

# Women, film and independence in the 21st century: A public forum

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## Abstract

What are the issues and factors that impact on the shape of women's independent filmmaking today? What does "independence" mean both in and for women's screen production today? On 22 February 2018, The Melbourne Women in Film Festival and Monash University presented a public forum at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) on women, film and independence. The forum brought together a number of filmmakers, academics and industry representatives to reflect on the meaning of independence for women working in Australian screen industries. Guest panellists were: Santilla Chingaipe (Journalist/Filmmaker); Professor Lisa French (RMIT); Margot Nash (UTS, Screenwriter/Director); Dr Claire Perkins (Monash) and Kristy Matheson (Senior Film Programmer, ACMI). The forum was co-convened by Associate Professor Therese Davis (Monash University) and Dr Sian Mitchell (MFFF Festival Director) and facilitated by Dr Jodi Brooks (University of New South Wales). "Women, Film & Independence in the 21st Century" is an edited transcript of this forum.

## Keywords

Women's Filmmaking; Independence; Australian Screen Culture; Gender Matters; Independent Filmmaking; Women's Film Fund; Gender Equality; Gender Equity; Australian Women Filmmakers

*An edited transcript of a Public Forum, Melbourne Women in Film Festival, Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI), 22 February 2018.*

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This public forum was part of the 2018 Melbourne Women In Film Festival (MWWF) program and was supported by Monash University's School of Media, Film and Journalism. MWWF is an annual festival – now in its third year – that celebrates “the work of Australian women screen creatives and technicians.” Showcasing a diverse range of new independent and experimental film and video work by Australian women screen creatives alongside retrospectives of earlier ground-breaking work, MWWF was an ideal context for exploring what “independence” means both in and for women's screen production today.

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**Jodi Brooks (JB):** Over the last few years we have seen the introduction of a number of initiatives to address the continuing gender imbalance in the Australian screen industry. Screen Australia has introduced its “Gender Matters” program, and various state-based screen media funding bodies have introduced similar funding schemes and gender diversity targets. These initiatives are aimed at addressing the negative effects of the celluloid ceiling in two key ways – they aim to increase opportunities for women to have access to key creative roles in the screen industry (access to the means of production) and they aim to enrich Australian screen culture by creating possibilities for more voices, visions and experiences. These recent initiatives are by no means the first of their kind for Australian film funding bodies. Since the 1970s a number of initiatives have been introduced to better enable women to enter and progress in the industry. As we start to discuss women, film and independence and the relationships between them in Australian screen culture today, it is worth thinking about the similarities and differences between how their relationship is understood now and how it has been understood at other key moments in Australian women's screen production.

Reflecting back a decade later on women's filmmaking in Australia in the 1970s, Lesley Stern observed that while women's filmmaking at that time coincided with a wider revival in Australian cinema, it was a movement that “marked its ‘independence’ not as national but as sexual.” It involved what Stern describes as “a double movement: a struggle to gain access for women to the means of production (which involves the ‘positive discrimination’ exercised by women's training courses, and lobbying for government funding), and a struggle on the level of meaning-production...the production of alternative images, of a point of view radically different to that offered by the dominant patriarchal perspective” (Stern).

The 1970s were important years in Australian cinema and they were also very important years in the development of women's filmmaking not just here in Australia but globally. As Laura Mulvey has commented, the 1970s was a period when the “terms

‘women’ and ‘cinema’ were brought together as a problem and as a possibility” and when “women began to make films within the collective consciousness of a women’s movement” (26) and when experimental filmmaking was driven by “the need to find new ways of visualizing ideas and freeing cinema to be an instrument of thought” (27).

When we talk about independence and women’s filmmaking today what do we mean by independent? Perhaps we can start our discussion of women, film and independence this afternoon through the frame of African American cultural critic bell hooks’ distinction between two different kinds of marginality: the “marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures” and the marginality “one chooses as a site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility” (23). bell hooks distinguished between these two forms of marginality back in a piece published in the late 1980s. While hooks’ essay is close to 30 years old her distinction between these two kinds of marginality is a useful distinction for us to draw on today as we think about the diverse range of stories, forms of screen media, aesthetics (and women) that are included – or should be included – in contemporary discussions about redressing the gender imbalance in the Australian screen industry.

The two forms of marginality that hooks identifies have been key concerns in women’s filmmaking in Australia over the last 40 years or so. Sometimes more emphasis has been placed on the former – addressing the forms of marginality that come from oppressive structures that exclude, bracket, contain – at other times there has been more space for the latter. With this distinction in mind, I would like to start by asking each of our panellists to comment on how they understand “independence” in the context of filmmaking. Margot...

