filmmakers.

Fenech’s comedies for SBS – most notably *Pizza*, centred on the employees of a greasy pizzeria and *Housos*, about the residents of a fictional Sydney public housing estate – are politically incorrect, vulgar, sexually explicit and often downright silly. Fenech rejects what he sees as a British cerebral comedy tradition of languid talk in favour of the fast-paced action and slapstick violence of vaudeville acts in the tradition of ‘The Three Stooges’. His mission is to make fun of authority, notably the regulation, control and misrepresentation of marginalised people by state, media and the well meaning on both sides of politics.

Like the UK drama *Shameless*, Fenech’s comedy challenges the middle-class representation of social housing tenants and immigrants as disadvantaged or victims, presenting them as entrepreneurial, artful dodgers. Shows like *Pizza* and *Housos* also reflect the ethnic diversity of Sydney’s working-class western suburbs; a space where those in precarious employment and from Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds collide (sometimes literally) with each other and with marginalised, long-term unemployed, Anglo-celtic Australians. The comedies depict a spectrum of ‘brown’ ethnicities spanning Indigenous Australians, Polynesians, Lebanese and Mediterraneans, which Fenech collectively refers to as ‘chockos’ and with which he himself identifies. *Pizza* in particular is often located in the subgenre of ‘wogsplotation’ comedy

(Speed 2005) and is routinely criticised for revelling in ethnic stereotypes, but Fenech's vision of 'ethnic diversity' is more complex than this easy critique. Fenech's ethnicised outer suburbia is an important counter to the lingering whiteness of most Australian television, especially prime time. Moreover, it is an innovative riposte to what Ghassan Hage (1998) calls 'governmental' multiculturalism – a strategy for managing ethnic difference that denies the complexity, vibrancy and hybridity of the 'multicultural real'.

Paul Fenech's background has necessitated a much more pragmatic approach to the interplay of market forces and creative ambition. Describing his work ethic in the interview for 'Fringe to Famous', Fenech says "I never had the luxury of just being able to be arty for the sake of it. In any job that I ever had, film or not, I had to survive by working hard". He explains that he is very willing to take creative risks but not financial ones. His comedy is frequently transgressive and offensive, but it is made very cheaply: "...that's just my philosophy on surviving as a producer. If we're going to make edgy stuff, you can't expect people to really pay top dollar, because if it's a failure, whoever has supported you is really going to cop it". His approach is to do much of the work himself (write, direct, produce, star), to keep production budgets low, to keep the overheads of the production company low and to keep the shoot as fast and fuss free as possible. The last part is made possible in part by Fenech's rapport with communities in western Sydney where, he says, the locals are much more relaxed about an impromptu film shoot. This fast, cheap, 'guerrilla' model of production in turn informs much of the look and feel of *Pizza* and *Housos*, especially their appropriation of documentary techniques, breakneck pacing and on-location shooting.

In many ways Fenech's approach resembles older traditions of exploitation filmmaking – niche content made for as little as possible finding wider appeal by trafficking in outrage and titillation, but here it has been applied to a multicultural television franchise (*Pizza* spans several spin-off television programs, films and hundreds of live revue shows). Leveraging the popularity of the original television series, the feature film *Fat Pizza* (2003) was made for a tiny budget of AUD \$400,000 and took in AUD \$3.6 million at the Australian box office, making it one of the top 100 highest grossing Australian films of all time (SA 2015). A similar spinoff feature film, *Housos vs Authority* (2012), was made for even less, AUD \$200,000, and made almost AUD \$1.4 million at the box office. Not all titles have been as successful, but with such a small initial outlay the return on investment for many of Fenech's comedies would be the envy of any local production company, exploitation or otherwise.

Notwithstanding his success at combining audience appeal with innovation within the comedy form, Fenech is yet to be embraced by the Australian screen establishment, perhaps because of the overtly working-class and permissive tone of his work. In the interview for 'Fringe to Famous', he was critical of the precarious nature of current employment in the television sector and the diminution of training opportunities he had enjoyed at the ABC. However, in an environment where most comedy content commissioned by public broadcasters is produced by outsourced entities, Fenech sees his own independent productions providing opportunities for emerging talent to hone their skills and ideas working with more experienced hands, in a less bureaucratically constrained and more risk-taking environment than is available today in a large broadcaster. For example, *Pizza* was the first major comedic acting role for the then unknown Rebel Wilson, who has since gone on to develop a significant screen comedy career in the United States. He also provides employment for talent drawn from a diversity of ethnic and other marginalised groups, such as working class and disabled Australians, not ordinarily represented with this degree of agency on mainstream television.

