National Cultural Policy Submission

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Bio

Dr. Mark Ryan, publishing as Mark David Ryan, is an Associate Professor in screen and media industries, and a Chief Investigator for the Digital Media Research Centre (DMRC), Queensland University of Technology. He is an expert in screen industries research and Australian film and television. He was the President of the Screen Studies Association of Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand (SSAAAZ) between 2015 and 2018. He is the co-editor of *Australian Genre Film* (with Kelly McWilliam, 2021, Routledge) and *Australian Screen in the 2000s* (2017, Palgrave Macmillan). Ryan is a Chief Investigator of the Australian Research Council Linkage project, Valuing Web Series: Economic, Industrial, Cultural and Social Value (2019-2023; LP180100626).

I am making this submission as an individual and an independent researcher.

Preamble

As a screen scholar my submission focuses on issues relevant to the Australian screen industry, with an emphasis on feature film, television, and online scripted content. The submission addresses three of the five pillars:

- A Place for Every Story
- The Centrality of the Artist
- Reaching the Audience.

A Place for Every Story

The Australian screen industry faces significant and systemic challenges looking forward. Globalisation, technological change, changing viewing patterns and audience behaviours, the decline of the cinema and free-to-air television markets, and uncertainty around national regulatory structures that have long sustained local content on free-to-air television are eroding legacy business models and audience engagement strategies. Consequently, the industry is at a crossroad. Cinema is no longer the primary market for feature films, subscription video on demand (SVOD) services have completely disrupted the free-to-air television market and audiences are migrating away from these channels – that have long dominated Australian television – to a growing number of SVOD services that are unregulated. The boundaries between previously distinct content silos are breaking down and the distinction between movies and television are blurred.

At the same time, a growing number of industry commentators are beginning to criticise, and agitate against, the increasing internationalisation of content produced by the Australian screen industry.[1] Some commentators point towards drama series such as the Netflix Australia Original *Tidelands* (2018), or features films made specifically for SVOD platforms such as *Christmas on the Farm* (2021) or *A Perfect Pairing* (2022) that are an easy-to-sell internationalised version of an Australian story for global viewers. Other critics point to the fact that millions of dollars of public money were invested in the Australian movie *Elvis* (2022) about an American cultural icon that has no apparent cultural value for Australia. This tension between commerce and culture has existed in the Australian screen industry since the late-1960s film revival.[2] Moreover, industry sentiments tend to swing between advocating for more public support for culturally focussed Australian stories, and more investment in commercial and generic content that have little concern for culture. However, gatekeeping the making of Australian film and television content to foster more authentic Australian stories does not necessarily mean more domestic audiences will watch this content, or that it will automatically generate cultural value.

The establishment of foreign production as a sustained pillar of production in Australia supported by the Location Offset – an average of over 20 foreign films and television programs per year have either filmed or had post-production work undertaken in Australia over the last 5 years – and the growth of high-budget Australian movies funded largely by foreign investment as co-ventures with Hollywood does facilitate positive spill-over effects for the local screen industry.[3] Regardless of whether the local industry supports the existence of a foreign production sector in Australia or vice versa, the growth in the production of high-end Australian blockbusters – that typically have questionable cultural value – and footloose foreign films made in Australia do nonetheless result in significant economic activity and employment outcomes for the domestic industry. They also train domestic talent at the highest level. Some of this talent goes on to work on lower budget, independent Australian films over their careers, and they can raise the technical standards and production values of these lower budget independent films. Director Kimble Rendall resurrected his career after directing the dubious horror film *Cut* (2000) by working as a unit director on foreign films produced domestically before going on to direct the higher-budget co-productions Australian features *Bait* (2012) and *Guardians of the Tomb* (2018). Producer Todd Fellman began his career working as a crew member on various foreign film and television programs on the Gold Coast before becoming a leading independent Australian producer behind movies such as *Daybreakers* (2009) and *Mental* (2012). The internationalisation of the industry has increased the capacity and production scale of the local production sector that has flow on effects for the post-production, the animation, and the fledging virtual production sectors, among other examples. In short, ensuring the Australian screen industry produces a range of low, medium, and high budget movies is

[1] George, S (2022) Nobody Talks About Australianness on our Screens. In: Meyrick, J (ed) *The New Platform Papers*. 3 (June). Sydney: Currency House.
[2] Numerous scholarly articles discuss this dualism.
[3] Ryan, MD (2017) Australian Blockbuster Movies. In: Ryan, MD, Goldsmith, B (eds) *Australian screen in the 2000s*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 51-76.

healthy for the industry. Producing less high-budget movies – which due to their large budgets must appeal to a mass audience – and funding a larger number of low to medium budget movies that are more distinctly Australian, does not necessarily result in more cultural value nor does it necessarily lead to more positive outcomes for the domestic production industry.

