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The media geographies of Tom O'Regan

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the many contributions of Tom O'Regan to media scholarship in Australia. While O'Regan may be best known as a scholar of Australian film and television, we suggest that O'Regan was also – and always – a scholar of the global. His work was premised on the idea that national and global industries are co-constitutive, shaped by flows of content, technology, ideas and attention. These are, fundamentally, matters of media geography – an issue to which O'Regan returned continuously throughout his long career. O'Regan was fascinated by spatial aspects of media: questions of flow and exchange across, between and within nations; problems of scale and scalar relations; and interactions between local, national, subnational, regional and global formations. We suggest O'Regan's research oriented national and subnational media studies along that expansive geographical plane, and we consider how this perspective informed his prolific work on film, television, video, and digital platforms.

Keywords

film, media geography, piracy, platforms, Tom O'Regan, video

Tom O'Regan may be best and longest known as a scholar of Australian film and television, the author of the groundbreaking early books *Australian Television Culture* (O'Regan, 1993) and *Australian National Cinema* (O'Regan, 1996), among many notable contributions. O'Regan's work expertly located industry, policy and academic debates over Australia's audiovisual industries within his own deep understanding of Australia's cultural and social frame. He followed these books with a sequence of publications closely engaged with national cultural policy, while tracing the sometimes surprising fortunes of the Australian film and media sectors. Throughout, he worked with a subtle and adaptive understanding of national audiovisual cultures. He was particularly interested in their political and economic contingencies, their long dependencies on complex transnational linkages, and the deep connections between markets for cultural goods and larger social histories. In O'Regan's account, screen culture was the creature of both unusual commercial dynamics and 'a problem for government' (O'Regan, 2001). Yet, while his studies of national cultural formations have now

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influenced several generations of Australian students, practitioners and scholars, they have also shaped work well beyond Australia on national cinema and cultural policy.

At the same time, O'Regan was also – and always – a scholar of the global. His work was premised on the idea that national and global industries are co-constitutive, shaped by pervasive and uneven flows of content, technology, ideas and attention. These are, fundamentally, matters of media geography – an issue to which O'Regan returns continuously throughout his long career. O'Regan was fascinated by spatial aspects of media: questions of flow and exchange across, between and within nations; problems of scale and scalar relations; and interactions between local, national, subnational, regional and global formations. Tom's research oriented national and subnational media studies along that expansive geographical plane; at the same time, the attention to geography carried with it an insistence on reconnecting local scholarship to those diverse rich veins of communications and cultural scholarship which recognised spatial relationships as central issues for the discipline. Tom's conversation and his published work frequently addressed this classic theme in North American communication studies (referencing Innis, Carey and many others), media economics, political economy and economic history (Douglass North), and cultural economics (Allen Scott). In his writing, a strong appreciation for such writers converged dynamically with a Griffith-flavoured take on cultural studies, Foucault and governmentality.

In this short essay, we suggest that O'Regan's distinctively geographical orientation now provides a powerful set of ideas for thinking about why and how space matters to media. We reflect on some of the legacies of O'Regan's work, and how it has prompted us – among many others who have benefitted over the years from his writing, engagement and friendship – to think about these questions differently. Of course, it is a challenge to follow only one thread through O'Regan's prolific body of work. O'Regan published a substantial volume of books, anthologies and articles. He developed a remarkably collegial writing, editing and publishing practice – evident as far back as the creation of *Continuum* and the publication of *Australian Television Culture*, in which chapters co-authored with Dona Kolar-Panov (on SBS) and Philip Batty (on Aboriginal TV) substantially expanded that book's scope and argument. Later, Ben Goldsmith was an important collaborator and co-author in many subsequent projects, and Anna Potter, Mark Balnaves and Susan Ward were prominent co-authors. Tom's protracted, continuing dialogues with his many academic and non-academic interlocutors were also a valuable means for him and others to clarify and test ideas. So when we write about Tom O'Regan's work, we are necessarily also writing about, and appreciating, the significant contributions of a notable array of scholars.

While preparing this essay, we have revisited our files and retrieved the dozens of texts – highlighted, annotated, scribbled-on, and used again and again in teaching and research, across many different projects – that define our personal engagements with O'Regan's thought. Several pieces on the complexity of global media markets have been particularly productive for our thinking about spatial perspectives on media generally, and our own work on informal media economies more specifically (Lobato and Thomas, 2015). Rereading these works, they appear to us to still have many important things to say; in that and other respects – their generosity, sophistication and range – they embody the great qualities of his scholarship.

