

## RESPONSE TO SCREEN AUSTRALIA'S DRAFT PROGRAM GUIDELINES

I am a twenty-six-year-old filmmaker based in Melbourne and a graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts School of Film and Television. My filmmaking experience has primarily been in the production of short films. Thus, I could best be described as an 'emerging' filmmaker.

It should come as no surprise then that I, like many, have serious reservations and grave concerns about Screen Australia's proposed funding guidelines. My major points of opposition are centred on Screen Australia's decision to abandon short film production funding (apart from animation projects), and in a wider, ideological sense, Screen Australia's apparent disregard and lack of support for new, 'emerging' filmmakers.

Having read the proposed guidelines and having attended the Melbourne consultation session on November 5<sup>th</sup>, I fail to see how Screen Australia's radical 'change of philosophy' (as it was expressed at the session and is embodied in the draft guidelines) could be viewed as positive, or likely to promote the 'innovation' within the Australian film industry that Screen Australia is seeking to achieve.

My immediate questions are: How many people currently in the Australian film industry will benefit from these new guidelines? How many people currently in the Australian film industry, and wanting to join the film industry in the future, will be disadvantaged by these new guidelines? What does the Australian film industry and the Australian public gain by accepting these guidelines? And does it outweigh what we will no doubt lose?

At the Melbourne consultation session last week, a gentleman in the audience asked those in the roughly one hundred strong crowd who were *not* concerned by Screen Australia's apparent disregard for short film development and production, to raise their hand. One person put their hand up. One. So in this sample study of Victorian-based filmmakers, of which it is important to note I was definitely one of the youngest and least 'experienced' in attendance, it could be argued that 99% of people were, and I think it is safe to say still *are*, concerned and dismayed by the new direction proposed by Screen Australia. Which begs the obvious question: Which members of the film industry did Screen Australia consult when drafting up these new guidelines to decide that these radical changes were positive and necessary? And whose interests do these guidelines represent? Certainly not any filmmaker, 'emerging' or 'experienced', that I have spoken with about these guidelines.

I found it revealing that in response to the overwhelming opposition concerning the total lack of federal funding for short drama production voiced by those in attendance at the Melbourne consultation session, Ms Fiona Cameron, Screen Australia's Executive Director of Strategy and Operations remarked, "We're not in the business of training filmmakers". In comments Ms Cameron reportedly made at the Sydney consultation session, it was suggested that the responsibility for the funding of Australian short films would now lie with the state funding bodies, film schools, and organisations such as Metro Screen and Open Channel.

I have a few fundamental problems with this proposal. First, as a graduate of a film school and as a participant of past Metro Screen courses, I think it is very naïve to suggest that these educational institutions alone can provide the necessary amount of funds, resources and opportunities to support the next generation of filmmakers when these organisations are increasingly falling under greater and greater amounts of political, financial, staffing and resource pressure. Since I graduated from the VCA Film School in 2006, for example, the VCA has been amalgamated under the University of Melbourne, and consequently the three-year Bachelor degree the VCA Film School once offered (the lifeblood of this school) is in real danger of being phased out altogether, and very soon. This extremely prolific and influential film school in the Australian artistic and educational landscape is soon likely to lose a significant amount of its strength and heart, and hence, this is not a time to be removing alternative opportunities for support for young filmmakers in this country.

Second, these statements assume that the only purpose of making short films is as a training exercise. In my view, these types of statements reveal a disturbing trend in the current paradigm of the Australian film industry, which is that short films, no matter how 'innovative' or 'successful', are *not* considered a legitimate art form or practice in and of themselves, and are thus deemed expendable, or in this case now ineligible, from Screen Australia's charter of 'cultural merit'. In recent years it seems that short films have become viewed primarily as a means to an end; a step in a filmmakers' "training" or professional development, a 'calling card' for potential, future long-form projects.