Specifically in terms of high-budget Australian movies largely financed by foreign investors, such as *Peter Rabbit* (2018), success begets success. The more Australian producers create high earning films such as *Peter Rabbit* earning US$351 million worldwide in gross box-office receipts, the more this type of production is financed by international investors.

Support for Australian screen content should be 1) platform neutral, and 2) public investment could be reconceptualised to support both content invested in telling Australian stories and generating cultural value, as well as commercially focussed and culturally undifferentiated stories. The requirement for films qualifying for the Producer Offset to have a cinema release should be removed. Screen Australia should fund content made by talented emerging, mid-career and proven established screen practitioners, and producers and distributors should determine which platforms are most suitable for a release based on business models, and considerations such as genre, story, and target audience.

As suggested above, there is a small but growing number of critics who argue that public funding should prioritise film and television programs that have cultural value or a distinctly Australian 'look and feel' (an idea that was popular in the 1980s). While I don't disagree with this argument, I am also cognisant that attitudes around the cultural value and commerce divide have oscillated over the history of Australian screen, and I believe that prioritising content that is more Australian in its style and content has its problems. What is an Australian look and feel? Programs that feature kangaroos and images of the red desert? What does it mean to be Australian? Does a multicultural society share the same views of what is culturally significant? Conversely, supporting content made by Australian creators without cultural value also raises questions. Should, for example, the Australian government fund movies that create American cultural value, such as *Elvis* or *The Great Gatsby* (2013)?

Consequently, I argue that screen policy should continue to support stories made by talented emerging, mid-career, and proven Australian film or television professionals. If a domestic production fund is created by regulating the streamers, in a similar vein to Screen Australia's policy programs supporting online content production,[4] different streams of funding could support content emphasising cultural value and others that don't. For example, the Online Production Fund contains two key subprogrammes: Generate and Premium. The aim of Generate is to support 'new, emerging or experienced screen content creators' willing to take creative risks in low-budget projects, while Premium facilitates

[4] See Ryan, MD, Healy, G, Cunningham, S (2022) Where Are They Now? Career Sustainability and Australian Web-Series Producers. *Media International Australia*, Incorporating Culture and Policy (published online). https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1329878X221114484.

higher budget projects for ‘screen content creators who have a significant track record/production credits on projects that have commercial success and/or critical acclaim’.[5] Screen Australia could potentially explore the possibility of developing a funding stream that supports ‘authentic Australian stories with cultural value’ alongside a general entry or genre film stream.

Historically, the argument for prioritising cultural value and Australian stories – with the pendulum swinging to culture over commerce – has tended to come at the expense of funding movies across a diverse range of popular film genres, and often those commercial genres that are most typically associated with Hollywood cinema such as action/adventure, science fiction, fantasy, among other examples. Since the introduction of the Producer Offset in 2007, there has been a strong surge in the production of popular genre movies and a significant diversification in the types of genre movies made. According to Screen Australia, for the five-year period between 1998/99 and 2002/03, national feature film production was dominated by a handful of genres.[6] Drama and comedy comprised a total of 78 per cent (47 and 31 per cent respectively) of the total number of feature films produced during this period, while thrillers accounted for 7 per cent and action films 6 per cent. However, for the ten-year period between 2008/09 and 2017/18, following the establishment of the Producer Offset, 36 per cent of the national slate were drama, 17 per cent were thrillers, 13 per cent were comedies, 7 per cent were action/adventure, 7 per cent family films, and 6 per cent were horror films.[7]

This is a positive development for the industry. Australian producers should be making a diverse range of screen stories across the spectrum of film genres. In Australian television, the commissioning of SVOD originals is encouraging the production of genres or styles that would not normally be made by commercial or public television – fantasy/magic realism in *Bloom* (2019), horror in the Stan mini-series *Wolf Creek* (2016-17), and Tasmanian gothic/horror/fantasy in *The Gloaming* (2020). Again, this is a positive development for the local production industry, and this should not be curtailed or tempered by a sudden shift to only funding content with a distinct Australian voice that impacts how screen professionals engage with generic forms.

