

RESPONSE TO SCREEN AUSTRALIA'S DISCUSSION PAPER:  
DOCUMENTARY FUNDING: STORIES THAT MATTER.

April 3, 2014

I'm grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Screen Australia Discussion Paper on documentary funding. I've read a number of draft responses by Trevor Graham, Gil Scrine, the ADG's Kingston Anderson and John Hughes et al. Addressing the series of questions the Paper poses at the end, their contributions offer valuable insight into the current state of affairs and considered suggestions as to how this might be improved. While they call for an increased level of SA funding independent of the network TV presale requirement, in the main their submissions keep the existing structural elements of SA's documentary subsidy mechanism relatively intact. Some usefully talk of emerging alternative funding opportunities and distribution outlets for authored documentaries.

I will be presenting some specific proposals at the conclusion of my paper, but they will not be tied to the questions posed by the Paper. I believe the art form in Australia is in crisis (at a time when it is thriving elsewhere) and I believe one of the prime sources of the crisis is the existing relationship between our state subsidy bodies and the free to air television industry. Like the ADG's Kingston Anderson, I believe there's more than just a number of shortcomings in Screen Australia's documentary funding mechanisms, there's a systemic flaw. I'll go even further: despite the organisation's good intentions - and they have been good intentions - the evolving policies of Screen Australia over the years have actually contributed to the existential crisis facing independent authored documentary making in Australia.

Two years ago I participated in an AIDC session entitled "Defining Documentary" which discussed the ramifications of the legal battle between Screen Australia and Essential Media over the TV series *Lush House*. This topic filled me with despair, I told the delegates. Our cherished art form - once the talking point of the documentary world - had been reduced to debating whether or not a tv series about removing stains qualified as a documentary. These conferences used to be about the art and craft of serious documentary making. Now we talk about stains, and rely on lawyers to determine whether or not a tv series about them qualifies for public subsidy. I then linked this issue of definition, symbolized by *Lush House*, with several other emerging concerns: the declining numbers of one-off, authored documentaries appearing on television, the increasing corporatisation of the industry, the downgrading of the status of documentary directors, the existential threat to high end independent documentary film making in Australia.

Some at the conference took me to task for exaggerating the problems and for inappropriately conflating the various issues. Two years on, I'm convinced I was right to do so, and part of that conviction can be traced to my participation in the tortured birth of the documentary feature *Once My Mother*. I have the honour of be Associate Producer on the film. While a number of factors militate against it serving as a case study, I believe an analysis of its production and funding history will serve to illustrate some of the systemic flaws I'm referring to.

At the cast and crew screening late last year, I told the audience that when I first saw Sophia's self funded rough cut in early 2011, I thought it one of the most moving films I'd seen, "a uniquely personal story told by a

mature artist working at the height of her powers." I then recounted Sophia and producer Rod Freedman's grinding, two year struggle to get the film completed in the face of repeated rejections from the ABC's Alan Erson and SBS's John Godfrey, how this presented an insurmountable hurdle because the way things worked, no presale meant no Screen Australia funding support and that meant no film.

Eventually however, Screen Australia's Signature Docs fund - which does not require a TV presale - finally recognized the film's true potential after two earlier knockbacks. Not long afterwards the ABC's newly appointed Head of Factual Phil Craig agreed to take a one hour version for \$20,000. Adequately funded at last, *Once My Mother* was finally completed. But not before Sophia Turkiewicz came very close to quitting, to giving the whole dispiriting game away. Oh and did I say properly funded? To this day, neither Sophia or Rod has been paid a single cent for their years of work on the film.

I then quoted Peter Weir: "With consummate skill, Sophia Turkiewicz weaves the personal with the historical, giving depth and meaning to both." And Bruce Beresford: "I cannot express how much I admire the courage and tenacity with which you have pursued the realization of this wonderful documentary."

