

Dr Janet Merewether

Response to Screen Australia Review of Documentary Programmes, April 2014.

Sent to

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BIO

Dr Janet Merewether is an award-winning documentary filmmaker who has taught at Macquarie University, UTS and AFTRS. Her film, digital art and documentary works produced by Go Girl Productions and Screen Culture P/L include 'Jabe Babe – A Heightened Life' and 'Maverick Mother,' which have won numerous Australian and international prizes including ATOM, IF and AFI awards, enjoying retrospectives in Taipei, Berlin and Boston. She was also production designer for the recent award-winning ABC series 'Redesign My Brain'. Merewether's documentary films embrace reflexivity and hybridity, and how these strategies can contribute to a documentary filmmaker's 'signature' or 'authorial voice'. She completed her doctoral degree at UTS in 2008 on the subject of innovative hybrid documentary, and continues to explore new visual strategies in television, media art and feature documentary forms. She is currently working on two new documentaries, 'Reindeer in my Saami Heart' and 'Heart & Hands'.

<http://gogirlproductions.com.au>

<http://www.maverickmother.net>

□ Are specific targeted programs such as the current suite of documentary programs efficient and effective?

JM –

Firstly, we all acknowledge that government funding for the film industry is in short supply in 2014, especially in relation to Documentary. I would suggest that there should be a greater proportion of SA funding allocated to Signature documentaries and less emphasis on GDP, NDP and IDP documentaries, where an Australian broadcaster pre-sale is required. Currently, it is almost impossible for independent, non-enterprise businesses to trigger a pre-sale from the ABC and SBS, despite these directors/producers having an excellent track record in festivals, awards, critical and audience reception. In the current conservative political climate, the broadcasters are favouring controversial, headline grabbing subjects, nostalgia, or factual entertainment programmes ('documentary light'). Their pre-sale decisions are mostly about ratings potential, not documentary quality, depth, the reflection of strong Australian characters, or an Australian creative perspective on international subjects.

Many recent ABC and SBS commissioned series utilise manipulated plotlines and game show structural constructs. These contrived structures can be disrespectful of the trust between director and participant found in the most powerful documentary films. Science programmes are now increasingly mirroring weight loss programmes in structure.

The ABC and SBS, in 2014, have stated that they will not fund or offer pre-sales for any documentary which has a non-Australian central participant, which means that Australian filmmakers cannot currently make films which deal with global issues, or reach global audiences. This is one reason why the Signature Fund should be increased, as a local pre-sale or central participant is not required.

Perhaps those states which do not have a specific festival fund could also be favoured in the funding allocation, as both AIFF and MIFF both have creative/feature doc funds restricted to residents in those states.

There has been a dramatic slide in the number of Australian directors represented at the top international documentary festivals and markets such as IDFA in recent years, simply because inward-looking SBS and ABC television series are rarely appealing to creative documentary festivals or curators internationally. Our documentary directors risk invisibility on the world stage. There was only one European commissioning editor at AIDC in 2014, perhaps reflecting this sense of diminishing presence of Australian documentary makers in non-English markets/festivals.

Screen Australia should be mindful to support a range of documentary practices. Some documentaries are scripted or have detailed treatments, and others, if shot in an observational style, are 'written' in the cutting room. The necessity for an advance 'script' in submissions is not always relevant, and may work against certain (intentional) directorial approaches to documentary filmmaking. The requirement for full treatments and scripts is leading to some of the uninspiring and unoriginal documentaries/factual series we are witnessing on our screens, dominated by 'voice of god/goddess' expert commentary, a convention which was overturned by documentary theorists in the 1970s and 1980s. Another concerning matter is the reduction of observational and essay documentaries being commissioned, and the increasing number of projects fronted by celebrities. This leads to a sense that the films are inauthentic and/or contrived, and that statistics are being 'massaged' to fit the producer's pre-conceived intention.

- How can Screen Australia best support low-budget documentary making?

SA can assist documentary makers by providing post-production funds for those directors who take the initiative to shoot their films, and need a limited amount of finishing funds, particularly in the areas of acquiring music, archive rights and engaging professional sound designers, mixers and composers.