**MN:** Well I think independence is a very rubbery and complex word when it comes to filmmaking because so few of us make films really independently. Someone like U.S filmmaker Kelly Reichardt made her second film independently because a relative died and left her some money. In the U.S. being independent means working outside the system, but we don’t have a studio system here. In Australia what we mean by independent film is different. When I first started making films we saw ourselves as independent filmmakers because we had a certain amount of creative freedom, but we were getting money from the government funding bodies, so we were not really independent. But now the funding bodies have a lot more say in how things are made. The only truly independent film that I’ve ever really made is my film [The Silences](#) (2015), because I chose to make it outside of the film funding structures. It was a deliberate choice, because it was very personal and I wanted creative control. I wanted time to be able to think about it and to find other ways into solving problems. I paid for the film myself and I edited it myself. That was truly independent, but usually when you make films here, you are not really making them independently because the funding bodies’ gatekeepers have a big say in it. And with more and more people trying to make films and less and less money available, it gets harder to get funding and you are under a lot of pressure to please the funding bodies. So, I think it is a complex term, independence.

**JB:** Thanks Margot. Claire...

**CP:** I might follow up on some of the things you said there Margot. My work is mostly around American independence and indie culture, which is something quite different, and absolutely it's important to understand that in America the concept of independence is very much about being outside of the studio system – or it was historically, I should say. What I think has happened over time is that the studio system has absorbed the type of work that we think of as independent. So, for instance, while someone like Kelly Reichardt does work relatively independently, some of her more recent work has been distributed by Sony. So we're looking at a situation where independence isn't really a financial descriptor so much as a discursive idea, and – in a wider sense - even an aesthetic idea. What gets a film labelled “indie”? Is it what happens at the level of content, of characterisation, of subversive content? And I think it's particularly around the idea of “indie” rather than independent where these ideas have been taken up and run with in various ways. So I'm interested in thinking that through in relation to what's happening in Australia. Australia.

**LF:** I think independence or the idea of independent film is a bit of an oxymoron in Australia because a large percentage of our films are government subsidised and there is significant dependence.<sup>4</sup> But I think there are some areas of filmmaking in Australia where there is a lot more independence. For example, women's participation in documentary is higher than other genres, there are a lot of women there, and that's because they can create their own opportunities. They can produce, write, direct and they shoot it and edit it themselves. It's obvious that the more women there are in the key creative roles, the more you get all the way down the line, so they bring women in. But I also think where there's a lot of money there's less independence. Women tend to get cut out of expensive films and end up with the smaller budgets and in areas where there's less money. We worked with Women in Film and Television to present an event at RMIT with the [Little Acorns](#) team, which is this really fantastic, hilarious five-minute web-series designed for busy mums who just need a laugh.<sup>5</sup> It's set in a childcare centre and it's made by Trudy Hellier and Maria Theodorakis. They got funding through Screen Australia to do it, so there was a dependence, but the thing they said was that because it's new, because it was a small amount of money, they were left to their own resources quite a lot and therefore there was a higher level of independence. And that helped them form it and they plan to evolve it into a television series. So perhaps my answer is that this is the way I understand independence. It depends on the mediums too.

**SC:** I take on a very different meaning to independence. I see independence in my work as a voice, as having an independent voice. I strongly believe in the themes I explore in all of my work, which is essentially contemporary migration and cultural identities. And I think that the struggle for me has always been how to stay true to that and finding

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<sup>4</sup> There are of course exceptions and maverick filmmakers find a way to make films. However, often these are assisted after production with marketing support, e.g. Donna McRae's [Lost Gully Road](#) (2017). Some independent films that are finding release are also being made in academia as creative production research, e.g. Angie Black's [The Five Provocations](#) (2018).

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-09-05/child-care-comedy-web-series-little-acorns-launches/7809792>

what best fits, what I'm trying to say without compromising on the need to tell those stories. That's why I work across mediums. They're not necessarily the sexiest stories to tell, and they're not necessarily the most popular stories to tell, and perhaps even in terms of my long-term survival as a filmmaker it might not necessarily be the best decision to primarily focus on those themes, but that's where I see myself as being independent. I'm pretty strong about continuing to push for those stories being told, and that's where I see and value my independence as a filmmaker.

**KM:** I'd like to pick up on a number of the points that have been raised. I think in terms of when we watch films the idea of independence versus a studio system, it's all just one big soup now. The corporate culture owns the film industry from start to finish in many ways, but I think when we look at filmmakers who have very singular voices or have very singular stories to tell then that's what I would deem independent. And I think documentary filmmakers are probably one of the most obvious examples of that because they're often working in much smaller scale environments and they're sitting with stories for a very, very long time. But I do think it's about the intent of the filmmaker, I think the structure in which people make their films industrially is just changing so rapidly that I don't know that I can put those two things next to each other anymore. Because you could be a very singular independent filmmaker and be funded by Netflix, or you could make a film out of an inheritance you get. I don't know that the funding necessarily means one or the other.

**JB:** I would like to pick up here on Santilla's comment about surviving as a filmmaker long-term and talk about the recent wave of attention that has been given to the gender imbalance in the Australian screen industry. Lisa, as someone who has been very involved in Screen Australia's Gender Matters initiative, I wonder if you could comment on what other things might need to be put in place to enable a shift in the industry.