"Well yes" I told the audience, "but should filmmakers like Turkiewicz, making films as good as *One My Mother*, really have to rely *quite so much* on courage and tenacity? Watch this film now ... and afterwards remind yourselves how *very close* it came to not being made at all. "

Since that cast and crew screening, *Once My Mother* has gone on to win the audience awards for best doc and best overall film at the Adelaide and Canberra Film Festivals respectively - a telling illustration of its audience

appeal; it then won an ATOM award and an AACTA nomination, is in competition at the Sydney Film Festival and will be released theatrically shortly afterwards with the vastly experienced Tracey Mair doing publicity for love not money. Why? "One of the most beautiful, moving, wonderful films I've ever seen" she emailed me after watching it. Natalie Miller at Melbourne's Nova Cinema is champing at the bit. The Cremorne Orpheum's Paul Dravet is notoriously shy of taking a punt with a documentary. His response? "Stunning film. We're in." Sydney, Melbourne and Perth (Luna Palace group) are in so far, and I'm convinced other cinemas will follow.

This may be premature, but given the audience responses, the praise of icons like Weir and Beresford and the enthusiasm of industry hard noses like Dravet, Miller and Mair, *Once My Mother* bids fair to take its place among the pantheon of great Australian documentaries. So why did Sophia Turkiewicz face such a hard road? Why did this "mature artist working at the height of her powers" come so close to giving it all away? Why was it rejected twice by a subsidy funding system with a remit to support work of quality, diversity, innovation, depth and compelling story telling?

Because there's a systemic flaw in the system.

I was present when Freedman and Turkiewicz screened their rough cut to Alan Erson and then John Godfrey. It was the same cut I first saw. The film's potential was blindingly obvious. All the basic elements were in place, including the wonderfully emotional climax. But that's not how Erson or Godfrey saw it. Godfrey rejected the film out of hand (with very little grace) for not "conforming with SBS guidelines." Erson's dismissal was more respectful, but neither man was open to any counter argument. Both seemed closed emotionally to the film that at both those screenings had yet again

reduced me to surreptitious tears. As the finished work has done to countless others at every screening.

The question I asked myself back then was why? Why did these two skilled programmers, veterans of hundreds of judgment calls at hundreds of screenings, both knock this wonderful film back so decisively? A clue can be found in Phil Craig's response to my cast and crew screening speech: "I'm not all that shocked or surprised that Sophia struggled to get her film financed ... Looking at it now we all see that it's a beautiful thing, a real stand out ... a documentary that aspires to art. But ... to a commissioning editor at SBS or ABC [it could seem to be no more than] a classic form of 'narrowcasting' - little more than a personal family video that she wants taxpayers' money to help her vanity publish, with nothing much to communicate to the broad general audiences that we seek."

Precisely. I believe both men - entirely conditioned by the perceived dictates of their medium - consider that films such as this one - complex, deeply personal, feature length "works of art" - the jewels in the crown of Australian documentary - no longer have any place on free to air television.

"Your comments ... are telling," I responded to Craig, "because there's been a worrying downturn in the commissioning of films like *Once My Mother*, the sort of documentaries now rightly regarded as classics, that put Australian documentary making on the world map. Would these films have made it to the screen these days? By the sound of it no, they'd have been dismissed as "a classic form of narrowcasting."

Yes, Phil Craig picked the film up for the ABC, but he bought it "off the shelf" for peanuts and the TV hour version Sophia was forced to supply is a dumbed down travesty of the full length work. I think Craig's response is the

exception that proves the rule. The "appreciative audience" he says *Once My Mother* deserves is not the audience he, Erson and Godfrey feel increasingly compelled to seek and cater for. Why? Because traditional broadcast television is under threat. Audiences are inexorably declining. Faced with this, TV's increasing tendency is to avoid risk, eschew complexity, embrace more and more publicly accessible "factual" programming because, says ex BBC commissioning editor Steve Hewlett, it is "less concerned ... with creativity and public purposes, and more concerned with audience metrics and commercial survival."

"We don't need films like yours" John Godfrey told Sophia Turkiewicz when rejecting *Once My Mother*. "Our series *Who Do You Think You Are* covers the same ground and it's very popular."

