

From John Nikolakopoulos

Screen Australia is looking to change. This is a bold, and somewhat controversial step. I believe if you are to make this step it needs to be done with much more clarity and confidence than your draft guidelines imply. The changes seem to be more of a step away from an old model, but not enough of a step towards a newer and better model. These suggestions I hope will give positive, explicit and concrete focus to the new guidelines which seem, right now, a little too vague and out of focus.

The old model of funding is what I would term supplier focussed. With the assumption that if the government removed financial and technical barriers, film makers would develop films and an industry would thrive.

The new model is audience conscious, but still supplier focussed. By gearing funding towards experienced producers, Screen Australia hopes this will help production companies become financially viable by realising profitable films.

Both models have huge problems, but instead of detailing these, I want to go straight into describing a clear solution.

Essentially what I propose is that Screen Australia become audience focussed in a much more dynamic way. By supporting awareness of the market, Screen Australia will gain credibility and relevance in the eyes of the film making community, be an invaluable resource for more experienced production companies, and be able to build solid performance measures that can be improved and refined year on year. In addition, all funding decisions will have a solid foundation in this framework rather than frustrating film makers with bureaucratic rules around experience or problematic interpretations around what constitutes Australian culture. In short, Screen Australia has the potential can be a beacon for film makers to find audiences.

For the sake of simplicity, these arguments are focussed on feature length films and documentaries for cinematic release, but inferences can be extrapolated for a broader relevance to other formats and distribution models.

Its also important to quickly note that the cinematic image has the potential to not just be a distinct cultural artefact, dissociated from the broader Australian experience, but can actually direct the sense of national identity. Emotionally, feature films remain a masthead for their ability to encapsulate, represent and develop broader cultural discourse. This is another reason I am focussing my arguments on feature films and documentaries.

FINDING THE AUDIENCE

No film is guaranteed an audience, but we can see that the key battles for Hollywood to shore up audience numbers involves elements such as well timed

release date, marketing, publicity, genres, targeting key demographics and psychographics, a star system, and other tools that essentially have little to do with the quality of the script or other creative aspects of the film. Hollywood builds on decades of history to develop and refine these conventions, an agreed upon meeting place between what audiences expect and what films provide.

These agreed upon meeting of film maker and audience are not present in Australian films, irrespective of quality. In fact, the opposite is promoted, where cinematic voices that are funded desert the audience precisely because of their innovation.

Screen Australia's role as an Audience finder comprises of the following steps:

1. Initial Quantitative and Qualitative market research on audience perceptions of Australian film and current film viewing habits
2. Analysis of cinematic viewing trends and timetables
3. Generate an annual report that responds to these trends. Chart the best release dates for audiences of certain demographics
4. Call for funding rounds where the films favoured are a creative response to the annual report.
5. Feedback research on all funded films that can be accessed by any producer

One quick example, Screen Australia may find that school leavers celebrate the last day of school by going to a movie. In series of tiered funding rounds that are accessible to all levels of experience (I will go into the detail of this next) people are invited to apply for funding for a film that will be released at this time, for this demographic.

If done for several years in a row, this grows the expectation of audiences, and the eventual goal would be that this niche would become expected convention by school leavers, and profitable enough for privately funded films to compete. The annual refresh of research would refine and develop new spaces. Interestingly, I strongly believe this would lead to new genres, meaning that you would have very successful domestic films that do not compete in the same space as Hollywood, ensuring a greater success.

I have also outlined each of the steps above in exhaustive detail in another document.

HELPING THE FILM MAKER

Unfortunately, the idea of focussing on credentialled sector of the industry is like drawing a bureaucratic line in the shifting sand which only serves to annoy film makers and distort films away from audiences. It will create distortions in the film development audiences that will alienate audiences. This is a complex assertion, but we can already see examples of similar effects in the parallel example of George Miller trying to access a producer offset for being an Australian director

of Captain America. Deals that are destructive to the film will be struck just to access the money.

I can go into much more detail but instead will try to put forward a much simpler funding structure. this structure, importantly, creates confidence in Screen Australia, and provides a clear and simple path for film makers to engage at any experience level.

It consist of several tiers of funding;

TIER 1 - Idea to script. Provide over a hundred microgrants of several thousand dollars for a synopsis to be developed into a draft script. This is open to all levels of experience. At the end of the grant approval, Screen australia can hold the options to the script for a year or two.

TIER 2 - Grants for development. 10 to 15 a year of \$15000 Open to all levels of experience. Film makers with no previous credits can only apply to Tier 2 through Tier 1. Experienced producers can directly apply to Tier2, or can request the option of any Tier 1 scripts that Screen Australia has optioned. the purpose of Tier 2 is to develop a package to sell the movie or documentary, include filmed material. The end result will be a package of material that can be used to sell the idea in the private market. The developed pitches will be market tested by investors, film makers, distributors and audiences. These results, especially if positive, can be used to bolster the marketability of the film in the private market, and even secure distribution. If a film optioned for Tier1 doesn't go ahead, the option can be requested by another production company.

TIER 3 - Actual funding. If an inexperienced production company has gone through both Tiers and has proven their ability to realise their idea, then they are eligible for Tier 3, even without experience. Credentialed producers can jump straight to Tier 3, referring their film to the recommended release schedule and preferred genres outlined in the annual audience analysis by Screen Australia, whose criteria are an arrangement of offset, private investment, presales and so on.

This idea has many other complex elements, including the opening of Tier2 as a potential short film funding opportunity if it alludes to a broader creative drive, but they are in a separate document. Another aspect is fostering the culture of individual executive producer roles within Screen Australia instead of decisions by comittee, and having these individuals be able to go into the private sector effectively.

RESULTS

The results of these suggestions I have made would be the following:

By providing an essential tool of audience insight to Australian producers, Screen Australia uses its unique positioning in the industry to foster stability and financial security to film as a viable investment. Knowing that audiences will come is the key to the whole equation. And Screen Australia can take concrete, relatively cheap, and measurable steps in guaranteeing audiences, and giving producers a dynamic understanding of the evershifting landscape of audience needs.

Funding fundamentally tied to clear market insight, that is refreshed annually, and whose accrual builds an invaluable database of knowledge for all producers

Within a few years, I would hope that there would be successful niches clarified which the private sector will quickly chase without funding and be profitable in. Creativity and originality are what makes films fun and great, but the film makers and the audiences have to be at least in the same vicinity.

Screen Australia will no longer be abused as imposing culture, and instead will be seen as a mediator.

Screen Australia will be able to measure its effectiveness by seeing if audiences are conscious of these film spaces, and if they expect Australian movies at certain times. Like the first hot day of summer, people could be looking forward to the first Australian summer film of the season.

Cultural and economic aims of Australian films become unified and are dynamically conversant with broader Australian culture. The film making culture and film viewing cultures converge.

I believe there are hidden wellsprings of audience demand for Australian films that a globalised Hollywood film language can never tap into. With a little exploration, these can become a solid foundation for a thriving local industry and eventually globally competitive industry.

My suggestions call for a fundamental rethink of your plans, which I fear might be beyond the scope of what you are looking for in feedback. So I have tried to give as clear, concrete, actionable and concise suggestions as possible. These suggestions are a summary of a much larger and more detailed document.

With a little thought and planning, I hope we can silence the depressing echo of filmmakers having conversations alone in an empty theatre.

John Nikolakopoulos