**LF:** Well I think there's a segue out of what Margot and Santilla said about survival, because there is a sustainability problem. Some of us on the panel are old enough to have been dealing with it for decades and decades and kind of getting over it, and wondering: when will it ever end? When will change happen? The statistics have just gone on and on without showing improvement. When I looked at the Australian figures on women's creative participation, I noticed that actually there was a dip towards the end of the nineties. And women started going backwards. In 1992, there were 22% women directors, and so there were some losses in the period before the 2000s, and now the number of features directed by women is 16%.<sup>6</sup> So obviously it was a question of something having to be done about it, and it was global. People all over the world are

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the 1992 report, *"What Do I Wear for A Hurricane" Women in Australian Film, Television, Video & Radio Industries*, produced by The Australian Film Commission and The National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, noted on page 10 that in feature films "there are clear gains also in the position of directors in which women have moved from 7% in 1985/6 to 22% in 1990/1." However, the most recent Screen Australia figures are that women are 16% of directors as outlined on page 5 of Screen Australia's Gender Matters, Women in Film and Television report. <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/getmedia/f20beab8-81cc-4499-92e9-02afba18c438/Gender-Matters-Women-in-the-Australian-Screen-Industry.pdf>

saying right, well it's not good enough. And it's not good enough not just in the film and television industries but in all industries. And so I think there had to be an intervention. And the problem is it's slow, it's bit by bit, and you've got to make sure these things aren't this year's flavour of the month and then they get dropped. So all of the "Brilliant Stories" initiative that got funded, obviously they're not all going to be made, but it's going to make a dint.<sup>7</sup> From my point of view I think that we need to also get male champions. For example, producer Sue Maslin says that when she was trying to get *The Dressmaker* (2015) up, she was going around and talking to the producers and they were saying "oh, but it's all women." She couldn't get the funding until she cast Liam Hemsworth in the lead role. And she said the thing that made the big difference was Mike Bard at Universal who was really on board with it. He knew he had women audiences, he was watching the shift. So, getting the male champions will make a difference. And the other thing that I think is really important is that it's a question of leadership. The people in leadership positions have to say – "just fix it" – like Michelle Guthrie did at the ABC with her executive teams. We need proactive leadership to get women into key roles. That's why there's a whole lot of leadership initiatives in Gender Matters. So attachments were funded, and a conference for the Natalie Miller Foundation, who also have a career development Award, which Kristy received.<sup>8</sup>

**JB:** Thanks Lisa. I think your point about repetition – about the lack of any real progress in women's involvement in key creative roles in the industry and the repeated need for initiatives to address the gender imbalance and impasses in Australian film – is something we might want to come back to. Margot and Santilla, could you talk about how you maintain your work as filmmakers? What do you need to produce the kind of work you want to produce? What is it that enables you to produce your work, and to what extent is it reliant on other sources of income?

**SC:** I find the only way I can survive is by working across different mediums. I don't think I could survive just in one medium. I started in documentary simply because it was I guess an easy transition from journalism. But also, documentary allows me to attach myself to projects that will bring in a regular income, whereas the pathway to feature films is not as easy. It's incredibly expensive. Just to be eligible for Hot Shots<sup>9</sup> for example, you need at least a credit. Which would mean that one of your short films that you've made independently would have had theatrical distribution or been seen at a festival. And that is very tough, that's a very tough bar to reach for anyone. And then

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<sup>7</sup> Brilliant Stories (formerly Women's Story Fund) – an initiative to stimulate awareness and increase industry activity around storytelling by women, focusing on bold, original and compelling fully-formed story concepts.

<sup>8</sup> Kristy Matheson was awarded the Natalie Miller Fellowship in 2017. The Natalie Miller Fellowship is awarded to a woman in the Australian screen industry who has "demonstrated initiative, entrepreneurship and excellence." <https://nataliemillerfellowship.com/kristy-matheson-awarded-2017-natalie-miller-fellowship/>

<sup>9</sup> Screen Australia's "Hot Shots Short Film Program" was established in 2013 to fund short fiction film production. In 2017 it was "refreshed" to include two stages – production and development – and eligibility for funding was "broadened" to include public release on a social media platform and/or a festival screening credit." <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/sa/screen-news/2017/02-21-hot-shots-plus-announcement>