Perhaps a separate marketing fund could be established to assist directors/producers to cover costs for marketing, website design and study guides which will help attract educational markets and broader audiences for their films, even if these documentaries have been made without SA funding.

Increase PEP to 40%. SA should lower the minimum budget required to trigger PEP (currently \$125 000 for half hour), and could consider a reasonable/capped level of director/producer/editor etc deferrals to be included in this calculation. Currently, PEP requires that production be within a 2 year window before the application, which excludes a great number of 'longitudinal' documentaries which have been developed (intentionally) over, for example, 5 years or a decade. This long devt/production window is common in long form documentaries, especially those which are 'self-funded' – directors often have to go away for lengthy periods to 'earn a living' in order to continue their films or raise funds to pay an editor or DOP.

The 2 year production window is currently too short, and, if the producer has detailed expenditure/BAS/tax records, should be up to a decade, or not defined at all.

Please cut red tape on low budget documentaries. The current SA requirement for a filmmaker to establish a company rather than simple sole trader business entity leads to thousands of dollars of accountancy and ASIC compliance fees every year. This money would be better spent on the documentaries themselves.

Originality, innovation, quality of team and idea, cultural benefit should be the pre-requisites. SA should back directors rather than just producers, and help them to retain their IP, by, for example, encouraging the structuring of SPVs as a 50/50 share (for offset projects), enabling a fair split of returns with producers. Directors who have already invested heavily in their film's development should not be forced by SA, ABC or SBS to hand over their copyright to a production company, particularly some of those Enterprise companies currently operating in Sydney who making a habit of threatening or sacking directors from their own films, taking copyright and revenue streams, locking directors out of cutting rooms or denying proper director credits. Many complaints have been made to the Australian Directors' Guild about poor behaviour by many larger companies who are directly funded by SA's Enterprise Scheme. There is simply not enough respect for the creative role of Directors, who are often the researchers and initiators of these documentaries.

Less experienced director/producers should be able to apply for funding if they have an experienced Supervising Producer or EP attached to their projects (without copyright interest).

- How can high-end documentaries reach the broadest possible audience?

Festivals, VOD and education distribution are obviously important, but most directors and producers still seek a broadcast premiere due to the large national audiences, as well as the potential for a broad media/critical profile.

SA should use its influence to encourage SBS and ABC to again establish scheduling slots for original, innovative Australian and international single or feature documentaries. Crowding prime-time slots with BBC Global acquisitions is rendering our culture and our film artists invisible to Australian audiences watching ABC, ABC2 and SBS1. This pro-British acquisition policy has co-incided with the employment of English staff (or recent Australian citizens) in almost all

programming and factual commissioning roles at SBS, and several at the ABC. If SBS demand Australian creative teams and diversity, then this must be reflected in the composition of its staff, who often have little respect for or knowledge of Australian-born directors, Australian history or our local film culture.

The diminishing presence of Australian staff at SBS and the collapse of SBSi coincides with fewer commissions to Australian independent producers, favouring enterprise and international companies. More worryingly, the English presence has co-incided with a large proportion of SBS1/2 and ABC1/ ABC2 programming consisting of cheap English language reality TV buyins (wall to wall eating disorders and sexually transmitted diseases). ABC may as well be BBC with the amount of English content bought in cheaply from BBC worldwide. In recent months I have seen natural history programmes about kangaroos in Australia, produced by a UK company complete with English accent voice-over. Programmes made by UK producers are now fed back to Australian audiences – this is patronising and represents a lack of belief in our local producers. This is cultural cringe at its worst. We have returned to the 1950s where Australians barely had a voice. Why do we allow this to happen?

- Should Screen Australia continue to offer separate theatrical funding for documentaries or should it create one funding program for 'premium' documentaries, regardless of platform?

How do you define 'premium'? Just allocate this money into an increased Signature Fund, which should be for original, director driven documentaries of broadcast hour or longer, up to feature length, with either broadcast, festival or theatrical releases in mind.

Well-researched, complex, adult documentaries with significant cultural and educational benefits should be prioritised over lowbrow factual entertainment. SA should support director/producers rather than purely commercially based producers, who prioritise profit over quality or respectful representation, and cut budgets for editing, design, sound post-production and other areas in order to be seen as 'profitable.'

- Could a requirement for marketplace commitment be met in ways other than a broadcaster presale?