I would like to point out that this view of the short film form, and of the filmmakers who are involved in their creation, is deeply flawed and incredibly conservative. The production of short films, historically and globally, is not a cultural practice that has been, or is even currently, undertaken *exclusively* by an under-35-year-old-film-school-graduate crowd. (Despite this perhaps being the crowd that the former Australian Film Commission often chose to fund through their shorts production funding strand). Ever since the Lumiere Brothers, many 'established' and 'highly experienced' filmmakers have continued to make short films throughout their careers, and have done so, fervently. Jean-Luc Godard, for one, has continued to make short films (even his sixties and seventies heaven forbid!) in between his feature films and at many points in his career when I think we can all agree he had well and truly 'emerged', and 'established' himself as not only 'highly experienced', but even seminal and legendary. So the attitude that a short film should be regarded primarily as a filmmakers' 'stepping stone' to become 'experienced', 'professional' or 'established' is not only culturally vacuous, and historically ill-informed, it doesn't do justice to the form or medium itself. Is writing poetry a 'stepping stone' to writing a novel? Or is it something completely discreet and valid in itself? Should there be any difference in how we view or assess short film?

Whether Screen Australia acknowledges it, the truth is that short films serve a vastly different cultural purpose than their feature-length counterparts. While it is no doubt true that 'successful' short films can act as 'calling cards' for future feature-length projects, I think it is deeply problematic and dangerous when the sole reason offered for the removal of short films' priority from the federal funding agenda derives from a desire to bring an end to what we can only assume has been viewed

by Screen Australia as some form of 'free education' for 'emerging' (read: young) filmmakers.

Conversely, I would argue it is equally dangerous when the primary arguments for the necessary reinstatement of federal funding for short films is centred solely on the ability of short films to serve as crucial CV points for the members of the 'emerging' creative team that made them.

In my view, until short films are regarded as a legitimate art form in their own right in this country, as they are in Europe, for instance, we will continue to face issues of artistic hierarchy and inequity between projects of varying running time well into the future. To put it simply: we would not be having this argument if more people in positions of power truly and passionately believed in the potential of the short film form to provide audiences with an alternative cinematic experience to feature films and television series. If this were the case, then those responsible at Screen Australia would have seen that they already have enough reason – one single, very important reason, that seems to have been forgotten in this debate – to reinstate the security of Australian short film funding well into the future.

I would like to ask another question as a means of elaborating on this quandary. Would Screen Australia's decision to discontinue the funding of short films have anything to do with the fact that, unlike feature films, short films rarely if ever make money, and therefore fail to return their monetary investments to Screen Australia, and presumably therefore make it more difficult for Screen Australia to justify the appropriate level of expenditure required to realise these projects?

If this is the case (and it is hard not to believe this could be the case given Screen Australia have failed to provide any official, clear, or logical reason) then I think it is deeply regrettable that Screen Australia is acting more like a commercially-driven business, than the cultural body that it is meant to serve as, for all Australian citizens, who are either currently practising as filmmakers (regardless of the duration of their projects) and for those who may want to become filmmakers in the future in Australia.

My next question is: Why the exemption for short animations? One of the reasons given by the committee at the Melbourne session for continuing short animation funding was that, "We have had some great successes in this area". And we haven't in short drama? It is incredibly ironic that the motif of Screen Australia's funding guidelines is 'innovation', and yet, short dramas are entirely absent from its pages. I would argue that in recent years of Australian film production, many short film projects, most notably live action dramas, have been vastly more innovative, bold, risk-taking, and creatively successful than many feature-length projects. And that shouldn't be surprising. Free from commercial pressures and constraints, short films are where cinematic innovation takes place most frequently and actively! And this, I would argue, is the primary reason why if there are to be any funds at all available to Australian filmmakers to assist in the production of films that are to be 'innovative', then short films must be included in this picture as they have consistently proven to be one of the greatest sites of 'innovation' in our national output.

The other point I would like to raise is the frightening lack of concrete planning evident from Screen Australia in order to fill the massive gap that will no doubt be left if Screen Australia does in fact refuse to revise its position in regards to ceasing short film funding. At the Melbourne consultation meeting, it was vaguely mentioned by Ms Cameron that Screen Australia could hypothetically boost the state funding bodies' current level of funding for short films in order to fill this gap.