*Who Do You Think You Are* is a weightier offering than *Lush House* of course, and very well made indeed. But it is not documentary, it is factual television, *and the two are chalk and cheese*. One is equivalent to a book, the other to a tabloid newspaper. The SBS series is designed, like all factual television, to be easily digestible, easily grasped by a channel switching audience with a minimal attention span.

The fact is, TV factual programmers like Erson and Godfrey were always going to reject *Once My Mother*, because whatever their merits, they don't want high end documentaries any more. They know what works for them and insist on getting it. And they've been very successful, aided and abetted by that section of the production industry only too happy to supply the programming the networks want, and by the state funding bodies that subsidise a significant proportion of this tv factual/infotainment production process.

Why did it happen? Because under political pressure to support the economic viability of production enterprises, Screen Australia conflated these two distinct genres - documentary and factual/ infotainment television. And what's more, with marginal exceptions (eg the Signature Fund) Screen Australia has applied the same funding criteria to both. In so doing, it has played directly into the hands of the broadcast television industry, giving it a free ride. The inevitable outcome is that despite Screen Australia's historic remit to aim high, films like *Once My Mother* - brilliant, artistic work that *should* have the highest funding priority - face an uphill battle to get made and are becoming an endangered species. Along with their increasingly disillusioned makers.

It was not always so. I'm reluctant to honk on about "the good old days" but there actually was a golden age of Australian documentary making. The prime movers were Screen Australia's earlier manifestations - the FFC and the AFC; and Film Australia. Far more documentary projects were funded on their merits, without being subjected to the dictates of free to air television. TV presales and other distribution deals were certainly and energetically sought, both here and overseas, but the principal determining factors in play were the artistic vision of independent film makers, and supportive funding body bureaucrats who took their charter obligation seriously by encouraging quality, depth and compelling storytelling over "audience metrics and commercial survival."

Glenys Rowe, with an insider's knowledge of free to air television, confirms that the rot set in when in the face of changing "audience metrics" and programming imperatives, one-off documentaries fell out of favour. Commissioning editors began demanding less challenging factual

infotainment, often strip programming it in series. Easier to promote than one-off docs, less demanding on viewer concentration spans. "They just didn't want documentaries any more," says Rowe, But nor did they want to let go of the state subsidy funding, so they began insisting on more and more public subsidy funding be tied to TV presales.

With its hefty production slate and substantial National Interest Program funding base, Film Australia could afford to be more independent and stand up to the networks. FA continued to produce high end work like Dennis O'Rourke's *Cunnamulla* and Connolly/ Anderson's *Rats in the Ranks*, neither of which were made with Australian TV presales in place. But Screen Australia bowed to the pressure. More and more funding went to projects with presales, less and less to those without, *no matter how outstanding*.

With this increasing control, the tv networks began dictating content and style. Underwritten by Screen Australia, enterprise production companies proliferated, only too eager to give the tv networks what they wanted. That led to another ominous development, highlighted in my 2011 AICD speech: "Commissioning editors are no longer interested in one-off films, no matter how wonderful the concept. But even if they are interested you're still down the tube because they don't want to deal with people like you any more. They want to deal with large productions companies like the one making the ground breaking series on stains. So you take your idea to one of these ... and not always but increasingly often, your idea becomes their idea and you become a gun for hire on your own film."

Independent film makers who do get their foot in the network door find they are exercising ever diminishing control over what they make and how they make it. For example, those who aspire to see their work screened in



cinemas find themselves shaping it for the entirely different medium of television (thereby reducing its theatrical appeal). I'm convinced that under these pressures the quality of documentary work has suffered as a result.

By allowing 80% or more of its funding to be tied to TV presales, by kowtowing to TV's populist demands, by forcing documentary makers to submit to TV's programming dictates, by allowing a populist genre (which should never have taken over so much of Screen Australia's funding) to subsume the traditional art form, Screen Australia has indeed contributed to the "existential crisis facing independent, authored documentary making in Australia." And the crisis comes at a time, it must be said, when the art form everywhere else is undergoing an exciting renaissance in film festivals, cinemas and other emerging outlets. What's more, the crisis comes at a time when free to air television is beset by declining audiences, declining revenue and exponentially expanding viewing alternatives. It is, in other words, a fading medium. Not that you'd think so, judging by the choke hold it has on Screen Australia and the documentary art form.

