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Support for film and television production in small nations: the role of Screen Ireland

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Abstract

This article examines the role and significance of national screen agencies focusing on Ireland's support agency, Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland. It considers Screen Ireland's contributions to enhancing the professionalisation and capacity building of the Irish production sector. The agency's role in expanding screen support and developing local creative talent is highlighted, alongside its non-funding interventions that foster networks of collaboration and action between industry and policy stakeholders. It highlights the agency's role in facilitating co-productions as it attempts to transform the nation from a service provider to a more strategically diverse sector. Using strategy documents and interviews, the article underscores the constant need for such agencies to define and attribute value to their work. By comparing Screen Ireland with similar bodies in other European countries, the study considers global transformations in the screen industry and how they are mediated by national publicly funded bodies.

Keywords: public funding; national screen agencies; screen policy; co-production, value

Support for film and television production in small nations: the role of Screen Ireland

National screen agencies, alternately called film funds or film commissions, are critical elements in the production of film and television content. In the case of Ireland's film and television sector, its national body, Fís Éireann/Screen Ireland, is no exception. The article situates the role played by Screen Ireland domestically and internationally, offering comparisons with its counterparts in other small European countries including Denmark, Netherlands, and Scotland. This article contributes to our understanding of publicly funded cultural agencies in three ways.

Firstly, it examines the contributions that Screen Ireland makes to the professionalisation and capacity building of production in Ireland. It finds that Screen Ireland has been critical in expanding screen as a medium for support and to the development of local creative talent. However, also critical (and often overlooked) has been its coordination of a growth coalition in Irish production and its mediation between sectoral and policy constituents.

Secondly, it points to Screen Ireland's attempts to reconcile a prominent fiscal strategy centred largely on serviced productions with a domestic agenda to build a more sustainable indigenous production sector. As conduit for co-productions and partner in the delivery of Section 481 (Ireland's prominent tax credit scheme), the organisation plays matchmaker between local labour markets and international productions attempting to position Ireland, not simply as a financially generous site for production, but as one with the requisite infrastructural and labour market capacity. Underpinning this is a strategy to shift Ireland from being a service provider to major productions which demand technical capabilities, to also having an indigenous production sector with its own business and creative capabilities - a dual strategy critically needed in small nations where resources and scale

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can be limited. Therefore, the research argues that in order to realise the full benefits from these fiscal incentives, agencies like Screen Ireland are needed in order to leverage the opportunity at a local level.

The final contribution of this article is to the question of effectiveness, and it points to the challenges of assessing the effectiveness and value of screen agencies when their remits have expanded to include a range of economic, cultural, and social ambitions. Screen Ireland narrates much of its value through the lens of economic outcome. The article considers the risks of cultural bodies engaging in a constant cycle of articulating and attributing value to their work.

Using Screen Ireland as focal point allows us to see the ways in which transformations in the screen sector are negotiated at a national level, along with the institutional response to such change. This article contributes to our understanding of the varied roles that cultural agencies play beyond funding, especially the critical role they play as internationally networked intermediaries in the film and television sector. For small nations such a role is particularly pertinent given the structural challenges of being a small screen-producing nation in a global market where economies of scale dominate and threaten cultural and political visibility.

The findings shared here are part of a wider project examining the interventions of screen agencies in small European nations including Denmark, Croatia, Belgium, Scotland and Ireland. The project reviewed the strategy documents of the major publicly funded body for film and television in each country, along with the national policy frameworks they inhabit. In addition, the author interviewed the CEOs, chairs and several mid-level staff in each agency. Forty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted during the period of September 2018 to February 2020, most of which took place face to face in-country. To arrive at the conclusions reported here, the author focused on the interviews with figures within Screen Ireland and the wider screen sector in Ireland (n=8), contextualising these with peers in other nations.