if you factor in where you're getting the money from, who's supporting you, whether you're a woman who has children or is married and has all these other things factoring in to where you allocate your finances, there are those things that have to be considered. If you're coming from a background that is underrepresented and you don't have the networks and the connections, then that also makes it incredibly hard to access funds to reach that criteria. But once you do reach that criteria, you then have to go on and develop that feature and that also requires that you've got the backing of networks and you've got the backing of big producers, because there is no way that Screen Australia is going to give you \$70,000 to go and develop your first feature. And so it makes it really, really hard. And my only option was going through documentary. That was just the only way I could do it. There was no way I was going to do it straight from a scripted narrative perspective. But also I'm finding I'm moving into the visual arts context simply because the themes I want to look at will not be funded in documentary because of the funding model and structure. But equally they're themes that Australian audiences are just not ready to consume in an entertainment context. So it's thinking about those things, but also thinking about the fact that access to these pathways is not as easy as many people think that it is. And when you're a woman and you add in all of the other intersections that come into that, it makes it a little bit harder. And the things that have helped me through my documentary journey is being connected to networks, and to people who have come on board and backed me and supported my ideas. It's made it a little bit easier. Getting an attachment through a Screen Australia initiative, and them being able to support me working out of Arenamedia and working with Robert Connolly, has been huge because that's just opened doors for me. But that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't proven myself to get that attachment. I did so many things before I could get that. So you know, it's hard. You really have to love films to make films, because the models, as they are currently in Australia, are just not conducive enough for creativity, they're not necessarily conducive enough for women, they're not the best for people from diverse backgrounds. It's just really, really hard.

**MN:** I know. But I'm older than you and I remember when it wasn't quite so hard as it is now because back then there were fewer people trying to get money. I remember when there was an Experimental Film Fund and that's quite a long time ago now. My friend Robin Laurie and I received funding from it to make a short film. I was working in the theatre, I had never made a film, but Robin had been a first AD (Assistant Director) on a feature film by Bert Deling called *Dalmas* (1973). This film started out as a police drama, but everyone took acid and it descended into chaos, but somehow or other it was a credit and we got \$1800. This would have been in the early 1970s, but it took a while to get it together to make the film. When we finally did we called it *We Aim to Please* (1976). No-one took any notice of us so we just went and did it. We had written a script to get the money, but we never went back to it, we just pulled out our shoe-boxes full of poems and quotes and pictures and the feminist theory and the film theory we were reading or not reading or, you know John Berger, we were very into John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, which looked at the history of the female nude and critiqued the male gaze and we were also very influenced by Godard. It took us about a year to film it. It was very "out there," and it's *still* "out there." It's just been restored by the National Film and Sound Archive and it screened at Sydney Film Festival last year

(2017). I'm still so proud of that film and it still makes me laugh. I edited it in my bedroom using a hand wound pic-sync. It was pretty funky kind of filmmaking, but you could do it then because you could live on the dole [Australian unemployment benefits] and take the time. You can't do that anymore. And then it went off and won a prize in Paris and it did all sorts of things, so people took notice of me when I wanted to make films and didn't want to work in theatre anymore. I think the next initiative that really helped me was when Film Australia set up a Women's Film Unit. It was a bit like the Gender Matters initiative because it gave new opportunities to women. Jane Campion made *Two Friends* (1986) in that program and I made a short documentary called *Teno* (1984) about repetitive strain injuries. It won a couple of prizes, so it gave me the confidence to be a director.

I think what has allowed me to survive is some sort of weird tenacity and passion, but as time went on it became harder and harder to survive financially. I worked at Film Australia for a while making documentaries and I did make a feature film fully funded by the Australian Film Commission in the mid-1990s called *Vacant Possession* (1994), but it wasn't a big commercial success although it was critically acclaimed. I finally took a job teaching screenwriting at UTS [the University of Technology, Sydney], but this meant it was hard to find the time to make my work. So, when I first looked at the question that was put to us to consider about "what do you need to create your work", my answer has to be time. When I started out I was young and I had time. I got my hands on the equipment and I worked for nothing. I shot films and I edited films. Back then as a young feminist I thought it was really important to get access to the means of production. But I was also very engaged with pushing the boundaries about the representation of women and how we might look at things differently, and to do that you also need time. And I never seem to have that time now, because that space requires critical thinking and it requires making mistakes and being allowed to make mistakes. The funding bodies want everything down on the page – exactly what it is going to look like and you're not allowed to make any mistakes, but we all do. That's how we learn. The film industry's obsessive quest for certainty is a killer because the creative process is full of uncertainty. So for me, what I need to survive as a filmmaker is time. When I came to make *The Silences* I just didn't want to go near the funding bodies because I knew I'd still be in film development for years and I knew I had to make this film. I knew I could cut it myself because of digital technology. That is the other thing that hasn't been mentioned yet today – how digital technology has opened up spaces for young women, young people in general, to get their hand on the means of production and do it in a very simple way. It doesn't cost the amount of money that it did when I was young.

I was interested in what came up before about the champions, when Lisa said we need male champions. I don't necessarily think we need male champions, I think we need male *and* female champions. And I've been lucky enough to have both. Andrew Pike from Ronin Films and Bridget Ikin from Felix Media both really championed *The Silences*. So you need people who are going to bat for you, because you can work and work and work and not get anywhere unless someone that they listen to says "have a look at this." The problem about saying we need male champions is the assumption that people are only going to listen to men. And while they do listen to men, and men still

are very powerful in the film industry, I think there are some fantastic women as well. Jan Chapman is going to be here tonight with *Love Serenade* (1996), she's been very powerful in the film industry. Jane Campion has also been an incredible champion for different filmmakers. She's put her name to things and suddenly they've got money. But the thing that I come back to is needing that space for uncertainty, needing the space to make mistakes, needing to have some time without all that pressure. In order to survive as a filmmaker what I need as the moment is time. I'm a Senior Lecturer at UTS, I'm reducing my hours, clawing time to make a new project.

