**Impact case study (REF3b)**

| Institution: University of Westminster |
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| Unit of Assessment: UoA 29: English Language and Literature |
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| Title of case study: Informing Creative Practices and Heritage in Visual Media |
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**1. Summary of the impact**

This case study highlights the impact derived from research undertaken into the history and contemporary possibilities of new visual media technologies, and is focused on the work of two cultural theorists in the Department, Dr David Cunningham and Dr Sas Mays. Their engagements with visual-technological cultures showcase the impact of their work on various public audiences, artistic and media practitioners and heritage organisations in creating access to new cultural knowledge for non-academic users. Mays's research has informed practice in the worlds of contemporary art and visual media heritage. Cunningham's research has generated public understanding of the visual culture of the modern metropolis, and, more directly, innovation and entrepreneurial activities within the new media production industry.

**2. Underpinning research**

Cunningham joined the Department in Sept 2002 as full-time Lecturer and was promoted to Principal Lecturer in Sept 2005. He is Deputy Director of the Faculty's interdisciplinary Institute for Modern and Contemporary Culture (IMCC). Mays joined the Department in Feb 2005 as a 0.5 Lecturer, became a full-time Lecturer in Jan 2009 and was promoted to Senior Lecturer in March 2010. He is co-ordinator of the Archiving Cultures project based within the IMCC.

Both Cunningham and Mays's research is exemplary of the kinds of cross-disciplinary attention to varying modes of representation and image that has been central to the development of English studies over the last decade. In this way, their research intersects with broader issues within cultural studies, and particularly with the interdisciplinary fields of media archaeology and urban studies. Following Cunningham's and Mays's collaboration on the 2005 collection *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Item 5 below), which developed out of a 2004 symposium at Westminster, Mays's general research interests have centred on the mediation of cultural experience and memory through different technological and archival forms, from the textual to the visual, and the analogue to the digital. These were further developed in his role as Principal Investigator for the AHRC-funded Network on 'Spiritualism and Technology in Contemporary and Historical Contexts' based at Westminster (2009-10). The AHRC project culminated in the 2013 collection *The Machine and the Ghost* (item 4 below), which has a specific research focus on contemporary art practices. In this way, Mays's research has sought to explore the renewed interest shown in contemporary artistic practice in 'lost', 'obsolete', and 'archaic' visual media forms and the illusion-producing processes of the past: for example, the camera obscura, magic lantern, stage illusion, optical toys and panorama, as well as stylised period representations such as are found in the imagery of spiritualism, automatic writing and early photographic techniques.

Complementing Mays's focus, Cunningham has established himself as an important voice in the field of urban cultural theory, and, most significantly for this case study, in research in urban visual culture, with a range of publications over the last decade (see, for example, items 1, 2 and 3). The research findings in his widely-cited 2005 essay 'The Concept of Metropolis', combined a new historical 'genealogy of the metropolis, as a negation of the restriction of earlier urban forms', with a cross-disciplinary 'analysis of the urban' rooted in an account of the larger impacts of capitalist development (as described by Peter Osborne in his book *Anywhere or Not At All*, Verso, 2013). This case study focuses specifically on the elaboration and development of Cunningham's research with regard to its innovative theoretical account of modern urban culture's connections to the abstracting character of monetary relations. Cunningham's research findings detail the cultural consequences of a situation in which, increasingly, the urban façade in its entirety becomes a potential media surface: a space of display on which, variously, television, cinema, advertising, architecture, graphic design, text, and photography interpenetrate and converge.

# 3. References to the research

1) David Cunningham, "Floating on the Same Plane: Metropolis, Money and the Culture of Abstraction" *Journal of Visual Culture* 12.1 (2013): 38-60.

2) David Cunningham, 'A Seam with the Economic: Art, Architecture, Metropolis', in Marta Kuzma & Peter Osborne (eds), *ISMS 1: Constructing the Political in Contemporary Art* (Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2006): 131-166.

3) David Cunningham, "The Concept of Metropolis" *Radical Philosophy* 133 (2005): 13-25.

4) Sas Mays (with Neil Matheson), eds, *The Machine and the Ghost: Technology and Spiritualism in 19th to 21st Century Art and Culture* (Manchester University Press, 2013).

5) David Cunningham and Sas Mays (with Andrew Fisher), eds, *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century* (CSP, 2005).

6) Grant award: AHRC 'Beyond the Text' Research Network Grant for 'Spiritualism and Technology in Contemporary and Historical Contexts' (£9,254), 2009-10 (PI: Sas Mays).