The paper begins with a discussion of the role played by screen agencies within the film and television sectors before offering a comparison of Screen Ireland relative to other agencies operating in Europe. Whilst the contribution of Screen Ireland to the funding landscape is previously documented (Flynn and Tracy, 2016; Liddy, 2016), the author focuses on the more invisible roles that it plays, specifically around the creation of a networked and politically agile coalition of stakeholders attempting to capitalise on opportunities for growth and to mobilise Ireland's capacity internationally. Given its mandate as a public body, the paper then highlights Screen Ireland's power to narrate its success on its own terms, a critique which can be made for screen agencies more widely in our sample. The paper concludes with a discussion of some political and policy changes which agencies like Screen Ireland will have to negotiate.

Why is Screen Ireland Important to Ireland?

Funded by *An Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán*/Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Screen Ireland is the national body responsible for implementing film policy in Ireland. It is the primary body for direct funding of feature films, documentaries, and short films. It supports the provision of some forms of television, most notably drama, and takes a role in the development of animation capacity in partnership with the trade

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association Animation Ireland. The expansion beyond film, evidenced by its rebranding from Bord Scannán na hÉireann/the Irish Film Board to Screen Ireland in 2018, is not wholly unusual for national screen agencies. In the recent strategies of several nations, film and television support have been strategically brought together due to the synergistic potential of such a merger and the increasing cultural and commercial value derived from television. Whilst many have expanded their remit, it is worth noting that several European agencies retain film in their title suggesting that certain cultural hierarchies endure elsewhere (e.g., Nederlands Filmfonds, Det Danske Filminstitut).

What is also distinct is Screen Ireland's active inclusion of animation as part of its remit, along with its growing attention to the games industry (see Screen Ireland, 2023a). In part, this is linked to the long and successful history of animation production in Ireland (Barton, 2020; Burke, 2009), but more recently this strategy of transmedia integration has been strategically important as the screen sector attempts to garner greater economic advantage through VFX and other computer-generated media. As the boundaries between media become more porous, many (though not all) screen agencies are evolving into transmedia support bodies. A review of its activities, programs and public discourse suggests Screen Ireland to be one of the most well-advanced in this transition, relative to several of its European peers. Many of its counterparts retain a commitment to story-telling, centralising resources into support for an auteur model of production (an enduring feature of European film funding), as opposed to a strategy for story-making which considers support for the entire pipeline of production.

As in most small nations, it is largely impossible to recoup the costs of a feature film domestically due to the relatively small market within the country. So Irish film and its makers have always, by economic necessity, looked outward. As noted by many scholars (Barton, 2020; McLoone, 1999; O'Brien and Canning, 2020; Tracy and Flynn, 2017), Hollywood and the UK have long conditioned the shape and priorities of Irish film policy and its frameworks. Film policies, and by extension the strategies of the Irish Film Board/Screen Ireland, have often been conceived relationally to these more powerful industries and nations. Whilst other nations like the UK have repeatedly tried (and failed) to compete with Hollywood, Ireland has long seen its role in the international marketplace for film as service provider. This service sector strategy and its most prominent element – the Section 481 tax incentive - has elicited some criticism including from prominent creatives such as Ed Guiney, producer and company director of Element Pictures, one of the largest independent producers in Ireland and a regular recipient of Screen Ireland funding (O'Carroll, 2022). However, both the strategy and its primary instrument are also a cause célèbre by many both within and beyond the borders of Ireland (Olsberg SPI, 2023; Dams, 2021; Guardian, 2023)[1]. As discussed later, Screen Ireland plays an important role in leveraging and brokering this agenda into something which can realise greater domestic sustainability, though not necessarily challenge the big players.

The Scale and Operation of Screen Ireland

It is worth pausing to compare the scale and operation of Screen Ireland to other European screen agencies. Direct comparison is difficult due to differences in organisational structures, mandates, and activities. However, Table 1 attempts to offer some headlines comparing Screen Ireland, Den Danske Filmfond (Danish Film Institute) and Screen Scotland. Although all three agencies share a mandate to support their national screen sector, the table illustrates significant differences in these

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supporting bodies in terms of their budget and their structures. The purpose of this comparison isn't to argue for more/less funding for Screen Ireland, but to simply contextualise its scale relative to other national screen agencies, many of whom Screen Ireland will simultaneously compete and collaborate with to deliver its own mandate.

