

**AFC INTERNAL DISCUSSION PAPER
ON THE
AFC SCREENSOUND AUSTRALIA INTEGRATION**

**Response from Deb Verhoeven
(RMIT University & Archive Forum)**

Summary Comments

1. **Methodology.** Whilst recognising that this is a Stage One Discussion Paper and therefore unlikely to demonstrate a high level of detail in its proposals, the Discussion Paper puts forward a range of significant and unsubstantiated generalisations about current Archive practice as the basis for its recommendations. These generalisations, whilst noted in this response (see this Response to A5, C1.1, C3.11-13, C4), will no doubt be addressed by the larger level of detail contained in a Stage Two Paper.
2. **The Archive and International Models.** Measuring the Archive against international models is useful to a degree. World benchmarking is important but not the only method for determining national archival practice. Alongside an understanding of international archival trends, an analysis of what is specific to the Australian film industry and its screen culture must be undertaken, in order to then determine what its specific archival needs might be.
3. **Client Service.** This Response expresses concern about the how the needs of individual Archive clients (taxpayers no less) will be addressed given the recommendations of this Discussion Paper.
4. **Improvement of Archive Library.** This Response endorses the proposal to make improvements to the Archive's Library on the condition of further consultation with members of the Screen Network Information Providers (SNIP).
5. **Independence and Integrity of Scholarship.** This Response endorses activities designed to foster a high standard of scholarship around the Australian film industry but recommends the establishment of an independent Advisory Committee to oversee the Archive's activities in this area in order to ensure the proposed Scholarship Centre's independence and academic integrity.

Specific Comments against points

- A4 In preparation for the Stage Two Paper it is recommended that the AFC further consult the academic community (especially those whose work rests on access to the Archive's holdings) and Library and Information Service stakeholders in particular members of the Screen Network Information Providers (SNIP).

- A5 The absence of any detailed consideration of organisational structure in this Discussion Paper makes an adequate response to some of the paper's suggestions about the Archive's program difficult. It is not clear from this paper what the precise extent of the Archive's integration into the AFC will be. For example, how will the AFC's recommendations for an accessible Archive library relate to the AFC's own information collection practices? Will the Archive have its own legal staff (specialising in copyright) or will this activity simply be an extension of the AFC's legal department? All these structural details go some way in anticipating the Archive's future success in managing its own programs (particularly in light of some of the criticisms identified by the Stage One Discussion Paper), in representing itself to key stakeholders and in maintaining its prominence amongst international archives.
- C 1.1 The argument in this section of the Discussion Paper seems to be against additional resourcing of the Archive's activities yet this appears sit uneasily alongside its next recommendation – to expand the Archive's agenda especially in the matter of comprehensive collection (C1.2). There is no detailed discussion of the impact of comprehensive collection on the Archive were this ambition even realisable in the absence of 'legal deposit' measures.
- C1.9 There is no evidence that "early investment in digital technology would mean increased efficiencies and improved functionality". In fact there would appear to be ample evidence that caution in the uptake of digital solutions can be financially and organisationally beneficial. That being said, continued development and improvement of the Archive's digital systems for information management (MAVIS) and client relations should be supported.
- C2.2 Recommendations in terms of international holdings should be withheld until the National Library concludes its review of the Film & Video Lending Service. Until then, it is unclear what new or unique services the Archive would be offering clients and stakeholders.
- C2.6 Strongly agreed.
- C2.10 Ongoing training of staff in copyright management will continue to be required at the Archive for the benefit of all clients. Additional training in film industry contracting especially in the area of distribution rights is also required.
- C3.3 Not true – individual access is possible – and encouraged in many international archives. Again, in the absence of legal deposit and therefore a reliance on individual

donors for sourcing materials, there are obligations and benefits to individual clients that should not be underestimated.

Furthermore, the Stage Two Paper will need to look at impact of not prioritising individual clients. If clients are unable to be satisfied by ScreenSound where will they turn? The AFI Research Collection is not resourced to undertake the information dissemination work of the Archive which really only leaves the AFC itself (a completely circuitous route).