**JB:** This question of getting time to work also brings up another issue that many female independent filmmakers experience. It's not just about how long it takes to make something when you're struggling to get funding. It's also about what's recognised as a substantial body of work and track record, a body of work that people will write about and give feedback on. That kind of commentary and feedback loop is often critical to what makes people get recognised as filmmakers and what can help open doors. I was interested, Santilla, when you were talking about the issue of credits, in terms of what Kristy does, because I was immediately thinking about web series and film festivals. As a programmer you're constantly in a position of either being able to create spaces for bodies of work and make connections between work – that's obviously critical to what you do – but if a credit is that important and a festival can help locate one for you, what does it mean in the digital era if we can start manoeuvring festivals to start opening up more to web series and the like and the digital platform? I'm just wondering, as a programmer, how might you think about that in relationship to independence?

**KM:** Well I think that in terms of film museums, like ACMI, but also in terms of festivals, the commercial and exhibition side of the screen industry sector is actually really innovating and constantly looking for new work and looking for new audiences. So I think that you can look at how television was once ghettoised in a place not near cinema and of course now Sundance, Berlin, the Cannes film festival this year will be doing their own exclusive television festival. I think that in terms of web series that dam has been broken in the last few years. So I don't think that audiences make any kind of distinction between "this was made for television" and "this was made as a web series." I think that audiences respond to what they see on screen. So I think programmers across the board in cinemas and in film museums and festivals have really got the jump on that. I don't think that hierarchy exists anymore. I think that people need to think about their audience and what work will service their audience. So I think that most programmers come from that place. You know, with the exception of A-list festivals, which come from that place but they also come from a different place where they need to have world premieres, the need to champion filmmakers who they have brought through their ranks. But I think on the whole most programmers are obsessed with audiences and they work their way back from there.

**MN:** And they want stars. A-List festivals want stars.

**KM:** Yes. A-list festivals need stars and that is where they are different to other festivals, but they also have a very deep vein of programming that is about championing new work. Making sure that you can have Catherine Deneuve, Apichatpong

Weerasethakul and Jessica Chastain all on the same red carpet. So they all understand the importance of that, as well as having Brad Pitt there for the photo opp.

**SC:** But just adding to that, in terms of the stuff that is made for the online space, for the digital format, my last short doc [Black As Me](#) (2017) was funded through the Screen Australia Gender Matters project. It was exclusively supposed to be for online and wasn't supposed to go anywhere beyond that but ACMI saw it, and they programmed it and it got a theatrical release. And that in itself became a credit. So I think that it's about having programmers who are really looking to find ways of bringing that sort of content to audiences that perhaps doesn't arrive through the traditional means that they're used to. And it requires a lot of innovation, it requires people that are willing to be bold in that sort of decision making. But that certainly was the most recent example with me with *Black As Me*, I mean you [gesturing to Kristy Matheson] saw it online and said we [ACMI] want to program this.

**KM:** But this is the thing. We had this really great feature documentary, it would be considered an American indie documentary, but it's a film that came through Twentieth Century Fox, it premiered at Sundance. It's hardly left of field in that way, but it was this really wonderful documentary and when we saw your short *Black As Me* we were like this is great. It's very short, it will go wonderfully in front of this feature. The audience coming to the feature are not going to expect this short. The filmmaker, who is local and here, will also be wanting to see their film on the big screen and it's about creating those spaces where you can give audiences surprises or something a bit extra. So it's also about creating those spaces where people can get something to maybe riff off and send them down another little rabbit hole where they might discover the documentary work.

**JB:** Yes, and creating those spaces without producing the kind of double-bind for new work that Whitney Monaghan has discussed in her recent work on [Starting From Now](#) (2014-16).<sup>10</sup> Whitney has written about the double-bind where the web-series is seen as this new utopian ground but its success is still being measured in terms of whether it moves to television. So we're saying yes this is really fantastic and utopian and new, but only if it's recognised by the traditional cultural gatekeepers. What you're doing is something different. It's about saying OK we can have this work, but it doesn't need to be marked off as acceptable and approved by traditional screen media cultures.

**KM:** Because I don't think audiences make that distinction. Funders might, but I don't think audiences do, they don't mind.

**JB:** On the television link, I might move over to Claire who has written extensively on television and is working on television right now. We know in terms of the US there is a lot of stuff happening about how television is the new promising ground for women independent filmmakers, how do you think that plays out here?