Table 1: Screen Ireland, Den Danske Filmfond and Screen Scotland Compared [2]

	Screen Ireland (est. 1980)	**Den Danske Filmfond/ Danish Film Institute (est. 1972)**	**Screen Scotland (est. 2018)**
Population	4.9 million	5.9 million	5.5 million
Budget	2019: EUR 22.52m 2020: EUR 33.36m 2021: EUR 30.09m 2022: EUR 36.7m 2023: EUR 37.7m (budgeted)	For the period, 2019-2023, the DFI had an annual budget of approximately DKK 560m (EUR 75m), not including the Public Service Fund.	In 2018/19, Creative Scotland received £9m (EUR 10.2m) in grant-in-aid for Screen Scotland activities. 2019/20: £9m (EUR 10.2m) 2020/21: £8.9m (EUR10.1m) 2021/22: £8.5m (EUR 9.66m)
Governance	Operates under Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media in accordance with the Irish Film Board Act 1980 (amended)	Operates under the Ministry of Culture in accordance with the Film Act of 1997.	Part of Creative Scotland with funding from Scottish Government and The National Lottery.

Reviewing the funding schemes operated by Screen Ireland provides some insights into its remit and priorities (Table 2 presents a condensed, but not an exhaustive, list of its main schemes). The list indicates support across the pipeline for content with an emphasis on development and production. As observable in other European agencies, the allocation strategies adopted by these bodies tends to foreground the supply of content, rather than one predominantly concerned with domestic demand for that content, leaving that to other agencies or the organisations that commission the work (e.g., the broadcasters and streamers)[3]. Also observable are the ways in which Screen Ireland is using its funding mechanisms to leverage specific social outcomes (e.g., equality, diversity and inclusion interventions, environmental sustainability). Our wider research observes similar strategies in other screen agencies, though the effectiveness of these is unclear (McElroy and Noonan, 2022; Noonan and Brock, 2022; Noonan and Sørensen, 2022).

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Table 2: Funding Schemes of Screen Ireland in 2021-2023

Development	**Production**	**Skills**
Feature Film Development Additional Feature Film Development Television Drama Development Documentary Development Animation Concept and Innovation Fund (in partnership with Animation Ireland) Animation Innovation and Immersive Development Screenplay Development (Established Talent) Strategic Slate Development fund Irish Language Broadcast Fund (with TG4 and Northern Ireland Screen) Luxembourg/Ireland Co-Development Fund for Female and Non-Binary Film makers	Fiction: Irish Production Fiction: Creative Co-Production Documentary TV Drama Production Animation: Television Completion Sustainability Advisor Initative for Film and TV Production	Screen Stakeholders Skills Development Bursary Awards Film & TV Drama, TV Unscripted and Documentary Pathways Fund Animation Pathways Fund
Distribution	**Short Film Schemes**	**Other Funding Schemes**
Distribution Support Direct Distribution Publicity Support Festival Funding: Irish Film Festivals Audience Development Fund (announced August 2023)	Focus Shorts Frameworks Actor as Creator Showcase	Covid-19 Supports (ceased May 2023) COVID-19 Production Fund Production Continuation Fund Core Organisational Fund Company Development Supports Creative Futures Slate Fund

Reviewing the awards of the Irish Film Board between 1993 and 2013, Flynn and Tracy (2016) conclude that the agency pursued a strategy of concentrating funding to productions which, before any other considerations, demonstrated market potential. A less systematic and more cursory review of funding decisions since the agency re-branded in 2018 suggests that much remains the same. For example, Screen Ireland has supported several horror films (*The Hole in the Ground* (2019); *Vivarium* (2019)), a genre which has traditionally existed outside public funding mechanisms due to the risk of public outrage. Whilst this suggests some distinction from its counterpart agencies, it is notable that horror has historically had both low production budgets and a loyal international fanbase, suggesting this to be a good strategic move by Screen Ireland to channel the country's 'dark folklore' for market gain (Barton, 2020; Carroll, 2022).