- C3.8 It is disingenuous of the AFC to describe activities such as the National Cinematheque, National Film and Video Lending Service or AFI Library as 'lost opportunities' for the Archive. These are longstanding film or library community initiatives that precede the Archive's establishment and which have successfully worked hand in hand with the Archive over a number of years. It is important to note here that the AFC's notion that an archive is the gathering up of a broad range of activities into the one institutional and organization framework is out of step with a great deal of contemporary thinking about archives and with the practice of many international archives. For many archivists, an archive is the implicit but important space that occurs between many collections of information and objects. An 'archive' could be made up of the collections of the AFI Research Collection, various University Archives, the National Film and Video Lending Collection, the ACMI Collection, and so on. A common physical or organisational location is not necessarily important – but a common information management system might be. Hence the crucial need for the AFC to continue consulting with the relevant networks of information providers.
- C3.9 Curated screenings and cinematheque programs are important to some international archives in the absence of these activities otherwise. In Australia, there is strong community support for independent programs such as the National Cinematheque. It is recommended that the Archive continue to work closely with the organisers of the National Cinematheque rather than seek to duplicate its activities.
- C3.10 a) In the absence of a national curriculum for audio-visual literacy it is hard to see how the proposal for a national moving image education program will benefit. Again, this will duplicate activities already successfully undertaken by some state-based organizations such as ACMI.
- C3.10 b) Strongly endorse
- C3.10 c) There is no need to 'establish' a national cinematheque tour since one already exists.

- C3.11-13 The comments in this section of the Discussion Paper seem most damning and yet are so general as to make any attempt at a response almost incomprehensible. Suffice to say that in the area of product development the Archive has performed an indispensable service to the education sector. The comparison to international archives needs to be further justified in this section since access to early cinema varies from one national industry to another. In the case of the Australian cinema it is almost impossible to locate video of early films for the purposes of research and study **except** in those instances where the Archive has undertaken to release this product itself. The benefit for students of the Australian cinema from the Archive's activities in product development cannot be underestimated. Let alone the additional benefit in terms of promoting the scope of the Archive's collection (and the resultant revenues derived from stock shot requests for example).
- C3.15 This Response notes again that the activities that distinguish the Archive from other national archives are largely the result of its own industrial and cultural context – e.g. its product development activities stem from a specific lack of commercial interest in exploiting early Australian films; the 'lack' of a cinematheque arises from the already evident cinematheque activities that occur across Australia.
- C4.4 a) Improvements to the Archive's library are endorsed. This Response notes for the record however that the AFC until recently has made apparently incontestable arguments against the kinds of activities outlined here. For example the AFI Research Collection (fully defunded by the AFC) already undertakes media cutting services and provides a range of online catalogues for the national screen studies community, the film industry as well as other individual clients. It is recommended that the AFC further consult the Screen Network Information Providers (SNIP) to ensure that unnecessary duplication of resources and activities does not occur in its development of the Archive Library.
- C4.4 b) It is unclear from this brief proposal how such as Scholarship Centre would ensure its own scholastic integrity and independence. The curious generalisation that archive staff impose an interpretation on the content of the collection (who says this?) seems to both misunderstand the role of 'curatorial' staff in developing research and the needs of researchers (who usually appreciate guidance). It is unclear how a proposal to establish a Scholarship Centre would address this unsubstantiated observation. It is recommended that in order to ensure scholastic standards of independence an Advisory Committee be established from the academic community to oversee the activities of this proposed centre.

C4.4e) It seems odd that the Archive is to be discouraged from 'publishing' audiovisual product but will be encouraged to publish printed materials (if in fact this is the distinction made here). Best practice would suggest that the two should occur alongside each other. For example there isn't much point in publishing on early Australian cinema (or even more recent Australian cinema) if it is not possible for the public to access the films themselves. Furthermore the technology of DVDs makes it possible to combine the two activities in the one medium.

Deb Verhoeven

Senior Lecturer, RMIT University
Manager, AFI Research Collection
Member, Archive Forum