

Film Inquiry Submission No. 25.....
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QDox Inc (Queensland Documentary Association)

Submission to the Inquiry into the Future Opportunities for Australia's Film Animation, Special Effects and Electronic Games Industries by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts

The Queensland Documentary Association (QDox. Inc.) is pleased to have this opportunity to respond to the call by the Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts for submissions to the Inquiry into the Future Opportunities for Australia's Film Animation, Special Effects and Electronic Games Industries

QDox notes that for the purposes of this inquiry the Film Industry encompasses 'film projects such as documentaries'. This submission is particularly concerned with issues specific to the future opportunities for the Documentary within the Australian Film Industry.

In summary, QDox argues that it is vital to maintain and develop mechanisms for the research, development, distribution, exhibition and marketing of Australian documentary production if Australia is to preserve and extend its "distinctive voice" in a global film industry.

The submission contends that documentary training and production has had and will continue to have:

- a central role in the Australia film industry
- clear economic, cultural and social benefits
- a major contribution to the continual development of audiovisual forms and technologies
- a crucial role in the development of the training and skills base for the film industry
- a significant role in providing the most effective linkage between the film industry

and the wider cultural and information technology sectors

- a key role in safeguarding and fostering Australian content

QDOX submits that, amongst other strategies, value can be added to these significant contributions by:

- Extending the current drama expenditure requirements for subscription television to encompass an expenditure requirement for documentary by subscription documentary channels;
- Extending the current Australian documentary quota on free to air broadcasting;
- Ensuring that Australia's public broadcasters (ABC & SBS) are adequately resourced to produce and transmit documentary productions on a truly national and regional basis;
- Extending and appropriately resourcing the Community Broadcast Television sector;
- Extending the resources for documentary skills training and production in the community broadcast and education sectors;
- Developing and supporting government, industry, educational and community initiatives which utilise emerging audiovisual technologies and documentary production skills to record and represent Australia's ongoing transitions in the worlds of work, family, culture and the community;
- Ensuring Australia's archival film records are appropriately collected, maintained and made economically and technologically accessible;
- Developing a Documentary Fellowship scheme to support outstanding documentary projects by established documentary makers
- Establishing a Centre of Excellence for Audiovisual Documentary

1.0 Documentary and the Australian Film Industry

Australian documentary production began with the first films produced in Australia and, arguably, it has been documentary production and circulation that has provided the thread of continuity running through more than a century of Australian filmmaking.

For most of the last 100 years, narrative feature films were the exception rather than the rule in the Australian film production industry and at least 80 per cent of Australian footage has been short non-fiction films: documentaries, newsreels and advertisements. This marks a key difference distinguishing the “minnow” which is the Australian film industry from the behemoth which is its American counterpart.

Much of this continuing difference can be traced to our small population (and budgets), our widely dispersed settlement and, most significantly, the simple economic imperative to put ‘bums on seats’ with a minimum of investment.

Current figures confirm the ongoing significance of documentary production. The most recent *Get the Picture* indicates “Almost 1400 documentaries were produced by the independent sector in Australia in the 10 years between 1990/91 and 1999/2000. These had a combined value of \$370 million, and an average budget per title of \$266,000. Australian commercial and public broadcasters produced an additional 389 in-house broadcast documentaries between 1990/91 and 1999/2000”.

These figures do not take into account the array of non-broadcast information, educational and sponsored production for government, non-government and industry sectors in what are essentially documentary genres.

Now, with the “convergence” phenomenon increasingly enabling the simultaneous development of documentary production for digital as well as broadcast and non-theatrical domains, the Documentary will continue to remain a very cheap option for the size and demographic of audiences it can achieve - much cheaper than drama, sport, news or most light entertainment.

2.0 Economic, Social and Cultural Benefits of Documentary

Typically, Documentary production is supported not because of an individual program’s market profitability but because of the Documentary’s capacity to communicate important information entertainingly to targeted communities or markets. That is to say, as Franco Papandrea has demonstrated, for “benefits, such as the enhancement of a national culture, that may be generated as a market externality” [BTCE 1997 *Cultural Regulation of Australian Television Programs*, Occasional Paper 114, AGPS Canberra]

Much of the documentary's special authority stems from its status as evidence from the world. In particular, from its ability to bear witness and give voice to people's real experience; thus enabling us to recognise timely issues in need of attention.

Unlike the 'ambulance chasers' of current affairs who must respond on the run to fast breaking or sensational stories and issues, quality documentary offers audiences well researched, reflective and engaging treatments of deep and long term human subjects. These can then empower a community to consider its democratic response to the questions raised.