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<sup>10</sup> The Australian production *Starting from... Now* (2014-2016) began as a web-series and ran for three seasons online before being picked up for television for a fourth and fifth season.

**CP:** I think it's an interesting problem. Just to speak to the US context for the minute, yes, on the one hand it's great. There's this real optimism around the idea of feminist filmmaking with a wave of women's television work from female auteurs who have largely come from the indie sector – I'm thinking here about people like Lena Dunham, Jill Soloway, Tig Notaro. There's a huge amount of this work by and about women going on at the moment. But I think it's also problematic because it repeats a myth that has plagued women's independent filmmaking for a long time, which is the idea that this sector makes the overall situation for women "OK." Women are working in the independent sector so it's ok that they're not working in Hollywood or in the mainstream, there's this sort of ghettoization. And if you look at the independent figures, in terms of the percentage of women in creative roles, they're not that great anyway. They're better than what's happening the mainstream in America but they're not fantastic.<sup>11</sup> So, I feel like that transferring that argument to television, which is what I think is happening, is repeating that myth. I think you need to be careful. Yes, it's fantastic, a lot of this work is really interesting and innovative, but I think this general optimism around progress needs to be qualified. In terms of what's happening in Australia, I see some really interesting connections. One of them, probably the most important one, is the question about value. So before, I noted Margot you said you made films you don't tell anyone about, that you're embarrassed about, which I'm very interested to know more about. I feel like television has been that undervalued work for women filmmakers for a long time – work that was done to make ends meet, work that was done as a kind of invisible labour. It wasn't a big auteur production, it was gun for hire sort of work. I do think that what's happening in Australia, similar to the US, is that attitude is changing. So, because of the rise of peak-TV and prestige television, the value of this work is changing. We see this with authored series like Jane Campion's work on *Top of the Lake* (2013- ), but also much smaller work. For instance, something like the work that Alison Bell and Sarah Scheller are doing on *The Letdown* (2017) in Australia, or Kate McCartney and Kate McLennan's work with *The Katering Show* (2015-16)<sup>12</sup> and *Get Crack!n* (2017- ) is very much seen as valuable in a way it hasn't been historically. So I think that's really important when we talk about what's happening in the television space. The other thing that I wanted to flag, and this goes back to what I said earlier about what independence means, is a question about why these texts are being caught up as independent? A lot of the time, particularly with US fiction series, it is the trope of imperfect womanhood that functions as a marker of independence. And I think this is again something that is transferring to Australia. *The Letdown*, for instance, trades on this trope of imperfect womanhood with its "messy mother" central character. The idea of the messy mother has a long history in American television as well. So I think that's something to think about, when we call something up as indie TV, generally we're not talking about it in terms of funding systems, we're

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the most recent report compiled by Martha M. Lauzen at the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film: "Indie Women: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women in Independent Film, 2017-18." [https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2017-18\\_Indie\\_Women\\_Report\\_rev.pdf](https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2017-18_Indie_Women_Report_rev.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> *The Katering Show* is another Australian production that began as a web-series before being picked up for television for a second season.

talking about it in about in terms of tropes and characters. And while it's great to see women that aren't picture perfect, that idea of imperfection is a little bit problematic.

**MN:** I'm thinking about [Sarah Gubbins and Jill Soloway's series] [I Love Dick](#) (2016-17). That's the classic messy woman.

**CP:** Right, the unhinged woman. And that's my favourite example of the current wave because it actually reflects on women's independent filmmaking as part of its material. It's a brilliant series, but what also interests me about *I Love Dick* is that it's an Amazon series. In America a lot of these platforms – Netflix, Amazon, Hulu - have been framed as creative havens. You often hear people, and particularly women, talk about how they didn't have boundaries when working with these platforms; they were just given creative control, artistic licence to go and do what they want. Jill Soloway said that about *I Love Dick*, that the Chris Kraus character could never have been made anywhere except Amazon. To me it's really weird and problematic that Amazon is being framed as a creative, feminist haven. Whereas because we don't have that kind of studio structure or mentality in Australia we're seeing that work on ABC on SBS, some on Stan originals, on the web. It's a different environment, it's a different scenario.

**MN:** I think the studio mentality is “fund 10 things and one will go.” So you take a risk on something like *I Love Dick*, but you also you do something that is really safe and you do other things in between and you just hope like hell one of them will go and make money. That's why they spread the money around. It's an investment strategy.

**KM:** But also with these streaming services, they have to think about how they're built on a model where they need subscribers and so they constantly need to be giving you new product. They're building libraries from scratch. So it's also like, as you say, it's a volume game. So this will definitely start to taper off, and it's already started to taper off with both Netflix and Amazon, neither of which bought anything out of Sundance this year. But if you think about these last few years they've ferociously trying to build catalogues so people will continue their subscriptions. I mean I think it's interesting because you will speak to producers who will speak of their Amazon experience, and they will speak about it quite positively. They get their data, they are paid their money up front. People who are with say a Netflix Original, they don't know anything about their data but they're given their money up front. So I think it's interesting.

