

Submission to the New National Cultural Policy

By Lily Mondy

Who I am

I'm a filmmaker and screenwriter from regional Western Australia, and a lifelong cinemagoer. I came to filmmaking in high school and went on to study it formally overseas, and I'm now working toward a full-time career in the industry. I'm writing this both as someone who makes Australian stories and as someone who grew up loving them.

My experience

I grew up in Margaret River, so the closest cinema regularly playing films was in Busselton. This meant around a forty-minute trip to go and see a film, and the cinema itself was quite small, with three screens in total. It's a great venue and one I still love going back to, there's something very nostalgic about it for me. But being on the smaller side, it tended to play only the guaranteed successes, the bigger blockbusters, and from my memory not many smaller Australian films.

I wasn't really thinking about whether a film was Australian or not back then. The Australian ones I did see though, really stuck with me. I watched *Red Dog* at the Cape Naturaliste cinema in Margaret River when I was about ten, and it's the first time I properly remember hearing an Australian accent up on the big screen. We'd watch the *The Sapphires* and other Aussie classics at home, but I find watching an Australian story in a cinema is always a totally different experience. At school we had watched a few in English class, and I remember *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Water Diviner* clearly. By the time I was in my senior years studying film we'd moved onto Baz Luhrmann and *The Babadook*, however these were often the exception and not the curriculum's backbone. Most of what we studied was either international, especially American and British.

What strikes me is how little has changed. The closest cinema to me now is the six screen Hoyts in Bunbury, and Australian titles are a rare sight on its schedule, so streaming has become the default if I want to watch them. I'm able to find these amazing films because I go actively looking, and that's the real issue. The films are certainly being made. Around eighty-four Australian features were produced in 2024, and local films made up about ten per cent of new cinema releases. Yet in 2025, against a box office approaching a record one billion dollars, Australian films took only around two and a half per cent of it. The work exists it's just not heard of. Audiences are simply turning up to other countries' films, because those are the ones being put in front of them and advertised to them. Someone without my background, the casual cinemagoer my family were on those trips to Busselton, has almost no chance of discovering Australian work. This isn't a problem of supply or quality. It's a problem of visibility and access, and that is something policy can actually address.

What I'd like to see change

Cinemas should be treated as cultural and social infrastructure. We tend to talk about cinemas in commercial terms, as businesses that succeed or fail on ticket sales. But a cinema is also a piece of social infrastructure, one of the few remaining places where a community gathers in the dark to share the same story at the same time. That has a value beyond the box office, and I think policy should recognise it as such. The most effective way to sustain a cinema-going culture is to build the habit early. My own relationship with film began as a child being taken to the cinema, and that habit shaped not only how I spend my time but the entire course of my career. Children who grow up going to the cinema become the adults who keep it alive, and if we want a generation that values Australian stories on the big screen, we have to give them the experience of those stories while they're young. This matters more now than it used to. As life moves increasingly online, people are becoming more isolated, and the simple act of going out and being among others is quietly being lost. Treating cinemas as infrastructure, supporting independent venues and building programs that bring young people and communities through the door, is not only a cultural investment but a social one.

Audiences should be treated as active participants, not passive consumers. There's a tendency to think of audiences as the end of the supply chain, the people who simply buy a ticket once a film has been made and marketed. But audiences aren't passive. Given the chance they seek films out, talk about them, recommend them and build the word of mouth that keeps a film alive long after its opening weekend. The problem is that the system rarely gives them that chance. As I described above, Australian films are genuinely difficult to discover, and that isn't because audiences aren't interested but instead due to the fact films are never put in front of them. The scale of the imbalance is glaring, for instance in 2024 films from the United States earned around eighty-five per cent of all box office takings in Australia. When discovery is left entirely to marketing budgets, the big films with the Hollywood budget win by default, and everything else disappears regardless of quality. Treating audiences as active participants means investing in the things that let them engage better promotion and discoverability for Australian titles, support for the festivals and community screenings where people actually encounter new work. People will support Australian film if we let them find it. Seeing our own culture on screen is important not just for film but for community and relationships.

Australia needs a dedicated screen export body. Australian stories deserve the same chance to reach international audiences that films from other countries are given. I've seen that gap from the other side, when I studied film at degree level in the UK our course drew on a wide range of international cinema for reference. Only a small handful of Australian films ever featured. It wasn't that our films weren't good enough to be there, they simply weren't reaching that audience. While films from comparable countries were studied, screened and discussed as a matter of course. We make distinctive, original films and tell stories that come from a perspective no other country can offer, but we lack the dedicated

infrastructure to carry them out into the world. Film is just as important as music, and through Sounds Australia we've already seen how our unique creativity resonates with audiences far beyond our borders. Why not build something similar for film? A dedicated screen export body would give our stories a real path to international festivals, buyers and audiences, rather than leaving each film to find its way alone. The benefit flows back home too because films that succeed abroad build a reputation that makes them easier to discover here. A country whose stories travel is a country more confident in telling them and will encourage young aspiring filmmakers to go for it.

Why this matters

This matters to me because of connection, and because of what our own stories do for a country. As we move further into an online age more and more young people seem lost and isolated. We have never been more connected, and yet so many of us have never felt more alone. That's not a problem with a single solution, but I genuinely believe Australian cinema can do a small and meaningful part of the work.

Mental health is a real struggle in this country, and we're very good at pretending everything is fine when it often isn't. Film is one of the few things that refuses to pretend, and Australian film does it in our own voice. It's where we explore the subjects we avoid, where minds are opened and difficult conversations begin. It's for laughing and crying and sharing the kind of emotions that can feel too heavy to carry alone. Our stories, told with our own accents and landscapes and humour reflect us back to ourselves in a way that no imported film ever can.

I believe an Australian film has the power to change someone's life, or at the very least to meet them in something they're carrying and let them feel less alone in it. But that can only happen if people can actually find these films, and right now too many of them never reach an audience at all. If we build cultural infrastructure that brings people back together, that gets young people through the door and puts Australian stories in front of them, then we're doing more than supporting an industry. We're investing in the country's wellbeing and in our sense of who we are. Australian stories made and produced here and told honestly on our own screens, are part of how we understand ourselves and how we stay connected to one another. That's worth protecting and worth fighting for and it's something as a filmmaker and audience member I hope to see change!