Elsewhere, the funding awarded to talent such as Lenny Abrahamson and Yorgos Lanthimos suggest Screen Ireland do have some affinity with the auteur model of funding which characterises much European funding. As Flynn and Tracy (2016) acknowledge, this complicates the concept of

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'Irish' cinema as the work of these auteurs is often not thematically linked to Ireland. This negotiation is acknowledged by Screen Ireland with support for Irish talent rather than Irish stories a purposeful part of its approach (O'Brien, 2023). Here it is outlined as a wider strategy of sectoral development:

> We've had very interesting discussions over the years in Screen Ireland about what makes a film Irish - which I imagine every screen agency in the world has. Is it because it was an Irish production company? Is it because it was filmed here? Is that because the lead is Saoirse Ronan? What is it that makes it Irish and we've thrown that one around quite a lot. It's about developing the talent that's here (Dr Annie Doona, (chair of Screen Ireland 2016-2021) personal correspondence, 2019).

> We're supporting a project called *Herself* (2021), which is being made by Element Pictures who are obviously a very successful Irish company. It's being written by a young actress, Clare Dunne, who is also playing the lead in the film. It's being directed, however, by Phyllida Lloyd, the UK director, she's done lots of very successful films. The reason we support that is that that's an Irish writer telling a story, and it's a very Irish story as well. So that's why you would particularly want the voice of the Irish, but it's been directed by a UK director. So we do occasionally do that. […]Where the writer and director are not Irish, but there are some other elements of the project that are Irish, something else has to be brought to the table (James Hickey, CEO Irish Film Board 2011-2019, personal correspondence, 2019).

It appears that in the strategy of Screen Ireland, the emphasis is firmly on developing Irish talent, as opposed to any demonstrable commitment to Irish culture, stories, or language. Hence, we might read the critical success of the Irish language drama *An Cailín Ciúin* (2022) not as the outcome of a commitment to Irish content, and more the outcome of a strategy which builds the capacity of Irish makers to find resonance in a global marketplace.

Dr Doona is indeed correct above when she speculates that many screen agencies wrestle with the question of national cinema, and many staff in other agencies subscribe to similar strategies in defining their approach to their nation's cinema. Many acknowledge the shift away from an emphasis on indigenous stories to support for locally based talent. Examples of this include *I am Not a Witch* (2017) the directorial debut of Zambian-Welsh film maker Rungano Nyoni, set in Zambia and supported by Ffilm Cymru, the Welsh film agency and the support from the Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel de la Fédération Wallonie Bruxelles (Belgium) for the work of director César Díaz:

> The film that will represent Belgian for the Oscars is in Spanish [*Nuestras Madres*, 2019]. The director is a guy that comes from Guatemala […] it's a wonderful film. It won the Caméra d'Or in Cannes. We thought it is part of our culture because he's Belgian. He's from Guatemala but he's Belgian. The film doesn't talk about Belgium at all and it's all in Spanish, but we thought, that's Belgian. So that's how far culture can go […] people just don't want to see the Ardennes all the time or the Belgian coast, it's boring, so the next one that we're shooting is a science fiction TV series and we don't care if it is in Belgium. What people sometimes like are accents or feeling they recognise something but otherwise they don't care. […] that's not something they take into account when they go to see a film. They just want to see a film to get entertained or because they know the director and they like his

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> work […] We don't want to label films as you would label sausages: Made in Belgium (Jeanne Brunfaut, Director, Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel, personal correspondence 2019).

Therefore, whilst screen agencies are the key institutional mechanisms that contribute to the delivery of national cinema as a form (whether that be Irish cinema or Welsh or Belgian), the research demonstrates that talent capacity and enhancing its ability to move internationally is key to their framing of that national cinema.