Quality indicators for this research include:

Item 1) peer-reviewed journal publication; entered in REF2
Item 2) invited contribution to international series of publications, funded by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway, a non-profit foundation created by the Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Item 3) peer-reviewed journal publication; translated in Portuguese journal *Revista Periferia* 2.2 (2011); widely cited, including in Gandy, *Cultural Geographies* 13.4 (2006); McCormack, *Progress in Human Geography* (2006); Madden, *Environment and Planning D* (2012)
Item 4) entered in REF2; culminating publication of AHRC Research Networks grant
Item 5) entered in RAE 2008 (73% of outputs rated at 2* or above); cited in, for example, introduction to Mick Gidley, ed., *Writing With Light* (2009)
Item 6) extensively peer-assessed (and very competitive) Research Council award.

# 4. Details of the impact

The routes to impact detailed in this case study have been facilitated by Cunningham's and Mays's involvement in the Faculty's Institute for Modern and Contemporary Culture, which was established in 2008 to act as a focal point for collaboration with outside cultural institutions, facilitating various cross-disciplinary projects and public events programmes, and which maintains its own blog/website (http://instituteformodern.co.uk).

Transferring Knowledge to New Visual Media Creative Industries:

Cunningham's research on urban cultural theory has been translated with significant success into contributions to both public discourse and architectural, new media and urbanist professional activities. Engagements with diverse public audiences internationally, combined with the transference of complex research into publicly-accessible forms – such as, for example, his public talk on cities as part of the 'Big Ideas' pub philosophy series in London (March 2012), and participation in the BBC Radio 4 documentary 'Philosophy in the Streets' (May 2008) – has enabled Cunningham to exert influence on discussions concerning the challenges faced by contemporary urban society. Benefits to public and professional understanding in this area have been realised through, for example, invitations to disseminate his research as part of the Architectural Association's Landscape Urbanism public lecture series (March 2009) as well as to contribute more broadly to the AA's City Cultures project. The wider significance and reach of Cunningham's research in this field is further evidenced in contributions to sold-out events at the Royal Academy of Arts' Architecture and Urban Forum (May 2012, May 2010; both of which are available as podcasts via itunes) and internationally to the Circulo des Bellas Artes in Madrid (May 2008: public lecture subsequently translated into Spanish for a wider audience). Together public engagements such as these (of which these are just a sample) have extended the quality of evidence and theoretical frameworks available to a collection of diverse organisations and

audiences.

Early instances of public dissemination of Cunningham's work led to an invitation to speak at the first international Media Architecture conference held at Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design (2007), which was instrumental in bringing together for the first time the principal players in facade systems – property developers, architecture practices and researchers – from across the world. As a result of this event, Cunningham met Peter Cornwell, Director of new media company BLIP Creative (www.blipcreative.com), and, as a consequence, has been able to work in closer collaboration with a new media industry partner to transfer the insights of his research into direct benefit to their work since 2008. BLIP, based nearby to Westminster in Soho, London, create LED display technologies for the commercial and arts sectors, with clients including Sony, Samsung and the European Commission. Peter Cornwell has commented (email correspondence) that Cunningham's "research has been instrumental in thinking through the radical distributed facade display systems that we have taken to market during the last five years", and hence directly contributed to BLIP's "departure from the trajectory in which the company had developed the moving image display technologies used" before 2008.

Cunningham's informal consultancy relationship with BLIP between 2008 and 2009 led, in turn, to the IMCC's participation in 'The International Distributed Display Initiative' based on technology developed by BLIP. This allowed Cunningham, in collaboration with new media artist Alison Craighead (http://www.thomson-craighead.net/), to facilitate the installation in 2011 of a public LED installation in the window of Westminster's Wells Street building (see http://www.blipcreative.com/blog.html), which allows for the creation of user-generated content via a 'user-friendly' online interface designed by BLIP. The network links together state-of-the-art screens at Westminster and Princeton University, which can be remotely accessed to upload and modify works on each by viewing webcam imagery online, with temporary screens in various public venues installed by BLIP. A concern for impact has been key to this project both in realising the creative potential (for short text as well as visual content) generated by the public nature of the screens and in contributing to ongoing theoretical reflection upon the potential uses of public display media valuable to the commercial and artistic work of BLIP. As correspondence with Cornwell confirms, Cunningham's work on the cultural questions raised by the uses of "distributed media in public space" informed, in this way, the design process for a number of "high profile installation projects" undertaken by BLIP from 2010 to the present, including the LED installation built for the European Commission at the Justus Lipsius Building in Brussels with the artist Daniel Canogar, which was the centre-piece of the Spanish presidency of the EU (2010). Such research impact has led, in turn, to further invitations for Cunningham to present his work in this area to other public and professional audiences, such as an invitation to participate in a panel on 'Curating Urban Screens' at the 2011 LOOP Contemporary Video Art Fair in Barcelona, attended by various international video artists and curators. Cunningham's research findings have also generated further benefit through the transfer of his knowledge to urban planning education in connected fields, as indicated by the inclusion of his publications on key reading lists for courses at, for example, the Architectural Association and University of Toronto, Canada.

