

CONFERENCE REPORT

A REPORT ON 'THE DOCUMENTARY CONFERENCE 1993- REFLECTING THE FUTURE' HELD FROM 2-5 DECEMBER 1993, SYDNEY.

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... the conference needed above all to look outward rather than gaze at its navel. All the big issues which face us in 1993 require a reorientation of Australia's view of itself and its place in the region and the world, a process in which filmmakers can play an important role.

Having stated this up front, the conference Management Committee certainly followed through, with documentary filmmakers from China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, Niugini, the Phillipines, Taiwan, Vietnam, Germany, the United States and Australia participating at the conference.

During the four days the choices were endless, with options of plenary sessions, documentary screenings, training sessions, equipment demonstrations, workshops, lectures and a general meeting. The days were long, intense and enjoyable.

The highlight of the opening day was the premiere of *The War Room*, presented by the filmmakers, DA Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus from the US.

Both participated in the Friday plenary session, *The Television Ambush. Has Television ambushed the Documentary?* This session was chaired by Frank Morgan (University of Newcastle), with other participants being Peter Thompson ('Sunday' on the Nine network), Sharon Connolly (Film Australia), Julian Russell (ASDA) and Anand Patwardhan (independent filmmaker from India).

Peter Thompson prefaced his remarks by mentioning that there was a dangerous level of consensus on the panel. However, opinion did vary as to whether television had ambushed the documentary, ranging from television had ambushed and hijacked documentary, to the view that television had provided a huge market and a medium for documentary makers to plug into. Sharon Connolly expressed surprise that this topic was still being discussed in 1993, given that television was the most popular medium, we should accept it

and get on with the business of making good documentaries.

Anand Patwardhan talked of the practice of first world countries sending first world film crews to shoot films about India. He said there was a greater tendency now for the first world countries to fund Indian nationals to shoot the films, but there were problems in that the films were oversimplified for consumption by international audiences. His preference was to shoot the film as if for an Indian audience, with the only concession being the use of sub-titles where appropriate.

The Saturday plenary session on documentary financing was chaired by Bruce Moir (Film Australia) with David Noakes (Australian Film Finance Corporation), Daryl Karp (ABC), Andrew Lloyd James (SBS) and Jane Balfour (BBC) participating.

David Noakes talked of the FFC investments in documentary films and the development of documentary accords with the ABC, SBS and the Seven network. These accords allow the FFC to underpin documentary films which are culturally significant and which can be funded without the need for overseas presales. FFC investment in documentaries is roughly 70 per cent to accord documentaries and 30 per cent to non-accord documentaries.

Daryl Karp described the ABC's focus on Australians and events of fundamental cultural importance and the development of the ABC's documentary catalogue from internal production, independent production and international co-productions.

Some of the difficulties with co-productions were discussed, where perhaps four or more countries might be involved and the effects of such

participation on the perspective of the film i.e. whether a uniquely Australian perspective remained. She talked of the likelihood of the ABC increasingly entering into agreements for the purchase of a 'version' of a program, or the rewriting or reshooting of parts of the program.

Andrew Lloyd James described documentary as the jewel in the crown of Australian television. He cautioned against placing our entire trust in overseas sales and co-productions, emphasising that the documentary must be locally focussed. He warned that the viability of documentary production depended on it being recognised and accepted as an industry, just as the Australian production of music and literature are industries. He stressed the need for a proper industry structure, to establish proper market prices and to determine how documentary filmmakers should talk to their audiences for more effective delivery.

Jane Balfour talked of the extra costs in co-productions and the likely need for reversioning the program. She also highlighted the success of Channel 4 in the UK and attributed this success to its commitment to alternative programming, with documentaries forming a significant part of that programming.

The topic for the concluding session was 'The Global Future- Documentary in the Millenium', chaired by Gil Appleton, with Kim Williams (General Manager Subscription Services, ABC TV), Brian Johns (Chairman, ABA) and Dennis Murphy (Executive Producer, National Film Board, Canada) participating.