Faced with repeated network rejections for two long years, Sophia Turkiewicz and Rod Freedman's only recourse was Screen Australia's Signature Fund, the only strand not requiring a network presale. But here too *Once My Mother* endured repeated rejections before someone saw the light and championed it. That someone deserves considerable sympathy because he/she is clearly placed in an impossible position. As well as being an avenue of last resort, the Signature Fund has also become the natural home of ambitious, high end documentary projects. It is accordingly swamped with high quality applications from talented but desperate film makers. The competition is ferocious, because given its miniscule funding allocation, the

Signature Fund can only offer financial support to a tiny handful of film makers. Given the quantity and quality of applications, the decision making must be very hard. Here again, *Once My Mother* came very close to falling by the wayside.

Conclusion: I commend Screen Australia for heeding the concerns of the documentary community, for taking the lead and instituting this inquiry. I also believe the time has come for Screen Australia to show even greater leadership, along with courage and vision. Instead of toadying to a medium on the way out, SA should dismantle the existing, dysfunctional funding structure, stop conflating tv factual/ infotainment with documentary, and end TV's choke hold over what gets made.

Film making is an extremely tough game. (I get very angry when I hear generously salaried executives talk about documentary filmmakers' "sense of entitlement.") As David Court so eloquently points out: "The toughness is like a tax on creation, levied by some unknown despot ... People who want to make films have to pay this tax. There is no choice, except not to make films."

All films are hard to make, good films incredibly so. That's of course as it should be. We are, after all, talking about an art form. Which brings me to my fundamental contention: *Screen Australia's current policies set the bar too low for the Ersons and Godfreys of this world, too high for people like Sophia Turkiewicz.* The recommendations below seek to redress this.

Recommendations:

Screen Australia should recognize two distinct strands of film making: Fiction and Nonfiction. The non fiction strand should be divided into two distinct

categories: documentary and TV factual, and in accordance with Screen Australia's historic remit, documentary should be privileged over TV factual. All existing funding categories - NDP, GDP, Signature etc - should be abolished and replaced by the new funds listed below. Assuming Screen Australia maintains a funding allocation to Nonfiction of \$20 million, the money should be allocated to each fund in the following proportions:

### **1. TV Factual Fund**

Allocation: 25% (\$5M).

Projects specifically designed for television that are broadly classified as TV factual, and come with TV presales in place. One-offs or series. All applications to be judged on merit, having regard to Screen Australia's statutory obligations to support work that is excellent and innovative etc. This requirement would probably render ineligible most material looked upon as infotainment.

### **2. General Documentary Fund.**

Allocation: 25% (\$5M).

Documentaries of feature length or less, or series, with some form of significant distribution in place, including but not limited to TV presales. All applications would be judged on merit. Projects with TV presales would not enjoy any advantage over those with alternative sources of funding.

### **3. Signature Fund.**

Allocation: 25% (\$5M).

Similar to the existing Signature Fund. Documentaries of feature length or less with limited distribution in place. In the case of projects of exceptional merit, no form of distribution need be in place. Overriding selection criteria would again be based on SA's charter responsibility - to support projects of excellence and/ or innovation etc.

#### **4. Project Development Fund.**

Allocation: 10% (\$2M)

Offering assistance to high quality projects in various stages of development, ranging from idea/ treatment upwards. The emphasis would be on flexibility, ie the capacity to breath life into, sustain, advance or complete a project in almost any stage of its development and production. Again no TV presale or other distribution deal need be in place.

#### **5. Distribution Fund.**

Allocation: 5% (\$1M)

Offering significant distribution assistance, primarily in the form of grants, to certain projects at or nearing completion, especially, but not limited to, documentaries with obvious theatrical potential.