In Australia, our documentary canon stretches from the 19th Century social concerns of the Salvation Army Limelight Brigade and Baldwin Spencer's pioneering ethnographic filming to the contemporary work of government agencies such as Film Australia, in-house production by commercial and public broadcasters and the major contributions of independent producers.

Over the years, such documentary productions have met the contemporary aims of their sponsoring departments and authorities by profiling Australian products, culture, and society locally and internationally. At the same time these documentaries have also developed a store of archival material which has enable subsequent generations to come to know their nation's past and the attitudes and issues that have formed us.

In this context it is also worth recalling that the first Oscar awarded to an Australian film was for the legendary Damien Parer's *Kokoda Frontline*. Similarly, it was the success at the Venice Film Festival of John Heyer's documentary classic, *The Back of Beyond*, which marked the Australian film industry's debut on the global festival circuit.

Underwriting this rich documentary tradition has been the preparedness of state and federal governments of various political persuasions — together with major public institutions and private corporations— to continue to develop mechanisms that guarantee ongoing Australian documentary production. In their turn, these Australian documentaries have promoted a national and international appreciation of the variety of our landscape, culture and people which has served to challenge crude stereotypes and cliches of what it means to be Australian.

By dint of its comparative economy, opportunity for creativity and capacity for witness, documentary production remains uniquely placed to continue to provide long term economic, social and cultural benefits

3.0 Opportunities for growth and technological development

Documentary is, in John Grierson's phrase, the "creative treatment of actuality" for which, as Grierson's contemporary, Alberto Cavalcanti, put it, "three fundamental elements exist: the social, the poetic and the technical".

Over the years, Australian documentary filmmakers have developed and employed new audiovisual technologies and their films drawn have not hesitated to employ innovative strategies of montage, surrealism and dramatisation alongside the more

familiar techniques of narration, interview and observation. Nor have they ignored the demands of character development, psychology, suspense and rhythm as well as those of accuracy, persuasion and advocacy.

Current developments in on-line documentary production confirm that Australian documentary filmmakers continue to embrace and pioneer technical as well as stylistic innovations.

The application of advanced digital technologies, online interactivity and broadband all present the documentary industry with a significant opportunity to continue to contribute to the growth of the Australian film industry. This is particularly so when the traditional boundaries between documentary and fictional genres are increasingly blurred and crossovers such as "reality television" and streaming video win strong audience acceptance.

It is also worth noting the capacity of techniques and approaches derived from a variety of documentary genres to contribute to the development of innovative designs in the games industry.

The digital era should be a time of promise not threat for the documentary community. Given due recognition and continued support, the documentary in Australia will continue to evolve as Australian documentary makers uncover new subjects demanding new approaches; find new uses for current technology; develop new technologies in order to pursue new perceptions; and strive to reach new audiences in new ways.

4.0 Skills and training for growth of the Film industry

The new media are decentralized and autonomous but networked. It is therefore appropriate that an inquiry into the continued development of the Australian film industry should consider a similar model. The place of documentary in the Australian film industry provides a useful starting point.

Our early industry was generally unwilling or unable to finance the studio facilities, screenwriters and star system necessary for fiction production, but documentary production was an entirely different matter. Studio facilities could be minimised and individual cinematographer/director/producers could "make a go of it" for long periods in the field, working for, or under contract to, government departments, newsreel companies, commercial industries and localised broadcasters.

This established the framework for a decentralised, locally responsive industry that was at the same time keenly aware of the need to remain abreast of global technological and stylistic developments such as sound production, colour processing and synch sound recording.

Today, while the Australian film industry has considerable studio capacity integrated

with international production financing, distribution and exhibition, much of the industry's personnel and production capability remains devolved and primarily engaged in factual program production for broadcast, information, non-theatrical and digital platforms.

Similarly, while there are centralised flagship film industry training providers such as AFTRS, the new media industries increasingly draw on a much more diverse set of technical and conceptual trainings in fields as varied as information technology, intellectual property, design, visual and performing arts, law, ethics and historical and cultural studies.

Given the demands of their genre, documentary filmmakers have been and will remain at the forefront of integrating this range of technical and conceptual inputs and trainings into their production practice.

It is clear that ongoing support for these creative and technological developments cannot be restricted to a few centralized locations but requires a flexible, imaginative and regional response.

Such a response will also serve to enhance the capacity of Australia's screen education providers to attract an international student market and maximise export opportunities.

5.0 Links between Documentary and wider cultural and information technology sectors

The history of documentary is the history of the development of new audiovisual forms placed at the service of state, commercial and community institutions in order to document, analyse and disseminate opinion about social, scientific and cultural events of ongoing significance. In order to fulfil this challenging role, documentary makers have necessarily engaged with the widest possible range of cultural and technological sectors.

