

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: As an artist

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

I agree.

A Place for Every Story

I agree, but add the following:

I will focus on television drama, but much of what I say I believe applies to all forms of art and cultural expression. Within my commentary on this Pillar, I make 2 recommendations. I regard the first as important, but I regard the second as critical. A change will be needed in the wording and meaning of the policy across all 5 Pillars, and in the perspective taken across the entire policy.

I write from multiple backgrounds, including theatre and screen, in executive and practitioner roles: as a playwright, and a filmmaker, independent and under contract to SBS; as a member of the Premier's Arts Advisory Committee under the Goss government; the CEO of Queensland's Screen Industry Development Centre for 15 years; national Chair of the State screen industry post-tertiary development centres for 7 years; a contributor to Screen Australia's practitioner development policy over those years; and an educator in screen writing, development and production. I continue to work as a writer across forms.

There are two issues underlying any discussion about screen industry policy in this country. The first concerns what is perceived to be the nature of original content for screen. It can be assumed it is simply product, a manufactured object, but it is more accurate and more useful to define it as an industrial art form, for at its best it is. And we must surely assume we wish to deliver the best, as expressed in the 3rd of the 5 Goals. During my decades in the screen industry the ruling un-written tactic by government gatekeepers has been to erase the term "art" from all documents, and from the minds of practitioners. It is bizarre and wholly counter-productive industrially, but this pernicious precept continues to hold sway. Oddly, it implies some level of fear – fear of difference perhaps. Even stranger, it is that different product they fear which will eventually become the industry leader in the future, the breakthrough work they will all seek to emulate.

My first recommendation is this is simply solved if policy declares screen work to be an industrial art form. I trust I need not point out that a great deal is revealed when power systems in a country wish to erase the descriptor "art" from what is clearly an art form.

The second issue concerns a seemingly innocuous but critical consideration for government policy on screen. It centres around a simple question - what constitutes an Australian story? Is it solely one about Australia or Australians, in all our diversity, but set in Australia? Is it one that is recognisable as "Australian" in some vague way from past productions? Or is it not also one by an Australian about any topic or theme, possibly set elsewhere in whole, or in part? This seems a simple question, but it has continued to confound and inhibit effective government policy now for the last four decades, under both major political persuasions. There is nothing so vague or so potentially misleading, or so easily misinterpreted or even misused, as the phrase "Australian stories."

Funding policy performance tends towards being simplistic, and industry commissioning and programming practice on screen follows suit, in part to allow it to tap into the funding, and in part because the vague simplistic wording helps block new, difficult or challenging work, but finally because it simplifies content decisions.

This in turn restricts the nature of television drama product we are finally offered as audiences, both in content and style. By now, gatekeepers within the industry and within government are generally and generationally habituated to the norm, seeking out and selecting work that is recognisable, work like we've had before. The generally disappointing results of this narrow way are in clear view on our screens, especially when compared with the powerful, compelling television drama now coming out of so many other countries globally. The development and production process in Australia delivers generally uninspired, predictable and dimensionally flat work to our screens, ultimately uncritical of, and unquestioning of the social or political status quo, locked into lacklustre forms of genre or soap. Even if the stories contain occasional challenging material, the styles and presentation themselves dilute the effect, blur and blunt the impact, and pacify rather than excite an audience to render them alert, with their judgement awakened.

Leaving aside for a moment the major issues of almost prohibitively limited budgets, and lack of career paths and ongoing professional development for directors and other key creatives, we must ask, as a country, are we incapable of strong, different work (clearly an objectionable and patently absurd proposition), or are our hearts just not in it? Or is it that the genuine creatives are being isolated from the key creative decisions? We must be eternally grateful our First Nations filmmakers are beginning to reach beyond, for it gives us hope.

My second recommendation therefore is that if this current attempt to reformulate cultural policy is genuine, it must insist on content by Australians, regardless of whether it is about Australia or officially designated Australian concerns, or not. Expression must not be programmed. If it is, it comes to more closely resemble marketing, or propaganda.

Originators of television screen content (writers and writer/directors by and large) are always having to put exciting, insightful new work or concepts about or set in Australia, Asia, or the world itself, often expressed in new forms and styles, into their bottom drawers. This is despite it often being superior to the work that does get produced. This is because they know full well such work will not be supported under current policy and habitual commissioning approaches. Indeed, they are far more likely to first self-censor in an effort to submit work that is largely the same as all the other work that has been, and still does get supported, and perhaps mix genres for a little spice. After all, everyone has to eat.

This, needless to say, contributes to what is long understood to be a problem within Australian culture – we do not genuinely know ourselves. Humans come to know themselves and their country from expressions of art and culture. The role of this work for screen is not only to entertain, but to teach and guide, to promote critical thought and self-awareness.