**LF:** But I don't think that's going on in Australian TV. It's totally risk averse.

**MN:** Totally risk averse!

**KM:** Yeah, it's not the same.

**MN:** I think what's interesting here is some of the work that is being done outside the margins. I supervised a young woman called Natalie Krikowa who was doing her doctorate on transmedia and how queer filmmakers can get past the gatekeepers by creating low budget work that slips under the radar. Natalie had made a webisode series called [The Newtown Girls](#) (2012) with some friends. They made it on the smell of an oily rag and they ended up with millions of hits worldwide. It was a lesbian love story and it has had a massive following globally – a lot in Saudi Arabia, go figure. So

her argument was that through really slipping under the radar you can bypass the gatekeepers and create new audiences because it's the queer, LGBTQI audience who want those kinds of programs and who will go watch them online and support them. What I think is happening is that the people who are the distributors are taking note of the fact that these types of programs have an audience. They didn't think there'd be an audience for them before, but things like this series have proved that there *is*. That's when they jump on board, when they think they are going to make money. There is a lot of very interesting work going on digitally, particularly with webisodes, and this work is happening under the radar where people from different communities are *creating* communities. I think that sense of community is something we have to really fight for these days because everyone is in these virtual communities by themselves and we're losing that sense of speaking to each other. So I really welcome the Melbourne Women in Film Festival and this forum too because it creates a space to speak and to have a conversation about these issues.

**JB:** Before we open this discussion up to the audience I would like to pick up on something that has been coming up a lot in this discussion, and that is the idea of "risk." Sophie Hyde talked a lot about our risk averse industry after the success of her film [52 Tuesdays](#) (2013) and one of the things she stressed was how important taking risks is to filmmaking and creative work more generally. As people working in screen education, research, programming, policy and filmmaking, what do you think is critical for enabling the type of openness that bell hooks talks about or the type of risk-taking that people like Sophie Hyde are advocating?

**SC:** I would say development is a big thing. I think that there is not enough investment in development in Australia and I think that is a very critical step in terms of making work that is innovative, that's creative, that is risk-taking, and that audiences want to engage with. There's just no money and innovative, creative work requires time. As Margot talked about, time is very, very important. Especially if you're creating characters that you want to be full, you need to live with those characters. I write a lot and I spend a lot of time living with characters. That requires time, it can't be rushed. In order for me to translate that onto paper I need that time, but there's no money that affords me that time to really think about things from a character's perspective and to think about the journey I'm taking the character on and therefore taking the audience on. And it's just not there. I think that if we're thinking about how we can have long term solutions, development is something that has to really be thought through. Again, as Margot mentioned, when you get to that stage when you are at the end of development and you are about to go into production and you go to the screen agencies, they want to know exactly what it's going to look like. In documentary that's very unrealistic, because you really don't know what this person is going to say or do. And, again, you're having to do so much work that is not covering the cost of development simply to get to that point that they can give you that money to go into production. In the US it's a little bit more robust in terms of development and how much is put in development including within organisations and broadcasters, and I don't necessarily think we value it as much in Australia in terms of the overall story-making process. And that feeds into the results in many ways because you can't make a good story if it's

rushed. It's just not possible and I think we need to go back to the quality over the quantity.

**JB:** I'd say risk-taking in programming as well actually...

**KM:** I think a big thing about that is this idea that you really have to democratise culture because it's a really big thing to ask someone to cross a threshold as intimidating as a museum or as expensive as a cinema. I think that if you democratise culture you can show people incredibly challenging work, but you don't need to make them feel like an idiot before they've bought that ticket. So I think if you can find a way to talk about things that feels quite inclusive and feels like an adventure then you've got a better chance of saying to somebody "you should have a look at this. It might not be your thing but you might find it interesting." That is how you can set people off on a journey of actually becoming curious and discovering. I think that's a big thing. It's important to not put any barriers up for people because every time you see something new it will lead you somewhere else and that is how you keep people curious.

**MN:** I agree and I think the more that we expose people to other things, other ways of seeing, the better. I teach, so, it's no use just looking at a class and saying now, I want you to take risks, you're allowed. They go "ooh, scary." So over the years I have tried to expose students to work they've never seen before, work that is risk-taking, work that will shock them, work that will excite them. There's not always that much time to do it. I taught an Australian film class a few years ago, which now sadly doesn't run any more. But it had no mainstream content, it was all Australian film against the grain, all the underground stuff. It was part of a sub-major called Reading Australia, and the idea was 'how do we read Australia by what gets left out?' So I exposed those students to the early feminist films, to the workers films of the 1950s, to the poetic and the Avant Garde films, to stuff they'd never seen before. I said OK, go off and do a creative response. I don't care what you do, you can write a script, you can make a film, you can dance, you can do photographs. One girl embroidered an evening purse as a tribute to Paulette McDonagh, the McDonagh sisters from the late 20s who made these society melodramas about women's issues, and it was beautiful. The National Film and Sound Archive have acquired this purse. The students did such wild, risk-taking things. It was so exciting because I didn't put any boundaries on them. It comes back to that bell hooks stuff, about trying to get students to think critically, and saying I want you to pick one of these films or group of films and make something that is a creative response, and I don't care what you do. And it was the most exciting class I've ever taught. I'm starting to use that technique more in teaching. And then the students aren't faced with that blank page of having to be original. That's terrifying out of nowhere, but they have to bring their originality and their individuality to make a twist to it. If they can do that it's a great learning thing. So I think it's about students being exposed to other kinds of ways of seeing, to other films. You hear that people like Scorsese, when he went to film school, just watched films all the time. That to me is the perfect film school.