As well as platform neutrality, Screen Australia should also continue to support content creation in the online space and on social media. The agency should also continue to invest, and arguably more heavily, in content that falls outside traditional content silos.

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[5] Screen Australia (2018) Online: development: funding programs. Commonwealth Government, Ultimo, Australia. Available at: https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/funding-and-support/online/development (Accessed 16 June 2022).
[6] See Screen Australia (2018) Australian Feature Films: Genres Produced: Proportions of Films by Genre, 1993/94-2017/18. Commonwealth government, Ultimo, Australia. Available: https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/fact-finders/production-trends/feature-production/australian-feature-films/genres-produced (accessed 22 August 2022).
[7] Ibid.

The web series can be plotted as a distinct, but hybrid media form at the intersection of professional forms of post-broadcast television and the new screen ecology of Social Media Entertainment (SME)[8] and user-generated online video creation. Web series have characteristics of both television series and SME. On the one hand, web series are scripted, serialised and episodic; they adopt genres typical of television such as sketch-comedy, drama, and crime;[9] and they make use of televisual narrative conventions such as serial arcs and cliff-hangers. On the other hand, like SME, most original web series are self-funded and independently distributed via open distribution channels, including social media and video sharing platforms, to network distributed online communities.[10] As an internet-distributed media form, web series, like SME, rely heavily on audience engagement.[11]

A growing number of professionalising amateurs are monetising content and building expertise, industry recognition, and large audiences over many years that ultimately lead to either a professional career in SME, or a professional career in film and television.

The Centrality of the Artist

Support for Australian screen stories should continue to facilitate and incentivise professionalization in native digital content production to seed new talent for established production sectors such as long-form television and film production.

A recent study into the careers of web series creators found that web series function as a valuable pathway to career sustainability for various types of screen content creators.[12] The career of 26 web series creators were tracked over a 10-year period, and web series facilitated a pathway to career sustainability for roughly three quarters of the cohort. Web series functioned as (1) a calling card for native online creators, (2) a format facilitating career consolidation or acceleration for television professionals and (3) a format enabling career diversification for filmmakers. Overall, web series can be a market-tested talent training ground for television, especially broadcaster-video-on-demand or subscription-video-on-demand services.

Many of these creators spent several years producing multiple web-series. Web series have been a calling card, a career accelerator, and an IP generator. The flexibility of the web

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[8] SME, encompassing YouTube and wider multiplatform content creation, is 'an emerging proto-industry' driven by 'professionalizing, previously amateur content creators using new entertainment and communicative formats … to develop potentially sustainable businesses based on significant followers … across multiple platforms' (see Cunningham, S, Craig, D (2019) Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley. United States of America: NYU Press).

[9] Peirce, LM, Tang, T (2012) Refashioning television: business opportunities and challenges of webisodes. International Journal of Business and Social Science, 3(13): 163–171.

[10] Christian, AJ (2018) Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television. New York: New York University Press.

[11] Burkholder, M, Ellingsen, S, Evans, N, et al. (2021) Web series, cancelled, and the value of engagement. Participations 18(2): pp. 251–268.

[12] Ryan, MD, Healy, G, Cunningham, S (2022) Where Are They Now?

series as either a calling card for a screen industry job, original license-fee-paying IP, or capacity to act as a revenue-earning pilot that attracts large audiences online, inherently makes this content valuable for creators when developing of a career.

Reaching the Audience

The future for Australian film and television is either online or SVOD streaming services.

As suggested above, there could be a Screen Australia commissioned investigation into whether funding for film and television programs can be platform neutral.

Discussion about improving the performance of Australian film and television industry often defaults to advocating for new production incentives or local content quotas that in turn ensure a certain level of production and therefore funding. Ensuring that streamers such as Netflix among others are regulated and are required to invest in Australian production is critical (and necessary); indeed, other submissions to this inquiry, including one by Craig Rossiter, have argued this.

However, as indicated above, there are also serious structural problems in theatrical distribution that impacts the release of Australian movies and their ability to reach domestic audiences.[13] The Producer Offset still requires eligible films to have a theatrical release even though this is not economic for many independent films. There also needs to be consideration of substantive incentives to encourage more investment in the marketing of Australian movies, and different ways to fund movies so that marketing and distribution strategies can also receive support from either direct or indirect funding incentives.

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