Not only do we mostly perpetuate our social amnesia about our invasion of this country, but we seem to be unaware even of who we are collectively as a people and a nation, and of the ways this is changing. Jingoism passes for cultural coherence. Absurd assertions about our primacy in various fields ignores relative facts. Our ritual cruelty to refugees – heads on spikes at the gates of the city - is swept aside and excused as necessary realpolitik. Some are awake and aware, but as a country we just seem to sleepwalk on. Or we did until we had enough collective nous to change government. Now is the time for a reset, as I trust this new Cultural Policy will show.

We are just beginning to tell stories from our many embedded cultures, and these will help, but it is a small beginning that can easily be stifled. In general our realities, our contradictions, our failings and our actual, deep value to each other and the world, and our obligations, are obscured, ignored. Problems are barely raised let alone truly challenged.

The answer to this is simple – adjust the usual vague wording of policy to allow for new, different work BY Australians that may not even be ABOUT Australia. But even if it is, it may be critical of the politics of this country and we its people, and may picture solutions. And to ensure this, mandate a minimum percentage (if that is what it takes) of new, different and challenging work by Australians to be supported meaningfully enough to reach production and broadcast. Let originators breathe, invent, make the new. They are the life- blood and the true future of the industry.

It is vital we set our minds straight about all this – screenwriters, as originating artists, always bring gifts, and without them, to be clear, there is no industry. They do not write always about their own place and time, or according to set agendas. They do their best work from the imagination, and they have the most profound effect when they either intentionally or inadvertently challenge the status quo. It is time we stopped attempting to codify that because it stifles the deepest value of the work. Funding based on reproducing known formulaic patterns shifts from support to control.

Specifically therefore, amend the existing document from (first sentence) “...Australian stories,” to “stories by Australians, on topics or themes they choose, even if not specifically about Australia, or set in Australia, and which may even be critical of Australia and its people.” This direct statement will help protect our best work, and allow us to mature as a people, and so as a nation. The demands of budget will always affect greenlighting outcomes, but at least some original work will be allowed to emerge. From that first sentence, throughout the policy documents, amend the all-too- easily manipulable phrase “Australian stories”, to “stories by Australians,” and maintain the vital extended meaning from that first sentence throughout.

PS: Simple edit on second par – not “less and less Australian stories” – the concept here is number, not volume or scale – replace with the correct grammar of “fewer and fewer.” Evolving patterns of English language-use have not yet erased this distinction.

The Centrality of the Artist

I agree.

Strong Institutions

I agree. The point made on the membership of Boards is especially critical, and given the clear continuing threats to democracy in this country, this must be addressed urgently, particularly in regard to the Boards of both the ABC and SBS.

I add the following on education and training:

The embedded determination within the current screen industry in both the commercial and educational fields is to promote and instill the short-termist, commercial view of above, which can be termed “industrialism” – the valuing and promotion of commercial imperatives at the expense of (instead of in tandem with) the art/cultural. With young people and their parents understandably expecting sustainable employment within the industry in return for a significant financial investment in their education, this industrialism within education can seem pragmatic and justified. However, it is simply not realistic, or honest. It is a promised outcome that cannot be delivered.

The relatively small screen industry in this country functions within a boom-bust micro-economy in which there are very few sustainable jobs at the best of times, and then, mostly those relating to the down-stream service industries. The local industry is based on relatively predictable returns on known product forms, not on the intrinsic value of the screen content itself – its value and power as cultural and artistic expression of a people in a place within their own history, and within the political realities of their present and foreseeable future. But regardless, almost no graduates will ever get work in key creative roles in the local industry.

It would in fact be more productive and ethical to shift the entire focus of education and training in this field in the following way.

While educating students in detail on the often lethal commercial imperatives that drive the industry and which will seek to block their best imagined work (or occasionally even appropriate it without adequate recompense) and giving them strategies for managing that, the institutions should also seriously foster the art/cultural value of their work, and promote innovation and difference as essential research and development for the industry. Solid guidance on working with streaming services must become integral to this new approach.

From there, give these graduates and other early-career practitioners funding pathways and linked partnerships and alliances with streamers to develop and produce their innovative work, and all links in the chain of professional development, including the industry itself, will ultimately benefit.

In time, the local industry will catch up to those future practitioners as they reshape it, and lead it out of its current repetitious doldrums, just as First Nation's television work is now beginning to do. Australian television drama output will flower.

Reaching the Audience

I agree, but replace "locate Australian stories," with "locate stories by Australians."

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

- To reiterate: replace the phrase "Australian stories" throughout the document with "stories by Australians," together where appropriate with its extended meaning of, "on any topic or theme they choose..." and further, as outlined above.
- Commit policy (perhaps even through a separate, 6th pillar) to increase meaningful legal support and professional commercial development for all practitioners, with particular regard to agreements and contracts, and to entrepreneurial strategies. This would best be undertaken in alliance with SPA through increased purpose-built funding to that organisation.
- With reference to the fifth Goal, review and continue to monitor the deep ownership arrangements of Australian production companies to ensure genuine Australian controlling ownership, and to ensure government funds are allocated only to those which satisfy this requirement, where production decisions and primary and long-tail profits remain in this country.
- Restoration of meaningful funding to the ABC and SBS, sufficient to significantly increase local drama production.