Fancy Boy – finding creative autonomy in the cross-platform environment

Fancy Boy is a Melbourne comedy collective best known for a fast-paced, scatological and sexually explicit live variety show and short video sketches for YouTube. It is an entity that has developed across a range of platforms, including live club nights, YouTube and (recently) television following a successful submission to ‘Fresh Blood’ (an initiative jointly sponsored by the national screen funding body, Screen Australia and the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation). As the name suggests, ‘Fresh Blood’ has been an experiment in ‘unearthing’ new comedy talent through a progressive competition. On the strength of the initial submission and previous success on YouTube, Fancy Boy was one of 25 emerging comedy acts chosen to produce sketches for distribution on the ABC’s digital platform iView. It advanced to a second round of ‘Fresh Blood’, as one of five acts to receive funding to develop a 30-minute pilot, and eventually the team was commissioned to produce an entire *Fancy Boy* series for distribution on iView and ABC2.

Fancy Boy satirises pop culture and media, but it is a product of the ‘post-South Park’ generation, with an altogether darker and more perverse flavour of comedy than earlier sketch programs like Vizard’s *Fast Forward* or *Full Frontal*. It is also a product of a post-YouTube era. *Fancy Boy*, along with other super low-budget, emerging Australian comedy acts like *Bondi Hipsters* or *Natalie Tran*, has found a substantial aggregate audience online (in the case of Natalie Tran’s 1.7 million YouTube channel subscribers, these are audience numbers that would be considered ‘mass’ by Australian standards).

Although the *Fancy Boy* team has shown some entrepreneurial flair, the principal producers Mark Conway and Mike Nayna see commercial and creative processes as inconsistent. In their interview for ‘Fringe to Famous’, they go so far as to describe the two as ‘mutually exclusive’ (except, they acknowledge, in the United States where economies of scale ensure there is a viable audience for niche comedy). It is a view that we have seen echoed elsewhere in the cultural industries, in the contemporary independent music and games sectors in particular. For the *Fancy Boy* producers, wider audience reach and mainstream validation is important, at least in terms of developing a profile and opening up more opportunities for paid work, but not at the expense of ‘creative fulfilment’ and integrity. Success is not understood primarily as mainstream audiences or financial reward, but as freedom from the time-sapping tedium of chasing grants and the meddlesome oversight of funding bodies (of course achieved through some level of financial success and audience impact). As Mark Conway explains:

So success to me would be not having to go through all these jumping hoops of funding, and justifying everything you’re doing, and explaining step-by-step, and constantly having to check in. It would be that you’ve had enough success that – “Here’s the money. Go do what you do and bring it back to us”.

Of course that kind of freedom comes at a cost. Nayna and Conway began by setting up their own comedy club featuring performers they both liked. As Nayna explains this strategy, “I don’t want to have to rely on someone else for the opportunities – I’d prefer to make it myself.... It’s almost like artist/entrepreneur, and that’s kind of how you have to be unless you want to be on the bottom rung of all this sort of stuff”. Eventually they bought their own equipment and started a production company. Where at one time greater financial and creative independence might have been hard won through a record of past success, here it is acquired through a smart, prudential approach to business sustainability.

Although the *Fancy Boy* producers frame what they do in the new millennial language of start-up culture, being entrepreneurial and seizing opportunities, it can also be understood as the latest expression of DIY culture, which has always involved a dynamic interplay between economic and cultural value. The *Fancy Boy* franchise might seem worlds away from the multi-million dollar comedy empire that Steve Vizard built during the heyday of network television in the late 1980s and 1990s, but their more modest success across a range of platforms is evidence of a similar creative and business verve. The key difference is that in an era where even mainstream success is no guarantee of a financial windfall, Conway and Nayna are aware that lean operations and creative integrity are essential to doing good business in the long term.

Conclusion

These examples highlight some of the problems with the tendency to polarisation that has characterised a number of recent debates around cultural policy and economy. It is impossible to understand them without recognising the complex interconnection between commerce and culture. A ‘preservationist’ perspective that understands the two as opposites simply does not reflect the lived experiences or creative philosophies of most of the practitioners we have spoken to in the course of our research. The relation between creative development and business has many different forms. In the case of Australian screen comedy, Steve Vizard set out to ‘woo’ mainstream audiences. He introduced calculated doses of subversive satire, political critique, media analysis and formal experimentation within a popular, commercial television format. Meanwhile Paul Fenech has won a broad popular audience with a raucous, low-brow, low-budget brand of comedy and in doing so challenged the pervasive middle-brow whiteness of prime-time Australian television. In both cases, there is a close connection between aesthetic and business development.

This is not to say, however, that one can simply be reduced to the other. Contrary to the full-blown innovation systems perspective discussed earlier in the chapter, there are important moments of tension and divergence. Many creative practitioners we have talked to, especially those from a younger generation, place a high value on creative freedom and maintain a restless search for ways to prevent its subordination, either to business imperatives or the bureaucratic requirements of attracting government support. In keeping with a long tradition of ‘indie’ and DIY culture, producers like Mark Conway and Mike Nayna from *Fancy Boy* look continually for ways to gain some creative autonomy. While they are, in many ways, ‘entrepreneurial’, always on the lookout for new opportunities in the new cross-platform environment, business development is more a necessity than an end in itself. Like many creatives, they are seeking no more than to find a sustainable economic base for their practice.