Screen Ireland and Ireland's 'Growth Coalition'

Moving away from discussion of its strategy for direct funding, this section considers Screen Ireland's wider contribution. Christopherson (2006) argues that to fully leverage value from the production of screen content, a 'growth coalition' is required comprising various stakeholders with a vested interest in leveraging the returns provided by screen to their locale. The existence of this network of bodies partly addresses the challenge of converting disparate activities into a sustainable industry. It converts short-term contractual exchange into long-term sustainability that potentially allows critical mass in both economic opportunity and cultural representation (Christopherson and Rightor, 2010). 'Growth' certainly seems to be at the core of the discourse and investment in screen production and the creative economy more generally in Ireland, even if this growth is defined predominantly in economic terms (Hadley et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2019).

There are several bodies in Ireland who can be considered part of a 'growth coalition' for screen (including bodies like Enterprise Ireland, the independent production sector, educational institutions, etc.). In part the need for an organisation to act as a constellation around which other organisations can gravitate and which operates with the aim of formulating a shared strategic view of the sector, comes from the specific policy structures in Ireland:

> One of the problems is that in Ireland the Department of Communications are separate from the Department of Culture, which is odd. In most European countries the two would usually be in one […] In practice it means that there isn't a consolidated policy around audio visual. […] RTÉ reports to the Department of Communications through the BAI. Whereas we, Screen Ireland, are here and we have things like the Arts Council [under the Department of Culture […] we have a steering group, which is the one thing which I really think is an important part of what I'm leaving behind. […] the steering group is chaired by the Department of Culture, a senior civil servant. It contains the Department of Communications, the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, the Department of Education and Skills, the BAI [Broadcasting Authority of Ireland/Udarás Craolacháin na hÉireann], ourselves, IDA Ireland [Industrial Development Agency Ireland], Enterprise Ireland, all of these people are sitting around the table. […] That steering group is there now to coordinate between the various Government departments, and that is - absent a joint Department of Communications and Culture - the next best thing (James Hickey, personal correspondence, 2019).

Whilst I want to be cautious about offering Screen Ireland sole credit for the developments above or even assuming it is in some way a leader of this 'growth coalition', I do want to argue that the activities described above evidence it as an active intermediary in Ireland's screen growth coalition in which

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knowledge is shared and a vision for the sector negotiated in which there is improved capacity to innovate and to advance the sector at pace. At the same time, this networking role also gives greater legitimacy and authority to Screen Ireland.

If much of their work is networked, it is also very often political—a critical component in the effectiveness of any collective agenda. As Hickey describes above, and as the researcher heard repeatedly from staff in other agencies, mediating within and between government departments was a way to overcome some of the structural limitations of policy making where screen traverses distinct domains such as culture, business, education, taxation, tourism and planning. Interviewees spoke about their advocating for and negotiating around specific policy positions (e.g., the continuation or expansion of fiscal incentives, the transposition of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD)[4], responses to the pandemic). In merging these roles into one to become a politically agile intermediary, screen agencies like Screen Ireland enhance the possible scale and coordination of policy frameworks, something highlighted by Hickey repeatedly as a key function of screen agencies (O'Brien, 2023). Their presence and legitimacy also advance arguments that in small countries, some form of public intervention and capital is crucial if these sectors are to be sustainable (Doyle et al., 2015, p. 12-13).

Amongst several domestic roles, Screen Ireland also contributes to the growth in screen by positioning Ireland as a willing and able co-producer and plays a matchmaking role in the global marketplace, thereby internationalising Ireland and extending its growth coalition beyond domestic borders. We can observe a confluence of these factors as Dr Doona reflects on the relationship of the agency to the market:

> Ireland is highly regarded, through James [Hickey, former CEO] and through Screen Ireland, I think we are highly regarded. When we go to Cannes I am always staggered by how busy the Irish pavilion is, and people come from all over the world to this tiny little country, you know next to the huge American pavilion, and they're really interested in co-productions and working with us and using our locations. […] Netflix and those online companies, they're buying into what we're saying is Screen Ireland. Netflix can bring opportunities for on-screen talent, for off-screen talent, but things like training, development, diversity, all of those have to be embedded in what they're doing (Annie Doona, personal correspondence, 2019).

