

Film Inquiry
Submission No. 3

PRODUCERS
AND
DIRECTORS
GUILD
OF VICTORIA
(EST. 1970)



The film, animation, special effects and electronic games industries make up a large sector of the community. The essential occupations of these industries mostly do not have any clear career path but we would venture to suggest that the education system is actively encouraging more and more children to study "media". We believe that, while, to some extent, the skills that are learned in "media" classes can be used elsewhere (eg. As marketing assistants, preparing executive powerpoint reports, using computers in other fields including engineering, plumbing etc. to enhance and simplify reports) that raising the expectation that there will be jobs in the industry will lead to higher unemployment in the future and the need for extensive retraining.

PREDICTIONS DIFFICULT

The processes in creating films are so disparate, and sometimes not clearly related through their hands-on activities, except for the current project being worked on, that it is possibly the most difficult industry for which to create relevant courses or to predict growth and income. It is the most capricious of pursuits, totally dependent on public taste, which changes suddenly and violently for no apparent reason.

Anecdotally, it is noticeable that successful Producers often have a legal background. This perhaps reflects the complexity of the industry as those with these skills are easily able to work through the legal minefield of rights issues in new media etc...

A HANDS-ON INDUSTRY

As with so many jobs which were once apprentice/hands-on and field-work based (eg. Nursing, plumbing and other trades, the film industry is an educative and often random structure that requires a high degree of "on the job" experience to follow studies or interests in more "input" or general fields eg. History, science, electrical trades, cabinet-making etc.. A good solid general education mixed with deep practical ability in a wide range of fields is most desirable BEFORE commencing studies which are exclusively based on "Media" or "Film".

WAGE/CAREER PATH EXPECTATIONS

Therein lies a problem. Students who have worked in, or studied, other disciplines, treating film as a Post Graduate study only, also have higher expectations of wages and career potential. The film industry does not reward higher study at any level. It is, and always will be, a performance-based rewards system with a structure loosely built on MEAA rates and negotiated by individual contractors to fit ever-decreasing budgets. However, in most cases, beginners are either very poorly paid or volunteers hoping to gather experience, credits and networks to kick-start their careers. Many face years of no work at all and without any guaranteed continuity of employment, many take jobs as waiters, telemarketers etc., while still calling themselves "Producers" "Directors" or other specialist jobs for which they have been (often far too narrowly) educated.

RELEVANCE OF COURSES TO JOBS

There is no point in funding film courses for which no jobs will be available.

Students should be counselled to look at general or specialist degrees first, perhaps other occupations to ensure that when they DO have the chance to study film, that they have some life experience, maturity and a broad world view, before putting their hand to what is a very expensive pursuit, both labour intensive and costly in terms of equipment.

There is, anecdotally, a very high degree of failure in the performance of AFTRS, VCA and other film-school graduates to find satisfactory continued employment in allied industries due to the decline in local product at all levels especially in the advertising business, traditionally a training ground for film-makers. The "stars" of the course are continually flaunted as standard, whereas these people make up a small percentage of graduates.

It seems that areas in which jobs will be growing will encompass many synergistic skills. Computer skills are essential at most levels of the industries, at least an understanding of the requirements for animation, graphics etc.. Even writers need this basic knowledge of the possibilities that graphics and animation can add to their scripts.

- a) The current size and scale of Australia's film, animation, special effects and electronic games industries.

NUMBERS IN THE INDUSTRY

"Everyone's a producer/everyone wants to be a director"

To address this question is almost impossible. Even a current Census would not give a true picture of the industry. The closest that one can come to a corraling of workers in the business is to collect data from reputable directories such as "Encore", "B & T Yearbook" and "The Production Book". However, a word of caution: many practitioners are still ignorant of the services that these books offer for free. Entries are printed free and books are sold to the industry, schools and libraries. It is a pity that everyone is not aware of this as overseas companies use these as a way of finding crews and there is a belief that if you do not have your service/name in these books, you are not legitimate.