There have been moments in Australian cultural policy where a certain balance has been found. The twin focus on culture and economy that was embraced in the 1994 Creative Nation policy was briefly revived under the 2013 Creative Australia policy introduced by the Federal Labour government (Crean 2013). At other times, however, policy directions have oscillated between extremes. In the two years following the defeat of Labor in late 2013, there was a marked return to preservationist policies under the conservative leadership of Tony Abbott. Although Creative Australia was not officially revoked by the Abbott Government, its pro-market liberalism was trumped by an instinct to subsidise the high arts and reintroduce state paternalism under a rubric of ‘excellence’. Behind a romantic rhetoric critical of the alleged philistine utilitarianism of Creative Australia was an elitist return to

older notions of arts patronage (involving, most controversially, a transfer of funds away from the ‘arms-length’ peer review process of the Australia Council to the ‘hand-picked’ control of the Arts Minister).

With the recent toppling of Abbott from within his own Liberal Party by the small ‘l’ liberal Malcolm Turnbull – a former media lawyer, merchant banker, tech entrepreneur and Communications Minister – there has been a return to a rhetoric of innovation and entrepreneurship. In the area of cultural policy this has seen the creation of a new funding program dubbed ‘Catalyst’, which “aims to support innovative ideas from arts and cultural organisations that may find it difficult to access funding” from traditional sources (Fifield 2015). It remains to be seen how this will play out. Many arts workers and cultural commentators are wary, wondering whether there is any functional difference between the Abbott and Turnbull policies, with each mention of ‘excellence’ merely being replaced with ‘innovation’ (Croggon 2015). What our research suggests is that there are dangers, in a complex market economy, of purifying cultural policy around either of these terms. Making a totem of ‘excellence’ by itself risks a static notion of culture that fails to register the real circumstances in which it is largely produced. To place the emphasis entirely on ‘innovation’, however, risks reducing creativity in the cultural arena merely to a business function, one that is unsympathetic to the actual motivations of the majority of creative practitioners.

‘Fringe to Famous’ suggests a number of further areas for research. If, as we have argued, the relation between commerce and culture should be seen as contingent rather than necessary, questions arise about the conditions under which they complement and reinforce each other and the conditions under which they diverge. Why is it, for example, that little antagonism was felt by Steve Vizard in the 1980s between aesthetic innovation and working in the heart of commercial television? Why is it that for younger creatives today, such as the Fancy Boy producers, the two appear contradictory? The crisis of business models in commercial media is probably a significant factor here. As the general profitability of the sector has declined, it has lost what might be called its ‘margin of generosity’ in which figures such as Vizard thrived. As the business dimension becomes tougher, less forgiving, it is perhaps more often experienced as fundamentally hostile to cultural aspirations.

This raises a larger set of questions about the implications for our argument of the emergence of digital media. How have digital media altered the relation between ‘fringe’ and ‘famous’? The digital turn has led to vastly improved access to low-cost production and distribution and opportunities for self-curation. It is less clear, however, that it has actually delivered a diversity dividend. The collapse of mass media business models has made it increasingly difficult to make a living in creative practice, particularly in the early stages of a career. This often means that the field is left to those with independent means or alternative sources of income. Public broadcasters can perform some of the function of introducing new voices, such as in the case of the ABC’s Fresh Blood initiative. However, they too are under pressure and cannot provide, by themselves, the conduit for popularisation and distribution that have been provided in the past by market processes. There are important questions for further investigation here.

There are finally questions about the prospects for the tradition in cultural policy of attempting to balance commercial and cultural imperatives. As we have outlined above, this tradition, which had an early provenance in Australia with policy settings under the Keating Labor Government, has had genuine successes, such as SBS Independent, connecting new and diverse work and talent with audiences. It saw a brief revival in 2013 with the release of *Creative Australia*, but its future is now uncertain. Internationally, policy approaches that take a positive interest in the commercial cultural industries have been strongly associated

with the 'Creative Industries' paradigm developed in the United Kingdom under the Blair government during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Within the UK itself, the approach has largely died along with the fortunes of the Blairite 'third way' program of which it was part. While it has been taken up elsewhere, most notably in Asia, it has tended to have a harder economic edge than its original formulation; it is now widely regarded as subordinating culture almost entirely to the status of an economic resource. There remains scope, however, for recovering the older, more balanced approach – perhaps best represented, at the national level, in the Australian case. There are significant opportunities for further work here.

Interviews

Mark Conway and Mike Nayna. Interview conducted 01 November 2015, Melbourne.

Paul Fenech. Interview conducted 30 October 2014, Sydney.

Steve Vizard. Interview conducted 02 December 2014, Melbourne.

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