As noted, Screen Ireland has always worked to embed Ireland in international markets. Several activities support Irish producers into the circuits of international production, a strategy evident in the funding schemes presented in Table 2 (e.g., networking opportunities, workshops and career development programmes, co-production and direct funding systems, support to attend film festivals).

To its internationalising strategy, Screen Ireland has added (and formalised) a greater European dimension within its collaborations in recent years. Ireland, as represented by Screen Ireland is a party to the *Council of Europe Convention on Cinematographic Co-Production (revised)* (CETS No. 220) (Council of Europe, 2017), which includes members of the EU and some EEA states. It also has bilateral co-production treaties with non-EU countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa (Screen Ireland, 2023b). This agenda for cooperation has resulted in projects like *The Cellar* (2022) an Irish/Belgian co-production and *About Joan* (2022) a French/German/Irish co-production. Whilst on the one hand we could argue that this focus on co-production is an outcome

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of Ireland's positive trans-border relations and standing as a member of the EU, itself a major contributor to the growth in co-productions (Hammett-Jamart et al., 2018), it is also commercial necessity as more and more smaller nations attempt to compete in the race for international investment and the subsidies which often accompany collaboration.

Screen agencies have long been critical enablers of the co-production market facilitating co-operation and realising several benefits from the process. For agencies, co-productions are a useful strategy because they spread financial risk between different individual agencies – few would have the resources to fund a production entirely and most encourage productions to look to the market or other public bodies for investment. This mode of investment is also important as the budgets and scale for productions increase and public funding is often squeezed. As this quote from outside the Irish experience illustrates, screen agencies actively operate as a skills and opportunity broker in this context:

> I started organising network meetings in Cannes with normally about three of them [Danish producers] where we would say "Danish film producers, meet Ireland". Then I would get in touch with the Irish Film Board. I explained very quickly how to co-produce with Denmark. They do it from the Irish Film Board perspective and then people are in the room networking. […] they were the ones that got co-production support and were able to expand their network and they're very good at financing now (Noemi Ferrer Schwenk, Head of International and International Producer, Danish Film Institute, personal correspondence, 2019).

This strategy also hints at the internationalising role agencies perform as an industrial ambassador for their nation's production and its capacity, proactively taking the sector's resources to international decision makers. It involves agencies like the Danish Film Institute and Screen Ireland actively travelling to trade shows and professional spaces (like the Cannes Film Festival in both Doona and Ferrer Schwenk's discussion) to ensure their nation's presence. It is evidenced by several visits to major production hubs for example, a virtual trade mission to Los Angeles in 2021 led by Screen Ireland, the purpose of which was:

> [T]o build on recent critical success updating key industry partners on the continued growth and evolution of the sector in Ireland, the planned expanding and additional studio production infrastructure coming on stream as well as the ongoing Government support for the industry as evidenced by incentives such as Section 481 and the Regional Uplift. […] In this context, ensuring that international decision makers keep Ireland front of mind is critically important (Screen Ireland, 2021).

Keeping Ireland 'front of mind' and visible amongst decision makers is part of its internationalisation role. Screen Ireland has evolved in parallel to Section 481, signposting and advising decision makers in relation to the scheme (they have also administered some of the equality and regional development paperwork which the scheme required). Therefore, Screen Ireland is a key intermediate between the international sector and Irish systems of fiscal support. They help to develop and integrate the different components of Ireland's proposition, and communicate this offer to prospective investors, co-producers and industry stakeholders. Scholars and industry routinely argue that Irish production would look very different without Section 481 (whether that is diminished or elevated is debated). However, the discussion above argues that Irish production would also look very different without the interventions of a body like Screen Ireland to leverage the gains of that

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support and augment its offering by facilitating demand for the resources around which different agendas can be realised.