O'Regan's (1991) article 'From Piracy to Sovereignty: International VCR Trends' appeared in a special issue of *Continuum* edited by John Hartley on the forward-looking theme of 'Television and . . .'. The article addresses the emergence of the videocassette recorder (VCR) as 'the most significant of the new TV technologies', and seeks to specify the significance of the VCR for television markets and industries in global terms. O'Regan swiftly identifies the highly variable manifestations of the VCR in different television systems: as a movie-oriented adjunct to more established modes of commercial distribution; as an additional, 'partially underground' TV service; and as a de facto pay-TV service. The answer to the question of what the VCR was depended

on where you were; the consequences of the VCR depended on the dynamics of both formal and informal systems of distribution and marketing.

O'Regan's suggestions about the productive but insufficiently understood relations between piracy and regulated markets were of particular interest to us as scholars investigating informal media in a variety of forms and locations. Characteristically, the article achieved several important things and operated at (at least) three levels. 'From Piracy to Sovereignty' situates in a global and historical context the Australian experience of the VCR, and especially, the extraordinary development of the tape rental market in the 1980s and early 1990s. It shows how the VCR can be understood as a simultaneously political, cultural and economic technology. It shows how important it is to recognise the plurality and diversity of global media markets, and the interactions between them. It takes piracy seriously as a mechanism in market formation, without normative judgement. It points to an important double consequence: the 'decentralising' of television for viewers, and a parallel shift from state-based regulatory control to an expanded, market-driven industry. The article deploys O'Regan's remarkably broad understanding of the global screen industries, offering telling examples of the particularities of video markets from Turkey and the Gulf States to Latin America. At another level, as is often the case with O'Regan's work, this piece is also an argument about audiovisual scholarship, and the importance of some remarkable preceding studies: Gladys Ganley and Oswald Ganley's (1987) *Global Political Fallout: the VCR's First Decade*, and Douglas Boyd et al.'s (1989) *Videocassette Recorders in the Third World*. O'Regan notes that his article should be understood as a postscript to the latter text.

Almost 30 years after its publication, 'From Piracy to Sovereignty' remains an incisive and wide-ranging study, with much to offer the current wave of researchers examining the new reconfigurations of global video driven by the many varieties of Internet-distributed television. Equally characteristically, Tom O'Regan himself had considerably more to say about video and the VCR. He revisited the topic in a 2012 article in *Television and New Media*, kindly responding to our invitation to contribute to a workshop, and then a special issue, on informal media economies (O'Regan, 2012). Here, he again emphasised the importance of understanding pirate markets in terms of their geographical complexity and diversity, and their historical lines of descent. He argued against a simple digital or analogue ontology, pointing first to the continuities between the Internet-based video media of the 2010s and the era of the VCR, and then to the connections between VCR markets and older models of subscription-based lending libraries, and pay-to-view cinema and theatre. Again, he wanted to demonstrate the plural and piecemeal qualities of commercial and cultural transformations. He was especially interested in how transformative technologies could produce different effects – both organising and disorganising markets – in different places, and how these effects could arise 'in both geographically central and in peripheral places simultaneously' (O'Regan, 2012: 385). In the circumstances, for us, Tom's pronouncements were instructive and deeply sobering, as we worked on bringing together a broad overview of media informality, a task that seemed both impossible and badly needed. But Tom also gave us many of the conceptual resources required to proceed.

One of O'Regan's (2004) most enduring essays is 'Cultural exchange'. This admirably concise text remains indispensable as both a go-to teaching text and as a major synthetic work of cultural theory in its own right. Arguing that cinema has always been defined by 'the lending and redisposition of cultural materials from one filmmaking and cultural tradition to another' (Stam and Miller, 2004: 262), O'Regan asks how one can systematically apprehend and assess these constitutive processes of cultural exchange: what elements does an effective analysis require? In response, he offers a unique taxonomy of objects and issues, integrating analysis of cultural *materials*, *communities*, *standing* and *negotiation* across geographic locations and scales.