My first response to this is that, the ad hoc manner in which it was suggested – and yet completely omitted from the official document of publicly-released guidelines – certainly does *not* instil great confidence that this will actually be implemented. But let us assume that an alternative measure for funding shorts throughout Australia such as this is implemented. I have serious concerns about how this would work. If Screen Australia were to merely top up the levels of funding currently provided by the various state funding bodies, would this not further increase the inequity that already exists between filmmakers based in different states? As far as I am aware, there is already a great discrepancy between states, with Victorian residents being eligible for the largest pool of funds provided by Film Victoria's various funding strands and schemes specifically for 'emerging' filmmakers. Is it wise and ethical for the federal film funding body to effectively reduce the avenues of funding for filmmakers who are residents of states other than Victoria, by eliminating federal short drama funding opportunities? Does it not seem more equitable, that all Australians, regardless of which state they live in, be equally eligible for funding by the simple fact that they are Australian residents, and are therefore eligible for the same federal funding strand(s)? And how can it be assured that this vaguely proposed measure won't simply serve to reduce the amount of 'innovative', 'emerging' filmmaking voices from around the country to those who happen to be the relatively lucky residents of Victoria? Would Victorian filmmakers be representative of all Australian voices currently working in the medium of short film?

My last point is in response to Screen Australia's proposed guidelines for feature film funding. Richard Lowenstein's submission to Screen Australia regarding his own career path in light of these new funding guidelines is instructive. As an 'emerging' filmmaker who has made a number of short films and who is currently developing a feature film, I fear the very dire scenario he describes regarding 'emerging' filmmakers' ability to work with the right producers for their projects, which will become greatly problematised by these incredibly strict guidelines.

It seems to me that, in effect, these new guidelines will only serve to concentrate power into the hands of the few, and will ultimately reduce the potential cinematic tastes, styles and traditions contained in this country to a small handful of 'highly experienced' producers' sensibilities. Which will therefore limit the very possibility for 'innovation' that Screen Australia is supposedly trying to achieve.

What happens when an 'emerging' writer, director or producer has a project that doesn't attract one of these 'highly experienced' producers because it doesn't happen to fit their world-view in either a real or cinematic sense. This otherwise potentially 'innovative' project – in all manner of ways – won't even be eligible for assessment for federal funding. Thus removing one major avenue for potential funding for this project. Thus making it harder for this filmmaking team to realise their film. And what about the key collaborators, the future generation of actors,

cinematographers, production designers, editors, and sound designers? Unless these 'highly experienced' producers happen to trust and approve the young directors' or producers' desire and conviction to work with these 'emerging' talents on their first films, these talents will never be given the opportunities to develop on long-form projects either. And where will these 'highly experienced' producers find the time and energy to serve as executive producers on all the potentially worthy projects so that these projects can simply have the privilege of being assessed for Screen Australia funding? The definitions and rules for feature film funding contained in the guidelines are so rigid that they give an inordinate amount of power to a handful of well established producers to effectively dictate what films will be supported, financed and therefore made, more easily in this country. I question the equity and democracy of these strict guidelines. Again I ask, whose interests are Screen Australia representing?

I sincerely hope this letter, like the many others submitted to Screen Australia throughout this consultation process, is properly considered. The ramifications of these current draft guidelines are far too serious and detrimental to the industry to be implemented without a proper process of review. I think it is patently clear that Screen Australia has hugely underestimated, and effectively misrepresented, the interests and needs of a vast body of Australian filmmakers, both 'emerging' and 'established', in these proposed guidelines. In my view, it would be unethical for Screen Australia to ignore the large chorus of protest on these issues. If these current draft guidelines are not seriously amended to meet the real interests and needs of the industry, Screen Australia will only be serving to further alienate and disenfranchise future generations of Australian filmmakers. I cannot see how such a dire scenario for our industry could ethically, politically or financially be justified in the short, medium or long term.

I implore Screen Australia to have the foresight to realise that a misstep has been taken, and reinstate potential funding for all Australian filmmakers, regardless of age and experience, to ensure our industry actually has what it needs most; filmmakers of every age, making films, of every length, and ideally, still making them after 2020 when those who are currently deemed 'highly experienced' might not have the desire to keep making them, nor the interest to help others who are still trying to make their very first films.

Dustin Feneley

Writer and Director of short films *Night*, *Snow*, *Hawker*, *Eskimo Kiss*

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