Narrating its own Success

At the time of writing, Screen Ireland is in command of a good news story: increasing levels of production (Olsberg SPI, 2023), the glow of Oscar nominations amongst its list of projects supported, and with sufficient reputational capital which can be mobilised by the sector and policy makers. An editorial in the *Guardian* newspaper following announcement of the 2023 Oscar nominations heavily endorsing Ireland's film strategy, specifically the activities of Screen Ireland and tacitly criticising the UK's strategy, offers an interesting pronouncement on the dynamic fortunes of strategic reputations within screen industries (Guardian, 2023). At the same time Screen Ireland can count several high-profile advocates closer to home including Guiney's occasional creative partner and Screen Ireland funding recipient, Lenny Abrahamson, who argues publicly for the agency's value and the transformation it has delivered to Irish filmmaking (Neary and Abrahamson, 2018). Both external recognition and positive headlines are useful resources for a publicly funded agency dependent on government departments for their patronage.

To date Screen Ireland has been left to narrate its success largely on its own terms. By this, I mean there is little public discussion of its accountability to the Irish citizen and taxpayer (as opposed to the industry) and so there is little sense of what expectations should be on the organisation. There are few systematic measurements, targets or benchmarks in operation within its reporting with each report, whether internal or externally commissioned, narrating growth in different terms; leaving Screen Ireland in a position where it chooses its own criteria and can articulate its own narrative of success.

It is worth contextualising this to say that this is not an issue restricted to Screen Ireland or that this research finds the agency to be duplicitous in its reporting. The reporting, and by extension the measures of value and effectiveness of publicly funded cultural bodies, have long been an area of debate and obscurity (Hjort and Nannicelli, 2022). Our comparative research on the structures of evaluation, accountability and governance that exist in screen agencies finds ongoing issues in relation to the metrics used to account for their activities, though some effort towards enhancing the transparency of their decision making is notable. In general, there are few ways to establish value for money within screen agencies and so few robust ways to facilitate comparisons on that value. As Hjort and Nannicelli (2022) argue, there are several forms of value that can be attributed to film; however, the shift from screen agencies as exclusively concerned with the provision of content to a wider range of activities and roles mean assessments are difficult to apply across the board. As noted earlier, a key role they play is in terms of the networks and relations they build within and beyond Ireland—how would the value of these be assessed in a way that is robust and meaningful? In the case of Screen Ireland and its strategy for transmedia support, how might the inclusion of these others screen forms complicate and/or displace any distinct value to be delivered via film specifically?

The reason Screen Ireland needs to command its own story of success lies in the structures and networks discussed earlier:

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> It's a challenge because you know all of those entities have to work collaboratively; it's the only way to have success. But they also have to maintain separate identities so that they can exist and they can get funding. So it's, it's quite strange in a way. But the lines are completely blurred. […] Screen Ireland is about supporting the development of film culture but they also have to support the development of employment and skills, which is also what Enterprise Ireland does. Where are the lines? People don't talk about that a lot because people want to maintain their own existence (Gareth Lee, Manager, Screen Skills Ireland, personal correspondence 2019).

The history of screen agencies tells us that the risk to the agency themselves should not be underestimated. Senior staff in screen agencies expend significant energy interpreting and pre-empting politicians' understanding of value — both the public value of screen content and the public value of the agency itself. As one interviewee lamented, this is further complicated by the professional constituency that screen agencies engage with:

> [O]bviously it's easy to criticise Screen Ireland… people are saying they could do this better or that. I think they have a very challenging role. And they have quite a difficult constituency. Because you see it's very political. There's a multiplicity of production companies out there, people who are highly articulate, they are very vocal, who can get this stuff into the media quite easily, because the media themselves are interested in this stuff. So I think it's a real challenge. The problem that we have in Ireland is we have a limited budget and they're trying to tick the boxes on a lot of things. Plus, some of the people that will tick those boxes for them are never going to make it into the big league. If Screen Ireland were a private venture capital fund, it simply would focus on people in the mainstream - really big stuff - but they're not. So, I'm loathe to criticise them. If I was doing their job, would I do it as well? Probably not (Executive at industry representative organisation, personal correspondence, 2019).