Note that it is not clear whether the importance of these manuals is spelt out in Film Courses as there is anecdotal evidence that many students are ignorant of their existence, even after graduation.

In an "industry" that has no definite career path, numbers are particularly difficult to calculate. Defining a full-time worker is also a challenge. As well, people in Australia tend to work, contracting or free-lancing, across a number of different media. It is quite common for film industry workers to take "bread-and-butter" jobs in television, say on a series, game show or as a free-lance. Animators will often be in demand for all disciplines, the most skilled working across all - film, television, commercials, games and sometimes creating their own "spec" projects at the same time eg. Short films for contests, game proposals etc.. As the equipment is basically the same, this is the way to maximise some sort of cash flow. Again, numbers are difficult to pin down as there are projects that assemble a large team (eg. The Flash Animation "Quads" which employs many animators in out-sourcing exercises according to needs.) just for the duration of a project. This, of course, is the way feature films are also crewed.

The bottom line is that little in the film industry happens without human input. It is extremely hands-on and requires a level of technology that is costly and very quickly superseded.

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b) The economic, social and cultural benefits of these industries. The economic benefits of the film industry can best be addressed by the relevant film bodies who maintain up-to-date statistics on these matters. We as a Guild do not have the resources. These could include the AFI, FFC, AFC. Naturally, statistics which include the wages of our expatriate graduates and film-makers, Nicole Kidman, Russell Crowe, Dean Cain, Mel Gibson, Cate Blanchett, Peter Weir need to be examined more carefully to decide which parts of their earnings are of value to Australia as a whole! However, there is a flow-on of interest in Australia that comes about as a result of the success of our stars. The fact that 4 stars from our small population have managed to be represented in the world's most bankable actor list (Cate, Nicole, Mel and Russell) is an outstanding tribute to the per capita creativity of Australians. This is a commodity that can be marketed to the world and Australia can be seen as a successful and creative nation through association with our "flagship" Australians. This extends to a very wide list of overseas successes, many of whom have now priced themselves out of the Australian film market, which is an ironic by-product of success in this industry. Note that a small number of them are willing to come home and work for basic rates (scale) in order to put something back into the industry, but in most cases their schedules do not permit it.

FILM AS AN EXPORT

The industry is in a time of transition where co-productions are the norm. Money comes into Australia and leaves it. The rare film makes meaningful export dollars but to some extent, this is because Australian productions are almost always under-funded, particularly in the concept development, script research and script-writing stages. We have excellent crafts-men and women at all stages of film-making and it is our experience that they always are willing to work beyond the hours budgeted in order to aim for film excellence. However, without a fully-developed and excellent script, much of this craft is wasted. As this is not something that can be replaced by a computer, some investment directly into the wages of writers and concept developers would be well-returned.

INTERNATIONAL APPEAL

This is an unknown quantity but the front-runners in successful Australian films seem to base their stories and performances on charm, cheekiness (and that dreaded quality "quirkiness") and heart, with underdogs making good leading as the box office winners including "Muriel's Wedding", "Crocodile Dundee", "The Crocodile Hunter", "Babe", "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" "Strictly Ballroom", "Shine" etc. "Moulin Rouge" is in a class of its own, being a musical based on La Boheme/Traviata style stories and created with an upmarket vision, but despite its comparatively high budget, it was still funded below its technical requirements, asking for many discounts (mates' rates!) and donated hours from suppliers. Of these, only Babe and Crocodile Dundee were adequately financed for their concepts. "Crocodile Dundee", Babe, earning approximately \$500 AUD million will have returned much to Australia, and with Moulin Rouge will continue to sell as DVDs and other merchandising. For more accurate figures on all these films, it is recommended that the Australian Film Commission statistics are used as they will also be able to place the figures into a context of gross, net, co-production returns etc..

