

Comment on Screen Australia draft program guidelines from Dr Lisa French

Dear Fiona Cameron, Executive Director, Strategy and Operation and SA Board

RE: Comment on Screen Australia draft program guidelines: omission of short films (other than animations)

In Australia today short film production is a prolific, fertile and diverse form. Short films have performed well above their weight in the international arena for many years—for instance, in the past filmmakers such as Jane Campion and Glendyn Ivan have taken out the Palme D’Or for Best Short film at Cannes—and in 2008, Julius Avery won it for his film *Jerrycan* (2008). Adam Elliot’s 2003 Oscar win the animated *Harvey Crumpet* was promptly followed by a nomination in 2007 for Peter Templeman’s short narrative, *The Saviour*. Arguably short film production has caused a global spotlight to focus on Australian filmmaking (and industry), particularly in recent times where short films have outshone features in terms of international recognition and telling Australian stories to the world. At times shorts have segued into television—for example the series of *Wilfred*, which enabled a creative team to develop and make a later feature in *Rats and Cats*. Shorts enable filmmakers to experiment, to try out theories, to enable investors to trust a filmmaker when asked to support a feature film. Jane Campion’s win with *Peel* at Cannes set up her relationship with the French film industry—which enabled *The Piano* to be made with French money. Without *Peel*, there wouldn’t have been *The Piano*. For a small investment, the returns are large.

Short films are frequently regarded as a ‘stepping stone’ to the feature industry, and while they can be this (the likes of Jane Campion, John Ruane, Shirley Barrett, Geoffrey Wright, Ivan Sen, Cate Shortland were nominated for AFI Best Short Fiction Awards and subsequently made feature films), it is also an important form in itself. It is like describing poetry as a stepping-stone to longer prose writing—they are not the same—like poetry the short has its own merits over the longer form. Shorts have their own creative boundaries which are diverse, innovative and culturally important. Some stories can be told in a short space, and work best if they are. This is why a filmmaker such as Jane Campion might come back to making several shorts after six features—they are a unique poetic artform.

Short films have been an important vehicle for Aboriginal Australians to tell their stories, and explore their own concerns—and this has been greatly aided by Screen Australia’s antecedent the AFC, for example the packages *From Sand to Celluloid* (1996), *Shifting Sands* (1997), *Crossing Tracks* (1999) and *On Wheels* (2000). Funding for these programs allowed persons such as Richard Frankland, Sally Riley, Ivan Sen and many others to break from the documentary forms that had previously dominated indigenous production and to make short narrative fiction and experimental films of outstanding quality and innovation.

We forget our history: for example, the films funded by the Experimental Film and Television Fund from the 1970s spawned not just the filmmakers of the revival, but of the future, as well as diverse practice in all forms—from art to industry—important to creativity and innovation in our culture. If short films are regarded as purely a training ground or a stepping stone (and these things are important to the viability of our industry because they improve the general quality of our films), then this is a short-sighted view because it does not understand the role that short film production plays in the development of a cultural undergrowth—the strength of the mainstream culture is dependent on this undergrowth and Screen Australia has a responsibility to nurture this environment—this ‘seedbed’. Without it our industry won’t be able to come up with the ideas, energy and talent that is required in the global industry—shorts are a vital part of the industry ecosystem. The Screen Australia act includes supporting and promoting the development of a highly creative, innovative and commercially sustainable Australian screen production industry. Shorts are a key area in which to promote creativity and innovation. By dispensing with shorts, Screen Australia is ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’.

The government's statement of intent clearly supports screen culture, yet there is no mention of this in these guidelines which disenfranchise emerging filmmakers and short filmmakers who are a key element of a creative, vibrant industry. The draft statement of intent also said Screen Australia is also looking at introducing a program that would provide funds to production houses to produce slates of short productions using emerging talent. But where is this in the draft guidelines?

I urge Screen Australia to reconsider the omission of shorts from the funding slate.

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