This is essential. Firstly, there are virtually no presales on offer. Secondly, directors are often better marketers of their films than conventional sales agents or distributors, so a well-designed self-distribution plan should also be considered seriously, as per Peter Broderick's methodology. Returns can then be used to develop future projects. The move for eg: educational distributors to work directly with independent producers is a positive step, and

SA should not require distributors or sales agents to be attached before the film is completed, and has had festival releases or critical attention which can increase its market value. The tiny amounts offered as a DG by distributors is

forcing director/producers to give away their rights for too little, too early.

- If so, what sort of indicators of audience reach and engagement could Screen Australia reasonably expect filmmakers to provide for their projects?

Online, mobile device, festival, broadcast or education audiences/numbers would all be relevant.

- What are the impacts (positive and negative) on the industry of the notional broadcaster funding allocations which currently apply to the NDP and GDP? Should these be revised?

There is too much automatic allocation of funding from SA to the broadcasters, who are clearly now favouring a small number of production companies (some owned by multinationals) over a wide range of independent director/producer voices. This is leading to limited diversity in gender, cultural and creative perspectives in documentary output.

SA should use its influence to encourage SBS and ABC to again establish scheduling slots for original Australian single or feature documentaries, both prime time and later. Perhaps series could be limited to half total funds allocated, with the other 50% for single documentaries?

SA could either remove or lower the local broadcaster pre-sale requirement for IDP, perhaps encouraging broadcasters to commit through a reasonable acquisition offer in advance (although \$5000-\$15 000 at present is far too low) and enabling these letters of market interest to trigger funds or become part of finance plans. All too often broadcasters will say 'show us at fine cut' forcing producers to self-fund international/creative projects to that point.

SA International door is still limited by requirement to have local pre-sale, but SBS and ABC will not consider international docs unless they have an Australian central character, despite having all Australian crew. Many outstanding Australian docs would never have been made if this is the case (*Black Harvest*, *Cannibal Tours*, *Landmines*, David Bradbury docs etc) and the international marketplace is rarely interested in documentaries with Australian central characters. Would we really expect Werner Herzog to limit his films to German characters just because he is German director?

Most ABC/SBS commissions appear to be ratings driven, and/or projects selected for their potential to attract advertisers. The broadcasters are favouring series, which is even further eroding the diversity of Australian voices being heard, as it limits the actual number of projects being supported. The so-called 'landmark series' and domination of war stories in Australian history commissions should be reviewed by SA, who should have a greater say in what is being commissioned by the ABC or SBS if they are going to provide a large proportion of production funds. Who is now curating/defending the 'national interest?' Increasingly, the ABC is promoting its own favoured presenters and celebrities, and placing these into factual series, rather than promoting directorial innovation. (eg: What do I care

what any of these non-specialist, non-expert celebrities remember from the ABBA concert they attended in the 1970s?)

- In making decisions about whether to invest in projects, what considerations should be prioritised (eg cultural, innovation, audience reach)?

Originality, innovation, quality of team and ideas, cultural benefit should be the pre-requisites. SA should back directors rather than just producers, and help them to retain their IP. If broadcasters want to make populist, celebrity-led programmes, these should be entirely funded from their own funding sources, not limited SA funds which should be allocated to culturally beneficial or creatively original documentaries. Director and crew creative development and expression should be considered as important as the current 'production company profitability' emphasis a determining factor. Enterprise companies have only been 'profitable' due to a disproportionate allocation of government handouts in the first place.

There is a perception of a cozy 'jobs for boys culture between ex- broadcaster commissioning editors and producers at several enterprise companies. SA should be mindful of this and not unfairly favour these producers.

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of Screen Australia accepting applications in rounds versus at any time?

Rounds are positive in that they force applicants to move forward considerably with their pre-production and research. The negative side is that six monthly rounds, such as Signature Fund, is rarely coordinated with State funding rounds, broadcaster commitments or major festival deadlines eg: Sydney Film Festival entry deadlines (eg: in 2014- Jan 31 Signature deadline, SFF documentary deadline end Feb. If Aust festivals require premiere, this could perhaps be better timed) Otherwise, eg: 3 x Signature rounds a year might be a solution.

Dr Janet Merewether

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