There is an obvious danger in having a public body offer its own narrative of success which risks being self-serving. This gives that body opportunities to select and explain their performance largely untroubled by mandatory constraints which can then shape the perceptions of others about both the state of the sector and of that organisation. It also means that any need for change likely comes from outside of the organisation—perhaps one of the reasons why Ireland's response to #MeToo didn't come directly from Screen Ireland, but from external voices (such as Waking the Feminists) and external scrutiny (Liddy, 2016). Again, this is not to say that Screen Ireland are being duplicitous but to point to the potential for faith in public bodies to be eroded because of weak systems of accountability; the controversies surrounding RTÉ and its appearance before the Public Accounts Committee in 2023 offering a sobering account of what happens when public bodies are complacent about their public accountability (Committee of Public Accounts, 2024).

Conclusion

There has been a notable rise in the institutional standing of Screen Ireland within the cultural apparatus of Ireland and a growing prominence of the agency in international markets for screen production. This advance in terms of its authority and autonomy comes at a time when some other national agencies find themselves losing both their standing and resources. The dual threat of

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political interference (due in part to the growth of right-wing political movements) and the cuts to public funding and the arts (often rationalised in a recession) have brought declining budgets and even existential challenges to screen agencies in many nations (e.g., Brazil and Slovenia). Despite the current climate, in 2020 Screen Ireland enjoyed a funding increase contributing to the highest funding award ever made to the agency (Screen Ireland, 2020).

We could contextualise this growing status as indicative of the cycle of policy making. The rise and fall of institutions like screen agencies can be viewed as part of the precarity that comes from being a publicly funded body which must negotiate an expanding and often subjective mandate—just look at demise of the UK Film Council (Doyle et al., 2015) as a cautionary tale in this area. We could also attribute this growing status to the value that these agencies potentially deliver. A key argument of this paper is that screen agencies like Screen Ireland intervene beyond the obvious areas of funding and training. They perform a critical role in the competitive evolution of the sector in spatial terms creating corridors of co-operation and competition between nations, and in functional terms by mediating, coordinating, and lobbying for different agendas. The role that they play is one which is more complex and multifarious than previously explored by scholars, and one which is often misconstrued by industry.

Whilst these aren't omnipotent bodies, they do wield forms of financial, cultural, and symbolic power that make their interventions worthy of attention. This is even more pertinent as their political power may increase substantially as countries attempt to respond to AVMSD. In some cases, screen agencies are regarded as a critical route for redistributing money and bargaining power from global streamers to domestic industries. Already several national screen agencies in our sample (including Denmark and Croatia) are the institutional mechanism by which content production levies are redistributed into local priorities (Cabrera Blázquez et al., 2022). What remains to be seen is how screen agencies will negotiate the efforts to extract financial contributions from Subscription Video On Demand services with their own efforts to secure these stakeholders as industry collaborators and investors, and whether this source of funding will change their working models and decision-making (Noonan, 2023). Therefore, there is considerable value in attending to the organisational structures that underpin creative and cultural sectors within small nations as without these actors, the risk of cultural and economic invisibility grows.

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Endnotes

[1]Tax incentives have become a fundamental pillar of film production globally and are key to the strategies of other European territories of a similar size to Ireland such as Iceland, Croatia, and Belgium.That is not to say that tax incentives are universal. Countries like Sweden, Norway and Denmark have resisted the international race of attracting runaway audio-visual production using tax breaks, though have soften their resistance at different times (Hedling and Vesterlund 2016; Sørensen and Redvall 2020).

[2] Figures taken from the Annual Reports, websites and press releases of all three organisations.

[3] It is worth noting that responsibility for exhibition and conservation, a role often seen in other European agencies, lies with the Irish Film Institute, Ireland's national cultural institute for film.

[4] The EU's Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) governs EU-wide coordination of national legislation on all audiovisual media—traditional TV broadcasts and on-demand services. The latest review of the AVMSD was carried out in 2018.

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