CULTURAL BENEFITS

This is something quite difficult to measure, but it can be hypothesized that segments of the community that are devoid of the means of artistic expression suffer from a raft of other social problems. There are therapeutic values in both practising and attending arts events and eg. Next Wave Festival and 2002 Big Art film project where rural children's disturbed lives are put on film, are successful arts therapy ventures. Film provides, first and foremost, entertainment and diversity of films ideally should reflect society's own differences, whether that be race, religion, linguistic or any of the thousands of details that make up the society of man. Seeing one's own reflection, no matter how disturbing or laughable, can assist a society in making the necessary adjustments to improve. Film, in all its genres, is a great tool in this process.

The arts on the whole are there to build up and reinforce our inner life and help make it rich and varied. The definition of the word "culture" is a difficult matter these days as so many groups have appropriated the word.

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Defined by membership, "culture" is essential to the well being of every human being. We each need our own experiences reflected and given some shape and form, which gives us a sense that our lives are also shapeable and have form. It encourages people to see these in others (leading to tolerance of differences) and in other spheres.

One of our members recently spoke to a sewerage engineer who was an ardent theatre and filmgoer. While he kept qualifying his comments self deprecatingly, he was expressing some genuine and profound insights about our society. He put a convincing case that the arts help him put aspects of his life into a wider context than the daily drudge of his rather unpleasant work. While it is to do with disposing of waste it is also to do with allowing people to enhance their lives, as reflected in performances.

On another occasion an engineer, who had been divorced some years earlier, went to see Joanna Murray Smith's play "Honour". Years later he still reminds one of our members of that occasion as he had so profoundly responded to the changing relationships as portrayed by Joanna Murray-Smith.

d) current and likely future infrastructure needs of these industries, including access to bandwidth. More and more our members are using the internet and other means to transmit programmes and ideas.

We are not generally equipped to discuss this in detail other than the general knowledge that a television signal requires 6 Mhz for a normal signal. The information carrying capacity communications device of the normal television network will almost certainly require expansion with the addition of interactive television, though it is not clear which signals are covered by satellite. As this is out of our scope of knowledge, what we would like to state is that Australia's special needs as a vast nation will always differ from those of European nations. We would advise Australia's consultants to be extremely vigilant and choose the best possible models from which to gather information. We would also prefer a system where the systems carrying signals are non-competitive and therefore, not as intrusive and impactful on the environment. Cables that are duplicated are wasteful.

We would also advise that Australia, in establishing an infrastructure, accesses the highest of technologies rather than establishing systems which will be superseded in a very short time.

It is to be hoped that the new technologies will be focused on providing broader access to socially, and hence personally enhancing pursuits. Access to information and interactivity for social ends is desirable. Providing on-line gambling etc. should be strictly balanced by constructive uses. This is not moralise but to observe the obvious that people are happier when they have the capacity to lead a creative, constructive life in which they have a sense of direction.

MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

In our multicultural society, the ability to access programmes from all over the world is a desirable state of technology. However, this should not mean that these programmes REPLACE local content. The ideal situation would be one in which, as in Europe, many channels are available from the Euro nations. For instance, the ABC could be converted to a station which is supported to provide high quality local productions relevant to the Australian (conglomerate!) culture. The channels of other nations or other minority groups could be accessed on a "user pays" basis. We do not believe that our nation's unique qualities should be replaced by other cultures, but Australians (whatever their background) should be given the access to the television of other nations, on different channels. SBS does a splendid job on an all-too-limited budget, providing a unique single channel "window to the world", but it is time that Australia received a bigger window. (Note that the European channels often are optionally subtitled at the flick of a button with English and at least one other language.)

This would suggest that expansion of bandwidth is of an urgent need.

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ANIMATION REQUIREMENTS:

It must be noted that much animation throughout the world is created by the use of animators working from home and sending their assignments in via the internet and using Flash technology. Many Australian businesses, particularly in remote areas, could employ a wide range of suppliers who are out-workers. There is no limit to how this system can work and the main competitors are in Asia. We suggest that you talk to MediaWorld Features Pty. Ltd. in regard to their Canadian/Australian Co-production if they have not made a submission already.

(Call Colin South 03 9662 2399 who has a very educated and experienced view).