**JB:** As someone who also works in the tertiary sector, I've got to say, Margot, that I think tertiary education is also becoming more and more risk averse. We are all increasingly required to [MN: Hit our markers] design courses with specific,

measurable and repeatable learning outcomes and marking rubrics. I'm sitting there thinking, how did you mark the embroidered purse...

**MN:** High distinction

**JB:** And your course sounds wonderful...

**MN:** I don't teach it anymore.

**CP:** It does, I want to do that course. I'm really interested to know, were the students resistant to that material at all?

**MN:** They were really shocked. They all thought they were coming in to learn about [The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert](#) (1994) and [Gallipoli](#) (1981) and I went no, no that's not we're doing in this class. I think the turning point was when I had them in the palm of my hand was when I showed them [Yackety Yack](#) (Dave Jones, 1974). I don't know how many people here know anything about *Yackety Yack*, it is the most anarchistic outrageous film that was made at La Trobe during the 1970s. It is insane and hysterically funny and it deconstructs film and they went 'whoa, are we allowed to do that?' And I said yes. I think they'd never seen anything like it.

**CP:** Can I just quickly add to that as someone who also works in higher education. Yes, I think there are immense challenges at the level of education, but at the level of research this is also a real issue. How to be resistant when we're being pushed toward getting money, cooperating with industry? I think it's a challenge. I don't say this as a criticism, I think it's up to us to think creatively about how to do this. But how do we co-operate with industry in a way that lets us be resistant, and do these projects, research these things, while asking for money from the people that are very often maintaining the systems that we're challenging? I think that's a real paradox for higher education at the moment and for how we continue to think about and try to fund research into women's cinema.

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At this point in the forum, the discussion was opened up to questions from the floor providing an opportunity for student and emerging female filmmakers to contribute their thoughts and share their experience. The panellists' conversation about the cultural and political logic of "independence" for women screen creatives working in Australia today established a key theme for the festival. It was carried over into subsequent panels and Q and A sessions and led to further discussion of the severe restrictions on time and development that a dominant, chronically risk averse system poses for women filmmakers. There was also extended discussion about the importance of 'independence' as the drive and capacity to maintain a singular voice. The range of generative strategies for achieving 'independence' raised by panellists and others throughout the festival repeat aspects of creative feminist practice that women have relied on for decades. They also demonstrate the complex work of resistance and negotiation required today in the face of the imperative to be an "ideal" worker in a gendered neoliberal environment—adaptable, creative, entrepreneurial, networked. As such, the notion of "independence" proves a productive lens for highlighting the range

of tensions facing women screen creatives as the second decade of the 21st century draws to a close.

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## About the participants

**Jodi Brooks** is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of NSW and has published on feminist film, screen performance, film sound and feminist film theory.

**Santilla Chingaipe** is an award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker whose work explores contemporary migration, cultural identities and politics. Her documentary [Date My Race](#), which screened on SBS in 2017, broke new ground by forcing us all to confront the roles that race plays in the world of dating, specifically in the online world.

**Lisa French** is Professor and Dean of the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Lisa is co-author of *Shining a Light: 50 Years of the Australian Film Institute* (2009 & 2014), and *Womenvision: Women and the Moving Image in Australia* (2003).

**Kristy Matheson** has worked in independent distribution and film festivals. She is the Director, Film at The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne where she programs contemporary films and retrospectives. Kristy has served on festival juries, written on film for *Senses of Cinema* and is a regular film reviewer on ABC Radio, Melbourne. She is the recipient of the 2017 Natalie Miller Fellowship.

**Margot Nash** is an Honorary Teaching and Research Associate at the University of Technology Sydney and director of three feature films *The Silences* (non-fiction), *Vacant Possession* (fiction) and *Call Me Mum* (fiction), the short fiction, *Shadow Panic* (fiction) as well as credits as filmmaker on films that were made collectively: *For Love or Money* (feature non-fiction), *Bread and Dripping* (short non-fiction) and *We Aim To Please* (short fiction).

**Claire Perkins** is Senior Lecturer in Film and Screen Studies at Monash University; author of *American Smart Cinema* (2012) and co-editor of *Indie Reframed: Women's Filmmaking and Contemporary American Independent Cinema* (2016).