Peppered with examples of cinematic exchange across and within Europe, Asia and Africa, the essay is deeply considered and properly historical in its attention to the long durée. O'Regan begins with the materials of cultural exchange – films, creative personnel, concepts, stories, translations, creative and industrial practices, receptions and interpretations – all of which are mobile in their own ways. These materials circulate across nation-states, but also regions and other supra-national groupings, language groups, faith communities and identity communities. He then explores the contested 'standing' of cultural exchange, which may be variously welcomed, resisted, denied or ignored by receiving communities. The chapter concludes with a rich discussion of the economic logics that shape media circulation across different kinds of boundaries. This multi-scalar model – an ontology of sorts for understanding cross-cultural flows – goes beyond the neat binaries of local or global and national or transnational. It is an analytically robust, yet accessible, theory of culture in motion, written at a time when debates on cultural exchange were often locked into unhelpful dialectics of purity and pollution, or thin theories of the cosmopolitan.

Collaborations through the 2000s generated a rich body of work on film studios and global production. In a series of publications O'Regan co-authored with Ben Goldsmith and Susan Ward – including a report for the Australian Film Commission (Goldsmith and O'Regan, 2003) and the book *The Film Studio: Film Production in the Global Economy* (Goldsmith and O'Regan, 2005) – the authors develop a rich descriptive and conceptual account of how the contemporary studio complex has emerged as a nexus point linking national and global film production. Approaching the studio as an institution that 'makes visible the important and ongoing role of place, local intermediaries and physical infrastructure in the global dispersal of production' (Goldsmith and O'Regan, 2005: xiii), *The Film Studio* offers an elegant conceptualisation of the spatial aspects of studio production, including the disaggregated and re-aggregated production models that enable a movie to be shot in different places and stitched together into an integrated whole; the local advantages (environmental, infrastructural, workforce) that distinguish international studios from one another; the national policy systems, networks and exchanges that support these institutions; and, finally, the on-screen geographies that studios facilitate, in which certain places come to stand in for other, real places or become wholly fictional worlds. *The Film Studio* remains a powerful work of theory for global screen and production studies, and also prefigures the current infrastructural turn in media studies by taking seriously the backstage institutions of screen production as sites for critical investigation.

In his later years, O'Regan turned his attention towards digital platforms as sites of media production and distribution. This later work responded in part to the inescapable significance of digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Amazon, but it also extended naturally from his long-standing interest in spatial patterns of media production and distribution. With Adrian Athique, O'Regan convened the Platform Media: Algorithms, Accountability and Media Design research group at University of Queensland, and co-hosted a series of events there throughout 2018 and 2019 involving a diverse group of scholars in media studies, law and information technology. He co-authored, with Nina Luzhou Li, a paper on Chinese platforms (O'Regan and Li, 2019), and worked with colleagues at UQ to host a series of conversations on Indian platforms. Among the last of these events was a symposium on geolocation and digital media.

Across these projects, O'Regan was always interested to push at the boundaries – spatial and temporal – of how we understand platforms and their significance to different media systems. He stressed the importance of approaching platforms not merely as manifestations of contemporary digital technologies, but as outcomes of longer historical processes. He argued also for attention to the diverse national contexts and conditions in which platforms are located. While his work on this theme was sadly unfinished, those who knew him during this time will remember his passion for the topic.

As we write this essay, a major platform policy debate is underway in Australia as the federal government seeks to address the market power of Google and Facebook through the news media bargaining code. Tom would have been fascinated but unsurprised by recent developments, including Google's agreements with news organisations and Facebook's extraordinary evacuation of Australian news and information-related content. While unquestionably of international significance, these events and the background to them cannot be understood outside the long history of Australian media and communications policy, where governments have long been attentive to the claims of established media businesses, and have intervened in the past to attempt to address perceived threats to the security of major incumbent, if possible without incurring public expenditure.

At the same time, authorities in Europe and the United States are investigating other means to reassert governmental control over online news distribution, private data flows, automated advertising technologies, competitive dynamics and related issues. The current moment is a striking case of O'Regan's 'simultaneity' of diverse, incremental transformation across the global peripheries and the centre. He would remind us that we will not be able to understand, let alone regulate, platform societies without a surer grasp on their spatial and temporal dimensions. His work will continue to guide those efforts.

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