Supporting and Informing Creative Practice and Heritage in Visual Media Art:

Complementing Cunningham's research focus on new media, the new knowledge generated by Mays's research has helped to preserve and present the cultural heritage of visual media internationally. In addition, it has made a significant contribution to informing and supporting contemporary creative practices, especially for a new generation of younger artists. Specifically, Mays's underpinning research on the intersections of nineteenth and twentieth-century image and text, combined with the AHRC Research Network grant he was awarded, provided knowledge and funding for a series of impact pathway activities that brought together literary, visual, and cultural critics with contemporary artists and specialists in the field of visual technologies. The findings of this project were publicised and disseminated widely, including, for example, via Mays's November 2009 presentation to RADA (also podcast on youtube and the AHRC website). These activities led to a collaboration with the Magic Lantern Society, which has a world-wide membership comprising collectors, enthusiasts, film-makers, magicians, performers, scientists and archival organisations from over 30 different countries, whose interests cover a variety of 'lost' forms of visual media and

optical diversions (http://www.magiclantern.org.uk/). The Head of the MLS, Mervyn Heard, attended the Network events and subsequently asked Mays to collaborate in co-organising a series of six public lectures on 'optical magic' entitled 'Professor Pepper's Ghost' (Nov 2009–Feb 2010) held in Westminster's Regent Street building, and sponsored by the IMCC. The series was, for example, listed in the London *Time Out* 'Things to Do' section and attended by 80-100 people per lecture, with a significant non-academic audience reflective of the Magic Lantern Society's membership. Such collaboration evidences significant success in re-presenting British visual media heritage to a new generation of creative stakeholders, both amateur and professional. For example, the curator of the Photographers' Gallery, London, Johanna Empson, who was invited to attend the AHRC project events, noted that her involvement led to "further collaboration [with 'an exciting group' of photographers] … at a time when digital photography and the web are quickly changing notions of the vernacular."

The impact of this collaboration was further enhanced by Mays's organisation with the Magic Lantern Society of a public conference entitled 'Old Media / New Work: Obsolete Technologies and Contemporary Art' (May 2010), again hosted by the IMCC. The conference was attended by c.80 people, and was specifically designed to provide a platform for interaction and engagement between non-academic specialists and young contemporary visual (and audio) artists, so as to engender forms of collaboration that would extend the impact of Mays's research activities in this area. The event focused on artists working with or around 'lost' visual media practices, in order to show, discuss, and explore such work in the context of its contemporary relevance and future possibilities, and was further disseminated through the online research project 'Archiving Cultures', established by Mays in 2010 (http://archivingcultures.org/). Mays's research was also of direct benefit in furthering impact-yielding connections with a younger, contemporary art audience, as well as directly benefiting the Magic Lantern Society in widening its scope to include twenty-first-century artistic engagements with 'obsolete' visual media. Articulating the reach of Mays's work into new artistic practice, the multimedia artist Madi Boyd called the events "extremely beneficial to the progression of my work" and particularly "helped me to form my thinking about and approach to a project I am involved in with London Zoo [as well as] a project as part of an Olympic legacy bid." Additionally, the curator of the IMT Gallery, London, Mark Jackson, highlighted the significance of Mays's activities for professional gallery exhibitions: "I found the conference has had an important effect on the future programme of the IMT Gallery by providing a forum to test ideas and help support practices and debates that concern me as a curator."

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)
1) Correspondence with Director of BLIP Creative, corroborating importance of Cunningham's research to artistic and commercial work, available on request
2) Director of BLIP Creative can be contacted to corroborate impact of Cunningham's work upon thinking through the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of technological developments in new public media display technologies
3) The International Distributed Display Initiative: http://www.blipcreative.com/blog
4) Cunningham's Architectural Association Landscape Urbanism public lecture:
http://www.aaschool.ac.uk//VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=79
5) Cunningham public talks in Royal Academy of Arts Architecture Programme:
http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/architecture/david-cunningham,1313,AR.html
http://static.royalacademy.org.uk/files/urban-narratives-1387.mp3
6) Inclusion of Cunningham's research as required reading for urban planning programmes, at the Architectural Association and University of Toronto:
http://www.aaschool.ac.uk/library/documents/2009term1luspencer.pdf
http://www.geog.utoronto.ca/graduate/geog-grad/current/2009-PLA2000-Goonewardena.pdf
7) Full details of AHRC-funded 'Professor Pepper's Ghost' public talks series:
http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/spiritualismandtechnology/uploads/peppersghostlectures_0910.pdf
8) Correspondence with artists and curators confirming the impact of Mays's research available on request.
9) Mays presenting research findings from AHRC project to audience at RADA (Nov 2009):
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eco5LVCgLGQ