Kim Williams outlined the types of programs the ABC will be delivering

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ture of demand for audio-visual entertainment, flagging the possibility of market failure because of limited information and uncertainty associated with the purchase of audio-visual product. That is, you don't know if you will enjoy a film until you see it and in fact if you know too much about it before seeing it, the enjoyment is reduced. This argument is applied in terms of US versus Australian productions. US productions have an advantage in being able to project a higher level of certainty as to the nature of the viewing experience through factors such as success in other markets while at the same time not revealing too much about the content of the film.

Chapter four surveys the size of markets within the film and television industry and leads into a discussion of the distribution system and in particular an interesting discussion of the form of distribution contracts. The main conclusion is that there is significant vertical integration between production, distribution and exhibition in the Australian market.

Chapter five describes different economic rationale for government intervention. It covers, fairly extensively, a range of arguments based on market failure; that is the inability of the market to deliver a socially optimal result due to the characteristics of the good. The chapter offers a range of theoretical arguments that could be applied to the industry. The paper concludes that the advent of pay TV and pay-per-view would increase the efficiency of the exhibition markets by providing mechanisms for greater responsiveness to consumer demand.

Chapter six returns to the theme of intervention in the Australian context, exploring the forms of government intervention in film finance regulation and other aspects such as industry support. In many senses this is the central issue of how to sustain sufficient levels of funding for Australian films.

Chapter seven pulls the arguments together concluding the Australian production industry needs government support but must also find new directions. Interestingly, concluding remarks point to possible synergies between film and tourism. Film production, they

argue must become more export focused with the view of securing their viability through increased exports. The opportunity that is offered is the emerging Asian markets that will offer opportunities as cultures converge in the region. Tourism is then like film in that they both seek new international markets.

While there is certainly scope for export the notion of cultural convergence would need some work. Certainly there are trans Asian markets for pay TV (e.g. CNN, Star) but it is a long jump from these markets to cultural similarity..

One difficulty that such an ambitious projects faces is the paucity of solid empirical studies in the area. Certainly there are significant collections of statistics available but often these collections cannot provide answers to questions such as the existence of barriers to entry in distribution and exhibition. Without clear answers to such questions the case and more importantly the form of government intervention will be difficult to progress.



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under its licence to provide two satellite delivered subscription television broadcasting services. One of these services will deliver children's programs, Australian drama and comedy and documentaries.

He confirmed what a number of speakers had stated throughout the conference, the programming will be the determinant of success of any of the new services. He emphasised that Australians would not turn on unless the programs are relevant to Australians.

He indicated that the documentary focus of the service would be strong, with 16 hours of Australian documentary being screened in primetime each and every week of the year. There would also be overseas documentaries.

Brian Johns highlighted the global strategic change that is taking place, with the breaking down of domestic market boundaries and the emergence of 'borderless markets'. He emphasised the positive aspects of the borderless

market, cutting across what has always been Australia's structural weakness, its small domestic market. He encouraged the use of co-productions as one means of overcoming this structural weakness.

He too, highlighted the significance of the programs on any new service, stating that programs must be relevant to Australians, programs that must reflect and reap the benefits of our multi cultural society.

He indicated that throughout 1993 the ABA has been conducting informal bilateral discussions with interested parties in its assessment of its Australian content standard [Australian Content of Television Programs (TPS 14)]. He confirmed his commitment to maintaining the safety net provided under the standard and called upon those present to be innovative, to participate in the opportunity offered by the borderless market and to develop parallel innovations while the safety net remains for Australian programming.

Dennis Murphy outlined the role of the National Film Board in Canada. He stated that Canada had been at the forefront of 'medium' availability, as it had been serviced by all forms of program delivery and had been extensively cabled well before the US. He said that the availability of cable and satellite delivered services had little or no impact on the documentary. He emphasised the most significant criterion for the success of a documentary was that it must be a good story well told and crafted.

Note: In 1992 on the three Sydney commercial television stations, 47 per cent of all documentaries broadcast were Australian. Of the 127.5 hours of Australian documentary, 76.5 hours were first release. Of these programs, 28 hours received a diversity score under TPS 14.