#### **6. Time Critical Fund**

Allocation: 5% (\$1M)

Offering emergency funding to projects facing rapidly developing and/ or unrepeatable filming opportunities or requirements. The fund **must** be set up in a way that will absolutely minimize delay, dispensing with unnecessary

bureaucratic hurdles, lengthy decision making, excessive documentation etc. It is essential this fund have the capacity to cash flow time critical shooting within weeks of notification, not months, and sometimes even within days if necessary.

## **7. Starting Out Fund.**

Allocation: 5% (\$1M)

Offering project based development and/ or production funding to beginning film makers, eg recent film school graduates, journalists etc entering the documentary field. Films would primarily be low budget, and of hour or less duration, although no specific duration would be mandated. Applicants would be strongly encouraged to seek additional funding, but no distribution deal need be in place. Experienced film makers would be attached to each project as consultants to give guidance, with editorial control remaining with the applicant.

### **Notes:**

These new funding streams are designed to redirect a significant portion of Screen Australia funding support away from TV factual programs to documentaries. The fundamental objective - bearing in mind Screen Australia's historic remit to support excellence - is to enable documentaries of outstanding merit like *Once My Mother* to compete on more equal terms for subsidy funding than is presently the case.

At the same time, no one wants to throw the baby out with the bathwater: the new funds acknowledge the value, indeed necessity of TV presales. It also acknowledges that much TV factual entertainment is of

undoubted quality, and employs a large number of film makers. While it may be a dying medium, free to air TV will be around for some time to come. But these recommendations also acknowledge a rapidly shifting environment and the need for constant flexibility: alternative forms of funding are emerging all the time, challenging the near hegemony now exercised by the TV presale over Screen Australia's funding allocations. Screen Australia must be constantly alert to the changing landscape and adjust its funding priorities accordingly. TV networks must accept that they do not have a monopoly over these public funds.

The proposed new funding streams also loosen somewhat the rigid insistence on market place attachment, because this rigidity can sometimes stifle or even snuff out altogether truly excellent and/or innovative projects that bring lustre to our art form and move it forward, but whose worth is not initially recognized or acknowledged. The overriding yardstick should be excellence, not least because excellent work, not always but often manages to break through and find its market. *Once My Mother* is a classic example.

At the same time, Screen Australia should allocate much more resources to developing certain projects as they evolve, drip feeding those of outstanding potential which for various reasons have not been able to attract a TV presale or other significant market support.

The Time Critical Fund is an essential funding element. Documentary is not fiction, it is about real life, and since we cannot predict the future, documentary is predicated upon uncertainty. Managing uncertainty requires flexibility, in particular the ability to respond quickly to erupting situations. There are too many stories circulating about time critical funding arriving weeks or even months too late. Those managing the fund *must* be

empowered to act quickly, cutting administrative corners if necessary.

By way of example: in late 1989 the AFC had only just begun processing the funding application of our sequel to *Joe Leahy's Neighbours* when the international price of coffee began to fall, an event absolutely pivotal to the story we planned to document. This made it imperative we get up to the PNG Highlands as soon as possible. Peter Sainsbury - then a senior AFC project officer - unilaterally approved the project, secured immediate board approval, organized the cash flow of hundreds of thousands of dollars and two weeks later we were in Mount Hagen, just in time to film the crucial scenes which set up our feature documentary *Black Harvest*.

I venture to say that could never happen nowadays, and I'm not simply talking about a time critical funding strand. The whole Screen Australia documentary approval process is too long, too complex, too debilitating. There is too much paperwork, too many bureaucratic log jams, too many rules, too many legal hoops to jump through. No one seems ultimately accountable - or so it appears from the outside - for the judgment calls that must be made about competing projects. There seems to be too much reliance on committee-based decision making, not enough personal responsibility taken for funding decisions. Film professionals of outstanding ability and proven judgment should be recruited as Project or Assessment officers on limited, one or two year contracts. They should enjoy a much greater level of autonomy than is now the case, but would then be held publicly accountable for the quality of their decision making.

Finally, the Starting Out Fund addresses the lack of established development paths for beginning film makers, brought about primarily by the

abolition of Screen Australia and the ABC's decision to cease virtually all its internal documentary production.

Bob Connolly