

Ben Goldsmith

I am a Lecturer and Researcher working in the Centre for Research and Screen Studies at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School (AFTRS), but the views expressed in this submission are my personal views, and are not necessarily those of the AFTRS.

I have been researching and writing about Australian film and the Australian film industry for approximately fifteen years; my PhD, completed in 1997, examined the construction of Australian cultural identity and the overlap, balance and contest between commercial and cultural imperatives in arguments around “Australian literature” in the 1930s, and “Australian film” in the 1960s and 1970s. During the course of my PhD research I became convinced of two things: first, the significance of film as a medium for Australians to tell stories and speak in our own idiom and voice to ourselves and the world; and second, of the fundamental importance of arms-length government support for screen production to enable these stories to be told and widely disseminated. In my subsequent work at the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy at Griffith University, and now at the AFTRS, I remain convinced of the cultural value of screen production and the necessity of government support for production and for training.

Through their support for screen production and training, public agencies can facilitate the necessary conversations within and among the diverse communities that make up Australia; they can cultivate the diversity of voices that individually and collectively ‘speak’ Australia; they can support the self-representation and media participation of minority groups; and so provide space – which can never be guaranteed by market forces alone – for what Seyla Benhabib has termed the “complex cultural dialogue” through which our collective values and sense of self are constantly created, recreated and negotiated.¹ For these reasons it is not only desirable but also essential that federal and state governments commit to supporting a range of mechanisms to enable all Australians to participate in this dialogue as producers, viewers and users of screen content.

The range of existing film funding mechanisms goes some way towards providing these opportunities. But it is my belief that if we accept that part of the function of screen production, and film in particular, is to stoke the conversation about ‘What it means to be Australian’, then we need to acknowledge that this is not simply a conversation we have amongst ourselves. It is my strongly held view that films made by non-Australians, or with a significant cohort of non-Australian crew and cast - from *Walkabout*, *Wake in Fright*, *Until the End of the World*, *Where the Green Ants Dream*, to *The Matrix*, and even *Superman Returns* - prompt or provoke us to think about who we are, what Australia means, and what our industry is and could be, in different ways than those films we make about ourselves principally for our own consumption. The small number of official co-production agreements and memoranda of understanding with other countries in theory work in these ways and enable

¹ Benhabib, Seyla. *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

cultural and creative exchange with filmmakers from other countries, but in practice few films have been made under these agreements, and they are limited to filmmakers from the UK, Canada, Italy, Ireland, Israel, Germany, France and New Zealand.

It is my contention that as a democratic, pluralist, multicultural society at this time perhaps more than ever before it is imperative that we embrace and create space for complex cultural dialogue not only within and among the diverse communities that make up the Australian polity, but also with other communities in other nations around the world. One way to foster international dialogue, to work towards our cultural objectives and to broaden our thinking about what it means to be Australian is to provide opportunities for collaboration between Australian filmmakers and filmmakers from other countries which go beyond those mechanisms – such as co-production agreements – which currently exist.

With this in mind, I want to propose the **establishment of a new fund** – not to replace any existing funding mechanisms, but to be an addition to them – for the purpose of regularly bringing a leading non-Australian filmmaker (most probably a Director) to live and work in Australia for a period of time (between one and two years). The fund would finance the production by that filmmaker of a film that would be made here, with Australian cast and crew. In the manner of the Adelaide Thinker in Residence program, the filmmaker would be paid a living allowance during their residence here, and would be encouraged to give master-classes at training institutions such as AFTRS, to participate in screen culture events such as film festivals and competitions, to speak at schools and give public lectures and screenings of their work around the country, and to mentor young and emerging filmmakers while working on pre-production and production of the film which would be the centrepiece of the exercise.

The benefits of such an exercise would include: contributing to the government's stated objective of "creating a diverse range of film and television product" in Australia; providing fresh perspectives on Australia, Australian stories and landscape; connecting Australian filmmakers and audiences with leading international practitioners, and through them to bodies of film work and approaches to film that previously may not have been encountered; exposing Australia and Australian stories to international audiences who may not otherwise have had access to them; and seeding new conversations and possibilities for international cultural exchange and collaboration.

The creation of such a fund would be a visionary step with the potential to take Australian film and Australian filmmakers in new directions. It would complement and extend the existing arrangements. And it would signal to Australians and to the world that we understand the vital role that filmmaking can play in cultural development, and that we acknowledge and embrace the international dimension of our ongoing conversation about who we are and what Australia means.