Australia's animation projects have very specific requirements and are a very appropriate business for such a large land, and are projects without national barriers.

e) the skills required to facilitate future growth in these industries and the capacity of the education and training system to meet these demands;

At present, the PDGV members believe that education in the related industries is out of step with the reality of employment needs both in the numbers of course graduates (far too many for the practical experience and available jobs) and would like to make the following practical suggestions:

- Film, television, animation, game design courses should be re-worked in a version of the apprenticeship schemes in the manner of many trades.
- Courses should be post graduate and not open to any students without some other discipline eg. The study of arts, history, literature, sciences, economics, drafting principles, or any of 1000s of disciplines. In this way, our new practitioners will have maturity and skills to inform the hands-on aspects of the media businesses.
- In addition, much of what goes for industry-training seems there to prop up the education sector, not to fulfil a need in the industry.

f) the effectiveness of the existing linkages between these industries and the wider cultural and information technology sectors;

Some years ago, the links and work shared between the advertising, film and television industries were well-known. Workers found constant employment across all fields, which meant that there was a high degree of job security, even in this largely free-lance business. Directors, producers and crews could practise skills on commercials made for television and cinema as paid jobs. Now, the main training ground for newcomers to the industry is through entry into Festivals, such as Tropfest. Incidentally, the drain on facilities providers and experienced people who are called upon to be unpaid consultants, is high! We live in an era of Festival burn-out.

We would recommend that this is taken into consideration in regard to the dropping of all protection to local content. Certainly, there are opportunities for Runaway productions to use local crews to make overseas films. Australia will then become just an adjunct to the overseas studio system. The above-mentioned out-sourcing of animation and web-based projects is another aspect to this. The bottom line is that our best crews should have the opportunity to be properly paid to work on local stories and not feel that the only way they can earn the senior rates that they deserve is to go overseas to work.

We would ask the Minister to give consideration to this aspect when looking at our industries.

g) how Australia's capabilities in these industries, including in education and training can be best leveraged to maximise export and investment opportunities;

To some degree, we have addressed education above.

- Governments at both state and federal levels should look carefully at providing direct support and encouragement at the print, promotion and marketing end of film, television and media production. Many small films could be successes overseas if promotion and simultaneous print release were supported.

10BA:

While the 10BA days in the '80s were problematic, that period nurtured some of our greatest directors and crews.

We have nothing to replace it. Surely in these days of computer accounting programmes, accountability can be better tracked so that a realistic level of support can be returned to the industry.


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"SOLID" CAREERS

Individuals lucky enough to score a job with one of the State or Federal agencies seem to be at a distinct advantage. The contacts and knowledge they gain from working within the system seems often to lead to successful funding applications. This underscores our belief that "on the job" training is the only effective education for this industry. As a contacts-based industry in which so much depends on having the backing of a solid network, at least some experience in a large organization is necessary. However, these jobs are few and far between. Incidentally, a straw poll of workers from our memberships and associates reveals that most are working for very low hourly rates. Days more often than not, far exceed union levels and the 8 hour day is almost non-existent.

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h) whether any changes should be made to existing government support programs to ensure that they are aligned with the future opportunities and trends in these industries.

We would like to emphasize that all areas of Film, Animation, Special Effects and Electronic Games design are very hands-on. These industries exemplify what Australia does best – use their brains to come up with ideas and creative pursuits that can be exported to the rest of the world. The only problem is that, while we have zillions of ideas and a per capita proportion of creativity far higher than most countries, there is little government support to the Clever Country. The cumbersome and arduous GST reporting system is way out of kilter with an industry whose highs and lows are unpredictable and dynamic. The input into a film is often a 10 year process with no returns for up to 4 years after that. Yet, the reporting to government agencies for taxation is bureaucratic and those quarterly report dates come around very fast...

Ireland, for instance, offers very generous tax status for its artists and related industries. We would urge that the government investigate this system.

We would be happy to offer one of our Executive to address any of your committees in person.

Document prepared by:
Wendy Rawady

Additional material by:
Eugene Schlusser.

On behalf of the Producers' and Directors' Guild of Victoria.