Cultural, technological and policy shifts are not new challenges for documentary makers. For example, until the 1960's documentary film predominantly reached its audience through a mix of theatrical and non-theatrical exhibition. Then, shifts in technology — particularly the advent of video and the emerging dominance of television— began to alter production formats, funding patterns and audiences. By the mid 1980s, the primary window and commissioner for documentary was television. In Australia, it was only after concerted lobbying that the FFC Accord was developed which enabled independent voices to reach this new television audience.

Now, as we shift from spectrum scarcity to a broadband world of touted spectrum abundance, there is a need to consider how this new technological and cultural landscape might draw on and extend the Australian documentary tradition in production, distribution and exhibition.

Some things are clear. Much of Documentary's strength resides in its practitioners' habitual negotiation of alliances not only with the obvious cultural 'players' such as QDoX Inc Submission to the Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Inquiry into the Future Opportunities for Australia's Film Animation, Special Effects and Electronic Games Industries [Pat Laughren for QDox]

archives, museums and galleries but also with other key sectors of civil society such as medical, social, legal, scientific, commercial and political institutions.

In the emerging information economy, the skill and experience of documentary producers in researching, shaping and delivering complex information — and in employing and contributing technological innovations — should position them at the cost-effective forefront of contemporary media developments.

6.0 Documentary and Australian Content

QDox is pleased to note the committee's identification of "what needs to be done to preserve and extend our position and distinctive voice in global film etc.?" as a central issue for this inquiry.

For over a hundred years, Australian documentary makers have borne witness to, documented, analysed and preserved the myriad facets of experience, memory and personality which make up our distinctive and developing national culture and its unique contribution to the global community.

As the Committee would know, questions of the need for an Australian presence on the screen date back at least until the 1927 Royal Commission into the motion picture industry; and Australian content regulation has been part of the licensing obligations of commercial television broadcasters since 1961. For example, Section 3e of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* states that one of the objectives of the act is "to promote the role of broadcasting services in developing and reflecting a sense of national identity".

The ABA's Australian Content Standard —which is a response to clear market failure in reflecting and developing a sense of Australian identity, character and social diversity— aims to achieve this sense of national identity "by supporting the community's continued access to television programs produced under Australian creative control". Currently, not only are there mandated minimum proportions of domestic programming but also quotas for new domestic drama, children's programs and documentary.

It is crucial that processes continue to be developed which ensure that the community will have continued access to Australian Content in a range of genres — including documentary — on digital, subscription and 'free-to-air' platforms.

For documentary makers, this is particularly the case at a time when technology potentially makes the democratic and local documentation of our culture all the more accessible and achievable.

Fortunately, there are many local and national initiatives where this potential is becoming a reality. One current example is the Department of Veterans Affairs' *Australians At War* QDoX Inc Submission to the Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Inquiry into the Future Opportunities for Australia's Film Animation, Special Effects and Electronic Games Industries [Pat Laughren for QDox]

Film Archive where over a two-year period the latest digital video technology is being used to capture the video testimony and oral histories of 2000 war veterans. While there is an understandable initial focus purely on WWII veterans, the project will then move on to every conflict from WWII to Afghanistan and the recent Iraq war.

Each interviewee in this project will be recorded for between 8 and 10 hours on all aspects of their life story with particular interest on the personal and social impact of the war. Each of the expected 30,000 camera tapes will be transcribed and in time it will all be accessible through a website/database currently under development. The documentary teams are shooting on Digital Video Cameras and every interview is shot on 'green screen' so that future filmmakers, researchers, school kids, etc can be use the material flexibly.

Another impressive example is the work of the SB30 team in inner South Brisbane. This community cultural development project sees a team of documentary makers assisting local schools, businesses and community organizations to produce ten brief video documentaries that will chart the process of change in an area experiencing rapid transition

These exciting initiatives provide a source of inspiration and example for the ongoing project of documenting Australian life, character, industry and culture. QDox looks forward to ongoing bipartisan recognition of the need to ensure that this visionary project of documenting and representing the real Australia is sustained and expanded in the years to come.

Over recent decades, Australia has developed a set of policy instruments — federal and state government film support agencies, the ABA, Film Australia, the National Interest Program, the Accord, tax regimes etc.— which are the envy of many other national film and television industries. Inevitably, in a dynamic environment, they need constant review, fine-tuning and occasional replacement. What is not called for is the abandonment of these legitimate and effective market interventions nor acquiescence in the retreat of local Australian content to a sanctioned ghetto on a marginalised carrier or exhibition circuit.